The Social Organization of Religious Conversions

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Irrationalities of rationality

- Ritzen claims that although McDonaldization is supposed to be rational, it can lead to results that are irrational. These include:
  - Inefficiency and higher costs: McDonaldization isn’t efficient for everyone, especially customers, and may cost extra.
  - The illusion of fun: Fun has become a guiding principle of many McDonaldized institutions.
  - False Friendliness: Genuine friendliness is restricted or eliminated and replaced with either no human relationships or false friendliness.
  - Health and environmental hazards: Includes health risks of fast food, food poisoning, litter, environmental hazards of factory farms.
  - Homogenization: Similar products are offered through the U.S. and world.
  - Dehumanization: McDonaldization offers low-skill jobs, treats customers impersonally, minimizes contact between human beings, and has negative effects on families.

Two views of conversion

- Turnabout view of conversion
  - Radical break with past and immersion in a new life
- Institutionalized view of conversion
  - Organized by families, churches and revivalists
  - Often an age-stage ritual to affirm existing values
  - Like other rituals, can still be meaningful experience
- Two key studies & one documentary
  - Wimberly et al’s survey of Knoxville, TN, rally
  - Altheide & Johnson’s covert participant observation of Phoenix, AZ, rally
  - Video: Billy Graham (Biography series, Randall Balmer narrated)

The role of family and churches

- Conversions organized by families and churches as life-stage ritual to re-affirm existing values (Wimberly et al. 1975)
  - Method: survey at Knoxville Billy Graham rally
  - 91% of attendees were church members
  - Bloc mobilization: 31% came with church group
  - Not break with family: 66% came with families/friends
  - Life-stage ritual: 73% of conversions < 20 years old

The role of the revivalists

- Publicity begins 18 months before event
- Organize churches to supply attendees
- Train counselors and other workers
- Provide message promoting conversion
- Provide “alter call” period for conversion
- Counselors go forward during alter call
- Counselors help converts through conversion
- Counselors record conversions
- Local churches notified to “follow up” conversion

Bureaucratizing conversions

- Altheide & Johnson: covert observation of 1974 Phoenix rally
- Research question: how are decisions made as to type of conversion in face-to-face encounters?
  - Acceptance of Christ as Savior and Lord
  - Assurance of Salvation
  - Rededication
- Results: all converts categorized as “acceptance”
- Interpretation: organization environment engulfed spiritual priorities