The Social Organization of Religious Conversions

March 14, 2008

http://www.public.iastate.edu/~soc.134
Religious revival in U.S. history

- The Great Awakening (1730s & 1740s): Jonathan Edwards and George Whitefield called for a “new birth”
- Second Awakening (early 1800s): Charles Finney borrowed techniques from advertising and showmanship
- Post-Civil War: Dwight Moody was a master organizer and church builder in Chicago
- Post-WW I: Ames native Billy Sunday promoted “muscular Christianity”
- Post-WW II: Billy Graham held first revival meeting in 1949; within 25 years, over 1.5 million people “stepped forward” for Christ at his rallies
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

✔ Today’s sources: two studies & one documentary on Billy Graham
  • 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)
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 “altar call” period for conversion
- Counselors go forward during altar 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