The Social Organization of Religious Conversions

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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

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)

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 “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