

BILLY GRAHAM'S CRUSADES IN THE 1950s: NEO-EVANGELICALISM BETWEEN CIVIL RELIGION, MEDIA, AND CONSUMERISM

Uta Andrea Balbier

GHI RESEARCH FELLOW

Today, the evangelist Billy Graham is known as “the nation’s pastor”¹ or as “Pastor in Chief,”² as evidenced by a *TIME* cover from the summer of 2007. Graham, a fundamentalist Southern Baptist from North Carolina, organized his first crusade—a religious revival meeting—during the fall of 1949 in Los Angeles. Every evening, several thousand people participated in this event. In 1952, he held his first crusade in Washington DC, entering the heart of the nation and the epicenter of political power.³ Other crusades followed that took Graham’s message all around the country and later around the whole globe.

Graham was not the first evangelist who traveled the country preaching hope and salvation. Evangelical preachers like Jonathan Edwards, Dwight L. Moody or Billy Sunday had influenced the religious landscape of the United States in every century. However, Billy Graham gave a whole new dimension to this sort of religious awakening. Between 1949 and 1954, he preached to 12 million people. In the summer of 1957, he held a 16-week crusade at Madison Square Garden in New York, selling out the Garden’s 20,000 seats nearly every night. In the same year, television companies started broadcasting the crusades live on Saturday evenings, making Graham the first televangelist.⁴

My research project on Billy Graham, the 1950s revival meetings, and the rise of a new neo-evangelical form of religiousness analyzes the culture of the crusades as well as their cultural and social surroundings to explain Graham’s success. My first focus is on the mentality of U.S. society in that decade. At a crossroads between the end of the Second World War and the beginning of the Cold War, the nation was searching for a new identity as an imagined national community.⁵ The relationship between the civil religion of the national community and religious communities was being redefined, and evangelical Christians were developing a new understanding of themselves as Christian citizens. Graham’s message provided guidelines for this process.

1 David Aikman, *Billy Graham: His Life and Influence* (Nashville, 2007), 1.

2 *Time Magazine*, August 20, 2007, 3.

3 For biographies, see: Aikman, *Billy Graham*; William Martin, *A Prophet With Honor: The Billy Graham Story* (New York, 1991); William McLoughlin, *Billy Graham: Revivalist in a Secular Age* (New York, 1960).

4 There are only sociological studies on Graham’s crusades: Kurt and Gladys Lang, “Decisions for Christ: Billy Graham in New York,” in *Identity and Anxiety*, ed. Maurice R. Stein, Arthur J. Vidich, and David M. White (New York, 1960), 23-44; Ronald C. Wimberley, et al., “Conversion in a Billy Graham Crusade: Spontaneous Event or Ritual Performance?” *Sociological Quarterly* 16 (1975): 162-170; Weldon T. Johnson, “The Religious Crusade: Revival or Ritual?” *American Journal of Sociology* 76 (1975): 873-890.

5 Stephen J. Whitfield, *The Culture of the Cold War* (Baltimore, 1991); Robert Wuthnow, *After Heaven: Spirituality in America since the 1950s* (Berkeley, 1998).

My second focus is on the rise of the media, which opened new channels for advertising and communicating the religious message. Graham's movement did not just invest in billboards and handouts; it also produced movies and organized press conferences. Thus, the history of advertising and media is closely intertwined with the religious history of this era. However, the use of media did not just change the way the Gospel was spread; it also produced new religious forms, communities, and experiences such as the religious conversion of television viewers (alone) in their living rooms.

My third focus concerns the connection between Graham's religious mission and the rapid take-off of U.S. consumer society in the 1950s. Graham invented the language and symbols that were necessary to integrate neo-evangelicalism into the culture of consumption and that shaped it into a "white, middle-class religiousness." In doing so, he helped evangelicals resolve the tensions between their Christian identity and their changing capitalist surroundings. This placed Graham in the tradition of the Second Great Awakening of the nineteenth century, when evangelicalism had adapted to the changing economic patterns of an industrial and capitalist society for the first time.⁶

In the context of these three social transformations—the changing national identity, the rise of the media, and the rise of consumer society—, a new form of neo-evangelical religiousness took shape that changed and modernized Protestant fundamentalism,⁷ fusing traditional aspects of evangelical and fundamentalist Christianity. From the evangelical tradition of American Protestantism in the time of the Great Awakenings, neo-evangelicalism took its strong focus on spirituality, revival meetings, and the belief that each individual has a personal calling. From the fundamentalist tradition of the 1920s, it took its concentration on a literal reading of the bible, its belief in the Second Coming of Christ, and its emphasis on Victorian family ideals. But neo-evangelicalism discarded one important aspect of its fundamentalist roots: It no longer relegated religious conviction to the private sphere but let it cross over into the public realm.⁸ Billy Graham's so-called crusades provided the stage for practicing this new form of religion and further shaping the new belief system.

The crusades produced a new kind of religious culture. To analyze this culture, my project focuses less on neo-evangelical institutions

6 On the history of the Awakenings in U.S. religious history, see William McLoughlin, *Revivals, Awakenings, and Reform* (Chicago, 1978).

7 Joel A. Carpenter, *Revive Us Again: The Reawakening of American Fundamentalism* (Oxford and New York, 1997); George Marsden, *Reforming Fundamentalism: Fuller Seminary and the New Evangelicalism* (Grand Rapids, 1987).

8 On religion in the public sphere, see José Casanova, *Public Religions in the Modern World* (Chicago, 1994).

and structures than on the symbols, discourses, and religious practices of the movement. Thus the project is part of a new religious history in Germany and the U.S. that rewrites religious history from the bottom up. Inspired by cultural history, this perspective challenges Protestant and civil religious metanarratives.⁹ It was during the crusades that the relationship between fundamentalist Protestant religion and society was reshaped. Analyzing this process will give us new insights into the relationship between modernity and secularization.¹⁰

I. Religiousness as a National Task

As early as 1949, Graham presented his new style of revival culture during his crusade in Los Angeles. From the outset, his preaching combined biblical quotations with current news headlines. Thus Graham featured political statements more prominently in his sermons than his predecessors, Dwight L. Moody and Billy Sunday, ever had. He based his political message on two central themes: the perilous nature of nuclear war and the “ever-present” communist threat.¹¹ He combined this with a call to civil religion, helping to restore the identity of the U.S. as a Christian nation. In Graham’s preaching, traditional fundamentalist fears and goals mixed with modern social needs.

Graham’s religious mission had two principal goals. On the one hand, it worked against communism, and on the other, it answered people’s yearning to clearly identify the United States as a Christian nation. These aims become clear from these words in a sermon from Graham’s crusade in Los Angeles:

Western culture and its fruits had its foundation in the bible, the word of God, and in the revivals of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Communism, on the other hand, has decided against God, against Christ, against the bible, and against all religion.¹²

Warning his followers that communists were infiltrating the U.S., Graham trained them to be responsible Christians and watchful citizens. Graham defined communism as a religion in and of itself, describing it as a Godless religion, a religion of the devil. With such statements, he declared it impossible for people to be

⁹ Michael Hochgeschwender, “Religion, Nationale Mythologie und Nationale Identität. Zu den methodischen und inhaltlichen Debatten in der amerikanischen ‘New Religious History’,” *Historisches Jahrbuch* 124 (2004): 435-520; Thomas A. Tweed, *Retelling U.S. Religious History* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1997).

¹⁰ Jon Butler, “Theory and God in Gotham,” *History and Theory* 45 (December 2006): 47-61; Jürgen Habermas, “Die Dialektik der Säkularisierung,” *Blätter für deutsche und internationale Politik* 53 (October 2008): 33-46.

¹¹ Aikman, *Billy Graham: His Life and Influence*, 68.

¹² Quoted in Billy Graham, *Revival in Our Time: The Story of the Billy Graham Evangelistic Campaigns* (Wheaton, 1950), 124.

both Christians and communists at the same time. Graham not only elevated anticommunism to the status of a mainstay in U.S. civil religion, but also used it to shape his own religious flock. His crusade members, the new evangelicals, became “we” and the communists became the “other” always secretly lurking in society. In this way, he embraced the fundamentalist tradition of designating (and clarifying for those in the general public) the anti-Christ and warned that the “fifth column” had already arrived in Los Angeles. With the devil present, it was the Christian citizen’s duty, Graham claimed, to fight him every day.

In his fight against communism, Graham continually blurred the boundaries between religious, national, political, and spiritual identities, thus shaping a new evangelical community conceived of and staged on the national level. At the same time, anticommunism became the shield under which other religious front lines started to disappear, such as the traditionally strong anti-Catholicism in the fundamentalist milieu. However, the new religious community was still primarily white and middle-class.



Graham not only defined this community in his sermons, but also staged it and trained its members during the crusades. The setting of the New York crusade in the summer of 1957 makes this obvious. The 16-week revival meeting was the most expansive and elaborate event in the history of American

Creating new religious communities: Billy Graham preaching on Wall Street, New York, July 1957. Photo: Bettmann/CORBIS.

evangelicalism. Nearly two million people attended the meetings held at Madison Square Garden, which was arranged as a spiritual realm. It also served as a space of national celebration, decorated in the American colors with flags flying and politicians like Vice President Richard Nixon in attendance. Graham’s sermons fit the surroundings perfectly, blending American patriotism with evangelical spirituality. In his last sermon, for example, he exhorted the audience to

tell the whole world tonight that we Americans believe in God. Let us tell the world tonight that our trust is not in our pile of atomic and hydrogen bombs but in Almighty God.... On this Labor Day weekend, here at the Crossroad of America, let us tell the world that we are united and ready to march under the banner of Almighty God, taking as our slogan that which is stamped on our coins: "In God we trust."¹³

With these words, he shaped a religious and a national community. He also gave form to the image of the American evangelical brethren as a national community at war.

Graham's intertwining of a religious and national responsibility becomes ever more evident when one examines the climactic spiritual moment of his dramatic revival meetings: Graham's invitation to his audience members to personally come to the stage and accept Christ. People would get up from their seats and approach the stage to meet a counselor to pray with. Counselors would then assist people individually in reaffirming their decision to personally change their lives and take the leap towards conversion.

Interesting and perhaps ironic was Graham's occasional comparison between the conversion process and communism. He told those taking the momentous step that the decision he was asking them to make was not at all an easy one. However, he continued, "the appeal of communism today is partially because it is a hard thing."¹⁴ In this way, he rhetorically linked the appeal of communism to the offer he was making to the audience, transforming the act of accepting Christ into a choice for the ideals of the free world over communism. Even at the most personal and spiritual moment of his religious mission, Graham continued to blur the boundaries between the political and religious realms.

II. Spreading the Gospel

The arrival of television in U.S. households in the 1950s certainly helped the new national neo-evangelical community to take shape. Religion in the U.S. has always been sold via the media, from the first religious printed booklets and early religious radio broadcasts to modern televangelist programs,¹⁵ and every use of the media has had an impact on the way religion has been spread and experienced. In a volume of essays on the media and religion, Steward Hoover

¹³ Quoted in Curtis Mitchell, *God in the Garden: The Amazing Story of Billy Graham's First New York Crusade* (Charlotte, 2005 [1957]), 180.

¹⁴ Quoted in Lang, "Decisions for Christ," 423.

¹⁵ On religion and media in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, see David Paul Nord, *Faith in Reading: Religious Publishing and the Birth of Mass Media in America* (Oxford, 2004); on religion in the age of mass media, see Heather Hendershot, *Shaking the World for Jesus: Media and Conservative Evangelical Culture* (Chicago and London, 2004).

and Lynn Clark have sought to explore the “layered interconnections between religious symbols, interests, and meanings and the modern media sphere within which much of contemporary culture is made and known.”¹⁶ My project, likewise, analyzes neo-evangelical religiousness to determine which of its aspects are produced in the interplay of religious revival meetings and the media.

The media spread Graham’s message from the first crusade, enabling Graham to influence religious communities on a more widespread basis than during the other Awakenings. Media mogul William Randolph Hearst was responsible for thrusting Graham into the headlines of the *Chicago Tribune* and the *New York Times*, while publisher Henry Luce placed Graham on the cover of *Time* and *Life*. Although both publishers portrayed Graham as a media star and his crusades as popular entertainment, Graham’s fight against communism and his quest for a spiritual renewal of the American nation were central themes in every article about him. The press did not just repeat Graham’s message but influenced it, emphasizing some topics over others and setting the tone of public debate. Graham developed a distinct language for communicating with the media, and the interplay between Graham and the media shaped a new public religious discourse.

Television also influenced Graham’s image. The cameras loved Graham’s good looks, his voice, and his gestures, and he knew how to play with them. As one observer noted, “*Variety*, the Bible of show business, said that Billy Graham ‘spells out Scripture and verse à la Judy Garland ballads.’”¹⁷ Moreover, Graham did not hesitate to communicate with the press: He held press conferences before and during the crusade in New York City, and all three major networks (CBS, NBC, and ABC) covered him and his crusade. From the third week of the New York Crusade on, the ABC-TV Network covered the crusade on Saturday evenings for an entire hour from coast to coast. The television ratings for the event were so high that ABC rebroadcast parts of it on seventeen evenings.

From that point on, Graham staged his crusades not only for his nightly audience in attendance, but for the audience at home in American living rooms as well. As a result, the rise of television as a medium created a new form of religious experience. Although large media surveys were not conducted back then, we know about the reactions of home viewers from hundreds of letters Graham

16 Steward M. Hoover, “Introduction: The Cultural Construction of Religion in the Media Age,” in *Practicing Religion in the Age of the Media: Explorations in Media, Religion, and Culture*, ed. Steward M. Hoover and Lynn Schofield Clark (New York, 2002), 1-6, 1.

17 Mitchell, *God in the Garden*, 57.

received. Many eager followers had found their way to God right in front of their televisions.¹⁸ These letters, therefore, reveal a new evangelical phenomenon arising from the use of media. The spiritual and transcendent experience of conversion no longer required the gathering of the community; it could happen in complete solitude. Still, there was an interaction between Graham and his television community. Graham would talk to viewers, and they would get down on their knees in their living rooms and write about their experiences afterwards. These letters give insight into the practice of media religiousness in the decade when it was created. They help us to understand how the use of television changed evangelical processes of conversion and community formation and altered or even replaced traditional forms of religious life.

III. Selling Hope, Consuming Salvation

The 1950s were not just the age that witnessed the television take-off. They also constituted the decade when consumer culture, with its unique advertising and marketing structures, exploded. From the First Awakening, selling religion—the spread of bibles, sermons, and the staging of revival events—has been a business and an integral part of the development of religion following the ecumenical dogma: the better you perform, the better you advertise, the better you sell. In the 1950s, however, this selling process took on a new dimension. Competition in the religious market had always been fierce, as Laurence Moore has shown in his excellent study *Selling God: Religion in the Marketplace of Culture*. Moore points out that such competition has transformed religion as a cultural system. Therefore, it is never enough to analyze only the forms of merchandizing and the use of media as part of the religious selling process. Rather, we should ask how the competition for a share of the religious as well as the cultural market shapes and transforms religiousness.¹⁹

The consumer orientation of the crusades significantly affected the form that neo-evangelical religiosity took. At the same time, the crusades themselves provided a venue for reproducing but also redefining and stabilizing the “American Way of Life.”²⁰ Graham did not just preach to a religious flock; he also communicated with white middle-class citizens. He staged himself as a new type of preacher and acted like a middle-class salesman to help them resolve the tension between their consumption behavior and the Christian ide-

18 Excerpts from these letters are published in Mitchell, *God in the Garden*.

19 Laurence Moore, *Selling God: American Religion in the Marketplace of Culture* (New York and Oxford, 1994), 6.

20 Carpenter, *Revive Us Again*, 241.

als of modesty and charity. His campaign also turned him into an advertising icon, and the media portrayed him as a pop star. In all of these ways, Graham targeted the American middle class.

Graham, who had been a salesman for a short time after finishing high school, can clearly be situated within the realm of marketable religion. A benchmark quotation in this regard was first published in *Time* in 1954: “I am selling ... the greatest product in the world; why shouldn’t it be promoted as well as soap?”²¹ The media picked up on this picture, viewing Graham more as a salesman than an evangelist, as in this journalist’s description of Graham during his

New York Crusade in 1957: “Well-tailored in a gray summer suit, white shirt and gray and purple tie, the blond, wavy-haired Billy spoke with the punch, poise and magnetism of a super salesman, rather than the fire of an old-time evangelist.”²² Graham made use of the everyday vernacular of a salesman, powerfully integrating metaphors of consumption into his religious language. Asked once how he imagined heaven, Graham answered: “We are going to sit around the fireplace and have parties and the angels will wait on us and we’ll drive down the golden streets in a yellow Cadillac convertible.”²³ Asked on another occasion, how he imagined the “Rapture”—the Second Coming of Christ—he declared that when the Rapture occurred, all the gravestones would pop up like popcorn on a stove.²⁴ By creating such

pictures, Graham adapted the language of the consuming middle class to his religious purpose. In doing so, Graham spoke directly to the quotidian needs and dreams of consumers, validating and legitimizing their lifestyle and fulfilling their desire to “find their place” in American society.

Another technique Graham used to establish a rapport with his followers was to portray himself not only as a religious figure, but as a middle class icon as well. The media coverage of Billy Graham was infused with reflections on his lifestyle, fashion, and consumption, and described his leisure activities in detail. Graham talked about playing golf and watching baseball. Everyone in the U.S. knew which



The salesman of religion: Billy Graham preaching in New York, 1951. Photo: Bettmann/CORBIS.

²¹ *Time Magazine*, October 25, 1954, 8.

²² Quoted in Mitchell, *God in the Garden*, 55.

²³ Martin, *A Prophet With Honor*, 126.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 125.

department store he favored for his suits. His good looks, shoes, ties, and fashion style became an integral part of every newspaper article on religion. The media particularly emphasized Graham's star-like quality. One observer remarked that he looked "as if he belonged in the star's dressing room of a musical comedy rather than in a pulpit."²⁵

Graham was *the* 1950s salesman of religion. He was successful because he knew how to communicate with middle class consumers, and they could identify with him. Accordingly, he tailored his religious message to best communicate with his target audience. Smoothing out the once exclusive fundamentalist rhetoric and the fiery style established by preachers like Jonathan Edwards and Billy Sunday, who had preached hell and damnation, Graham sold hope and salvation. He did not ask for social responsibility, but rather reinforced the American way of life.²⁶ His social critique focused on porn and alcohol, but he never challenged the social injustices of American society in the 1950s. Moreover, he linked his religious message to the ever-present civil religion: He did not blame America as a nation for its sins; rather he returned to the traditional view of America as the chosen nation. Graham knew that the more agreeable his product was, the better it would sell. Even the staging of his revivals reflects his orientation toward the white middle class's need for conformity. Screaming out loud in the middle of the service was deemed inappropriate,²⁷ and Graham emphasized traditional elements of American evangelicalism like choirs and sermons instead of flashy rituals like the speaking in tongues practiced by the Pentecostals. Graham sold a religiosity produced specifically for the white middle class, in sharp contrast to his pretension to include different classes and ethnic groups in his campaigns.

IV. Conclusion

Billy Graham's crusades were products of the unique cultural atmosphere of the 1950s, which they reflected and reproduced. Graham integrated his religious message into the civil religious context of national self-assurance and into the developing media and consumer culture. In this process, he shaped a unique neo-evangelical religiousness that shows religion adapting to modernity, thus challenging our common understanding of secularization. Graham's religious campaigns influenced the relationship between religion and society. They changed American Christians' self-concept from an

²⁵ Quoted in *ibid.*, 25.

²⁶ McLoughlin, *Billy Graham: Revivalist in a Secular Age*, 91.

²⁷ Mitchell, *God in the Garden*, 50.

apolitical to a political one, in which they as citizens and consumers defined a new role for religion in public discourse. The nation's pastor helped to establish a new media-based, national religious community. At the same time, he transformed the civil religious frame of the Christian nation into an evangelical one. Although Billy Graham built upon the tradition of the Great Awakenings in American religious history, he found a new way to embed evangelicalism into its political, economic, and cultural environment, thus securing it a unique place in modern society. Graham's success story demonstrates that American religion derives its strength from embracing rather than resisting modernity.

Uta Andrea Balbier is a Research Fellow at the German Historical Institute, Washington DC. She is the author of *Kalter Krieg auf der Aschenbahn: Deutsch-deutscher Sport 1950-72, eine politische Geschichte* (Paderborn, 2006) and co-editor of *Umworbener Klassenfeind: Das Verhältnis der DDR zu den USA* (Berlin, 2006). She is currently working on a book on "Political Participation and the Transformation of American Evangelicalism, 1900-1961."