


The Social Organization of Religious Conversions

March 14, 2008


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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



Jonathan Edwards




Billy Sunday

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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)



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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

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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

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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

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