The Social Organization of Conversions

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http://www.iastate.edu/~soc.134
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