


4-2014

# Billy Graham Comes to Las Vegas: Faith at Work on the Strip

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## Repository Citation

Robinson, M. (2014). Billy Graham Comes to Las Vegas: Faith at Work on the Strip. 1-10.

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# Billy Graham Comes to Las Vegas: Faith at Work on the Strip

*Michelle Robinson*

**ABSTRACT:** An exploration of Billy Graham's 1978 Christian Crusade in Las Vegas, this paper argues that the Billy Graham Evangelical Association (BGEA) developed distinctly Vegas-styled evangelical tactics to address challenges posed by the city's fragile religious infrastructure and competing attractions on the Las Vegas Strip. To organize a spectacular and successful ecumenical event that would garner local and national attention, BGEA simultaneously leveraged popular notions of Vegas as "Sin City" while recruiting Christian evangelicals from beyond the city proper to temporarily transform the religious ecology of the Strip.

Keywords: Billy Graham, Christianity, evangelicals, Las Vegas

### Preferred Citation:

Michelle Robinson. "Billy Graham Comes to Las Vegas: Faith at Work on the Strip" Occasional Paper Series 24. Las Vegas: Center for Gaming Research, University Libraries, 2014.

Taking a religious media event as its starting point, this paper charts the transformation of the Las Vegas Strip during Billy Graham's 1978 Las Vegas Crusade and investigates how the efforts of the Billy Graham Evangelical Association (BGEA) impacted the city. While Graham's biographers and historians of Las Vegas habitually portray Graham's 1978 crusade as an iconic moment for the city (John M. Findlay argues, for example, that Graham's visit "consecrated Las Vegas's place in the American cultural main-

stream"), religious historians have yet to clarify the extent to which, if any, Graham's presence altered the perceived and actual dynamics of religious life on the Strip.<sup>1</sup> As if designed to deflect attention from criticisms of the Billy Graham Association's lack of financial transparency—and particularly the existence of a \$23-million World Evangelism Fund that *The Charlotte Observer* had brought to the public's attention the previous year—this five-day religious spectacle on the Strip received national attention for

its efforts to bring Christ to residents of a metropolis often referred to as “Sin City” or “Lost Wages.” This paper studies the impact of the evangelist’s campaign on the religious ecology of the Strip, arguing that Graham’s 1978 Vegas crusade cultivated and revealed opportunities for religious activity in the casino-resort culture.

Using materials from University of Nevada-Las Vegas library’s Special Collections and its other archival materials, this paper explores how the temporary encroachment of a large-scale evangelical crusade transformed the space of the Strip. Additionally, it begins to craft a more robust account of Graham’s activities and related religious events during the 1978 campaign, and identifies many of the ways the Crusade appropriated traditional gaming and resort spaces for Christianity. I argue that the unusual challenges of engineering a Crusade in Las Vegas required BGEA and Graham invent new strategies to etch Christianity into the spatial dimensions of the Las Vegas Strip. I also make the case that Graham, in concert with Vegas’ media, took advantage of the campaign and its influx of evangelical Christians to modify public perceptions of the casino-resort complex, endowing the Strip with a spiritual dimension that simultaneously relied on and obfuscated the presence of Christian-identified workers on the Strip.

By most measures, it would be difficult to deny the success of Graham’s Crusade. Stretching from Wednesday, February 1 to Sunday, February 5, 1978, Crusade attendance was estimated at 63,000. Most rallies at the Las Vegas Convention center were standing-room-only events, and on the first and final nights of the Crusade, Graham broke all previous audience records at the Convention Center. Approximately 5%, or 3,144 members of the audience, came forward to accept Christ—a higher proportion than the 3-4% of souls BGEA anticipated winning for Christ. Almost half of those who came forward did so to seek their salvation.<sup>2</sup> Helen Early, a long-time resident of Las Vegas and member of the First Christian Church, recalled that on the first night of the Crusade, “so many people came forward to accept Christ and seek to be reborn that we did not have enough counselors to take care of these people,” and, on the spur of the moment, BGEA had to implement a one-to-five ratio of spiritual counselors to the just-converted, as opposed to the one-on-one counseling the Crusades typically provided.<sup>3</sup> The exhilaration and

prolonged excitement of the Crusade far surpassed Early’s portrayal of the annual western dress festivities during Vegas’ three-day Helderado parades sponsored by the Elk’s Club which, she explained, now lacked the enthusiasm they once held for Las Vegas residents.

The evident success of Graham’s visit suggests that Las Vegas and its immediate environs were primed for an evangelical campaign. Apparently, Vegas posed no greater challenge for BGEA than its previous endeavors. After all, by 1978, Las Vegas had practically shed its reputation as a seething center of vice and crime in the popular imagination. By the mid-1970s, the Kefauver Committee’s sanctimonious complaints against gambling and organized crime had yielded to genuine efforts to study the social, legal and economic dimensions of the gaming industry. From 1974-1976, the Las Vegas Commission on the Review of the National Policy toward Gambling conducted research that assessed gaming protocols and affirmed the efficacy of law enforcement practices in Las Vegas, implying that, as David Schwartz argues, “Casino resorts had been successful in transforming gambling from a pariah business to an exemplar of successful state-industry cooperation.”<sup>4</sup> Gambling had ceased to be a priority of evangelical Christians, whose energies were far too absorbed by right-to-life campaigns and inner-city violence to raise objections to the “politically irresistible” fiscal benefits state-sponsored gambling could deliver.<sup>5</sup> Still, an image of “Sin City” survived in the popular imagination, and it provided expedient shorthand that set the stage for the good work of BGEA. The Crusade needed a “Sin City” to dramatize the power of Christ in Las Vegas. At the same time, their preparations depended on existing religious organizations to lay the groundwork for the crusade’s success.

On June 2, 1977, Billy Graham Evangelical Association announced its decision to undertake the February 1978 Crusade, reportedly at the behest of at least 150 area ministers. By July, a team of local workers and members of the BGEA team had set up camp in a headquarters on south Maryland Parkway. With more than a 100 volunteers on board from the beginning, BGEA devoted the remainder of the summer to setting in gear the administrative apparatus and grassroots networks required to reach out to the city’s many inhabitants. The promotional strategy was to divide and conquer, piloting something be-

tween trickle down Christian outreach and an evangelical pyramid scheme that pooled the resources of 150 area ministers. Reverend Ken Forshee and his congregation at the First Christian Church played an instrumental role from the beginning.<sup>6</sup> They compiled mailing lists, built congregational committees, and made endless phone calls to publicize the upcoming event to more than 10,000 people within a hundred mile radius of Las Vegas. Over a thousand men and women trained as counselors for the crusade under the supervision of BGEA's Charles Riggs and Jack Cousins. Thousands had been "touched" by these outreach strategies in advance of the campaign, explained BGEA's on-the-ground man Larry Turner,<sup>7</sup> and this throng of the "touched" would convene at the Las Vegas Convention Center for the February Crusade. If BGEA's outreach efforts sounded more like ecumenical telemarketing than Christian witness, Turner insisted it was not: "The work of evangelism has to be spiritual," he said. "It is not possible to accomplish the work by human engineering."<sup>8</sup>

Notwithstanding these initial efforts and the victories of the Crusade proper, BGEA encountered exceptional challenges in their preparatory and promotional work for the Crusade, and the challenges they faced were specific to the religious ecology of Las Vegas. In addition to the limitations of Vegas' existing Christian institutions, there were expansive and sometimes notorious religious alternatives that loomed large on the Strip and beyond. Moreover, the BGEA was saddled with the difficult task of vying with celebrity entertainment on the Strip for publicity without forfeiting religious integrity for pure showmanship.

On the face of it, BGEA's well-oiled evangelical machine had stockpiled a legion of Christians eager to play a part in the campaign and to worship side by side at the Las Vegas Crusade. But the several stumbling blocks they encountered showed a need for a truly *Vegas-styled evangelism* to make the Crusade a success. The hurdles were clear. To begin with, the headcount of local Christians was depressingly small. Larry Turner discovered there were only about 115 churches he could rely on to promote the Crusade, and most of these had measly congregations of less than 200 members—far less than the other American cities that the BGEA had visited.<sup>9</sup> Rev. Forshee supplied a dispiriting addendum: three-quarters of Vegas' pastors were compelled to moonlight simply "to make

ends meet." "To be blunt," Forshee expanded, one local pastor doubled as a barber and, just to stay afloat, he always kept a pair of shears in his pocket. If the shortage of flourishing congregations was a serious drawback, enlisting believers and non-believers to participate in the Crusade was another. "Penetrating" communities with advance notice of the Crusade typically required "threshold visitations": volunteers hitting the pavement to personally invite residents to the upcoming event. In Vegas, where waitresses, bellboys and dealers typically worked shifts, this standard procedure was practically useless. Phone "visitations" at all hours yielded better odds, but only 600 pledged they would attend. Finally, the BGEA faced yet another obstacle securing youth participants, by and large the lifeblood of Graham's earlier crusades. Local chapters of evangelical organizations like Young Life, Youth for Christ, and Campus Crusade did not exist in Las Vegas. BGEA's solution was the now dubious practice of organizing rallies at public schools. These were startlingly productive; BGEA's Ralph Bell held 17 separate rallies and apparently enlisted 88 high-schoolers for Jesus even before the Crusade began.<sup>10</sup>

In addition to the challenges that Graham encountered with the existing religious infrastructure, he faced major competition from the numerous entertainments that plastered the Strip. Given the circumstances, BGEA intensified their marketing efforts like never before. For the first time, Graham's face graced a billboard ten feet tall and in full color, a dramatic departure from his usual publicity efforts which aligned the evangelist with other Vegas headliners to make him a competitive "attraction."<sup>11</sup> Still, these advertisements met with fierce competition, vying with even larger billboards for the likes of Sammy Davis, Jr. and Frank Sinatra. We might compare BGEA's line of attack to the promotional blitz for a show like the Flamingo's new edition of *Playgirls on Ice*, which debuted at the same moment. Its ad campaign consisted of nine different elements, including newspaper ads and teasers, radio slots, taxi-cab displays, full color billboards, and a giant marquee cutout. The program itself featured one Tara Fleet as its "principle nude," ventriloquist Joe Nemith, and Rickie Dunn, a pickpocket star. Its popularity benefited from longevity and, in the plenty of reviews it received, the Bill Moore production was lauded as an "eye-popping production" that "outsparkles them all."<sup>12</sup> Furthermore, the saturated publicity for *Playgirls on Ice* only

represented a small part of the \$950 thousand dollars that the Flamingo hotel had budgeted for advertising that year.<sup>13</sup> BGEA, by contrast, worked with a total budget of just over \$300 thousand for all expenditures, including advertising.

But BGEA refused to be easily bested. If their campaign was not “eye-popping,” they nevertheless intended to create a memorable, eye-opening evangelical event. This required celebrity entertainment, and they had celebrities to offer. And there was, of course, the evangelist Billy Graham, a public figure whose press junket they packed with public appearances, including a television special with KORK’s Kathie Milone and an interview with Phil Donahue, who brought his show to Las Vegas to cover the crusade. This premeditated brush with the celebrity circuit had its risks: journalists inevitably dredged up Graham’s recent financial scandal and apocryphal associations with gangster Mickey Cohen. Meanwhile, one columnist ridiculed the former “Fuller Brush salesman,” suggesting Graham had simply expanded his performance to include “lighting and sound technicians, body guards, makeup specialists, ‘crowd motivators,’”—not to mention, he added, “a dog trainer who supervises Graham’s trio of Doberman Pinschers who are trained to kill in response to commands in German” as well as a lighting expert who insisted on a ““pink-cheek effect,” produced by softening blues with a rare orange white filter.”<sup>14</sup>

As luck would have it, BGEA’s determination to avail themselves of these kinds of marketing stunts proved advantageous once the crusade began. In his “On and off the Record” column in the *Las Vegas Sun*, Joe Delaney pointed out that Graham had an advantage over existing attractions: Whereas comedian Gabriel Kaplan and his opening act at the Aladdin Bagdad Theater could not pull in anything close to a full house of 800, Graham drew an estimated crowd of 13,000 with his program of *bonafide* celebrity entertainers and resident talent: a not-too-shabby born-again cast that included Johnny Cash and June Carter, members of his BGEA team and a 1,100 voice choir of Las Vegas locals. How to account for Graham’s success? At Kaplan’s performance, “There was a \$15 minimum for three drinks per person or a bottle of wine or champagne for 2 people at a total cost of \$30 plus tax for two,” Delaney delicately explained; by contrast, “Admission to the Billy Graham show was free... These are the facts; no comparisons are intend-

ed...”<sup>15</sup> On the other hand, Graham’s presence scarcely fazed Vegas’ headliners. *The Las Vegas Review-Journal* reported that, “At Caesars Palace, where Frank Sinatra is booked [solid] through the weekend in the 1,200 seat showroom, the response to the question of the crusade cutting into business is, ‘Billy who?’”<sup>16</sup>

Jim Reid, the itinerant and “friendly Chaplain of the Strip” who abandoned a Baptist ministry in Henderson, Nevada to win souls for Christ, had walked the Strip (in “patent-leather high-heeled boots”!) since 1970, but he always faced an uphill battle.<sup>17</sup> To stock his first services, Reid relied on regular church-goers as “shills.” Other evangelical innovations emerged of necessity: shift work set the schedule for Bible Study; the new converts and their pastor urged casinos to supply a space for worship. Circus Circus donated the “La-La Room”—what was originally a girlie show theater, though too small for its audience—for official Sunday services. After four months, the room was leased to a puppet show, and Reid tracked down more permanent lodgings at the Flamingo Casino’s Gold Room. In the months before Graham’s crusade, his Koinonia Church met regularly in the Holiday Inn Center Strip and the Gold Room at the Royal Inn Casino.<sup>18</sup>

But Reid was pessimistic about the success of Graham’s Crusade. Though he verified that Christians permeated the Strip and every aspect of show business (as “performers...security guards, dealers, waiters, bellmen, keno runners, busboys, stagehands, wardrobe aides, and cocktail waitresses”), he also cautioned Graham that “Satan is here” and “He does not want a crusade in Las Vegas.”<sup>19</sup> Reid rebuked the radically heterogeneous religious beliefs and practices on the Strip and in the casino-resort complex, whose employees, he claimed, included Scientologists, Moonies, folks who dabbled in parapsychology and reincarnation—not to mention dabblers in metaphysics, witchcraft, demonology and a very “active” Church of Satan. All told, Reid insisted, these sinners, apostates, and Satanists made up about 80% of people on the Strip.

Reid’s statistics notwithstanding, the Las Vegas Chamber of Commerce had proudly listed that, “More than 80 churches representing almost every faith hold regular services” in pamphlets distributed earlier in the decade. Later, it raised the number to 125 and finally proclaimed that, “Las Vegas ranks high in the nation among top cities on a churches-per-capita

basis, with its 150 churches representing 35 different denominations.”<sup>20</sup> The 1978 *Official Street Guide* to the city listed a relatively uncontroversial directory of churches in the vicinity of the Strip. These included the Catholic Guardian Angel Shrine and the LDS Seventeenth Ward Chapel as well as Presbyterian, Baptist, Christian Scientist, Lutheran, and Episcopal Churches.<sup>21</sup> More than a few took part in Graham’s ecumenical campaign, inviting BGEA affiliates to guest pastor during the Crusade. Some even promised to deliver their congregations wholesale to the rallies in the Convention Center in lieu of ordinary services.

Members of these congregations might give wide berth to the Strip, but some were certainly the security guards, busboys, and cocktail waitresses that Reid spoke of. Las Vegas’ Christian communities had tailored their faith traditions to navigate whatever moral affront the Strip posed for more than half a century. For example, Stanley A. Steward emphasizes Las Vegas Pentecostals’ long-standing habit of profiting from the infrastructure and economic opportunities supplied by the gaming and entertainment industry. Though their churches theoretically required members adhere to strict behavioral prescriptions which proscribed association with drinkers, gamblers, and nude entertainment, most practiced what Steward calls a “pneumatic faith”: a code flexible enough to accommodate the realities of economic need and the available industries for employment when they went to work.<sup>22</sup>

These run of the mill parishioners on the Strip seldom made headlines. But there were, anyway, plenty of sensational reports ready to steal the limelight. As Graham eased into town at the end of January to a groundswell of media attention, the *Las Vegas Sun* also advertised theologian Dr. Barbara Young’s lectures on reincarnation and extra-terrestrial communication at the Marina Hotel and the Nellis Air Force Base, part of her world-wide tour “to fill in Biblical history through [past life] regression.”<sup>23</sup> Feature articles about Graham’s Crusade lay alongside reports on the struggle for women’s ordination in the Catholic Church and the work of the Jews for Jesus movement. Perhaps the most extraordinary news event—and one that threatened to eclipse Graham’s arrival in Vegas—was the unfolding story of Deborah Blanco, a twenty-one year old woman who slashed off her hand with a machete and, as she was taken to Sunrise Hospital for what would be an unsuccessful attempt

to reattach her amputated appendage, recited the biblical verse “And if they (sic) hand offend thee, cut it off: It is better for thee to enter into life maimed, than having two hands to go into hell.”<sup>24</sup>

In the face of a relatively impoverished religious infrastructure and a news media bombarded by religious and celebrity spectacle, the BGEA seems to have pounced on the city’s lingering reputation for sin, since the magnitude of their enterprise depended precisely on the primacy of vice. Little wonder that in this “Kamikaze Crusade,” as it was called by some of the BGEA staff, Las Vegas was conceivably a “precious jewel.” It could be a “launching pad for a religious awakening that might sweep the world”—but it was also a “fulminating sewer” of a city potentially immune to Christ’s message.<sup>25</sup> On the other hand, BGEA’s preliminary recruitment efforts would swathe the Strip with evangelicals from distant parts, fill its hotels with all varieties of Christians, and gild it with religion. It was a matter of optics. The busloads of men, women and children who converged on the Strip would manufacture a mirage, a *trompe l’oeil*: a Christian evangelical veneer that could coat the Strip. In other words, while the Crusade’s success *depended* on an influx of outsiders, the BGEA *needed* insiders (preferably former sinners) and it *needed* Sin City to set the stakes of the mission.

To construct its “Sin City,” BGEA designated its Las Vegas enterprise “Operation Andrew,” presumably after the first of the apostles, the man who witnessed the Messiah’s predictions of the destruction of the Temple of Jerusalem and the appearance of false prophets in the Last Days. (Andrew had also delivered the small boy with a few fishes and loaves that Jesus multiplied to feed thousands.) At the Crusade services, where half the seats were designated for “sinners” and youth were encouraged to attend, the Biblical texts that anchored Graham’s sermons were more than a bit heavy-handedly addressed to the destruction and rebirth of place as well as person. There were tried and true verses: the familiar verses John 3:16 and the 23 Psalm and, of course, the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5-7). But Graham also told the story of Bartimaeus, a blind man who regained his sight and followed Jesus (Mark 10); the story of the prodigal son, which celebrates the return of a son who has “sinned against heaven” and returned as if from the dead (Luke 15: 11 -32); and Paul’s discourse among the Athenians, which urges the city full of

false idols to abandon their unknown Gods and listen to the Good News (Acts 17). If each of his sermons spoke of conversion in the standard terms of destruction and rebirth, these particular texts called upon the born-again to remake the city and to alter its public image and its residents.

Vegas' politicians and business owners were conscious that a successful Crusade could powerfully revise public perceptions of the Strip, swapping its reputation as a city of vice for one of Christian virtue. BGEA had provided an opportune moment for civic leaders and social critics to crush unfavorable impressions of Las Vegas. An editorial in the *Review-Journal* announced not only that Graham's presence was "the best tool the Chamber of Commerce has for righting the multitude of wrongs misinformed outsiders have of Las Vegas," but also that, "from the sacred point of view, the crusade again should be a tremendous asset to the community." The *Review-Journal* explained:

When the camera eye closes in on Graham, then pans across the audience, America will see mothers, fathers, aunts, nephews, old persons, pretty persons, ugly persons...all kinds of persons.

...at Wednesday's opening night crusade there were none of the characters many American apparently believe exclusively live in Las Vegas.

No little old, cigar-chewing men with rolled up white shirts and dark green poker visors.

No hulky bodyguards in pinstripe suits carrying violin cases.

No red-carnation Mafia dons.

No aggressive hookers looking to pluck a lamb from the fold.

Just plain folks.

While repudiating these antiquated caricatures of the Strip, the editorial paradoxically conceded that high rates of criminality were an *actual* crisis the Crusade might resolve: "It could happen, you know, through a chain reaction started at the crusade."<sup>26</sup>

Graham chipped in to catalyze this "chain reaction," and his tactics fall into three distinct categories. First, he deftly deflected his audiences from the visual contradictions on the Strip that undercut his ecumenical efforts. Second, the BGEA team engineered an unusual and spectacular event that would draw national attention: a rally that targeted the ordinary occupants of the Strip, the celebrities and shift

workers Graham would shepherd to the fold. Finally, Graham discerned a substantial if little-known evangelical presence in the city whose presence he might broadcast to the world.

As I have pointed out above, it was the space of the Strip itself that could be converted, born again—even if it meant that Graham would need to carefully negotiate (and sometimes capitulate to) the commercial exigencies of the casino-resort complex. Graham's urgent moral message in 1978—preached, on one occasion, "from the podium of Caesar's Palace" with "a waterfall of coins cascading into nearby slot machines"—was designed to spark a "spiritual awakening" in Las Vegas and indicated the determination of this "Christian Celebrity" to generate new religious energies.<sup>27</sup> Significantly, Graham rejected suggestions of a Biblical injunction against gambling, and refused to censure the activity. As a matter of fact, Graham insisted that the "real" gamblers were to be found on Madison Avenue, even as he pointed out that, "The greatest gamble in the world is the gamble a man makes with his own soul."<sup>28</sup> This swift reallocation of the terms of conversion emphasized the excellent odds faced by the evangelical prospector, who needed only to reframe the stakes to unearth the raw materials ripe for Christian conversion.

Along these lines, BGEA showcased the casino-resort complex and the world of entertainment as a cradle of conversion, the birthplace of the born-again. For instance, Graham reported conversion events in the casinos during the Crusades. On one occasion, he announced that, as he walked through a casino, "one of the dealers jumped up and said, 'Praise the Lord.'" "Then he went back to work," Graham said. He added that, in the very same hotel, a man "who was playing the slots, said, 'I have been caught.' I sure didn't know what was on his conscience."<sup>29</sup> More to the point, the main attractions of each rally included born-again popular entertainers like Johnny Cash, whose presence and witness created porous boundaries between the entertainment industry and the business of evangelicals. Even Graham's "Youth Night" featured pop singer B. J. Thomas, who testified he was a former drug addict with a "\$3000-a-week habit" until he found the Lord.<sup>30</sup> This type of testimony hinted at a hidden crop of would-be Christians whom the Crusade could harvest.

In this vein, Graham's coup de grâce was "unprecedented" in his ministry: a 3 a.m. "action" sermon in

the Convention Center, an hour when Vegas was “just coming to life” after the midnight shows and when late night personnel ended their shifts.<sup>31</sup> The event catered particularly to the showgirls, dealers and other shift workers along the Strip, but over 1,000 people attended the event—including the singer Robert Goulet and Foster Brooks, who performed drunk skits under the alias “The Lush.” When the evangelist issued his invitation to accept Jesus Christ, the papers reported, “43 persons responded, including a Moslem belly dancer, three showgirls, seven cocktail waitresses, four Keno runners, a bartender, a craps dealer and a man who said he is a homosexual employed at a hotel.” Though local and national media depicted the affair as a lurid curiosity, this scheduled event foregrounded Graham’s willingness to go to the trenches for casino workers, permanent residents of the strip in special need of the Gospel.

Finally, Graham purposefully promoted a wholesome image of Las Vegas, which he depicted as a city chock-full of evangelicals overshadowed by the glitter of the casinos. As the Crusade drew to a close, the evangelist maintained he was surprised to see “another side to Las Vegas besides gambling and the bright lights of the Strip,” though he was well aware it existed. Graham proposed that televising the crusade to an audience of 75 to a 100 million abroad would “further popularize the town.”<sup>32</sup> Apparently, the Crusade’s audience was a bunch of clean-shaven middle-Americans, a theme he emphasized again and again: “Deep down, it [Vegas] is just like any other American city.”<sup>33</sup> When Graham entered “the fun and entertainment capital of the world,” the *Las Vegas Sun* explained, he discovered “his real audience here has been the ordinary man, woman, teen-ager and child.”<sup>34</sup>

So was the Crusade an appeal to the casino resort culture, or did it merely appropriate the Strip for mostly unsullied Christian outsiders, winning along the way the support of politicians and a business community that would profit from the Crusade? Did Graham intervene in the lived religious experience of working peoples, to cultivate new opportunities and spaces for religious activity in the casino-resort culture, or did he rely on an army of Christians from beyond the boundaries of the city to make the Crusade a success? Did he grow a largely invisible community of Christians and generate opportunities to be Christians *at work on* the Strip?

The purpose of this paper has not been to undermine the compelling accounts of Christian conversion that took place in Las Vegas during BGEA’s five day Crusade. Graham’s 1978 Crusade certainly altered the structure and legibility of faith-based activities on the Strip—at least temporarily—and his rallies persuaded many to seek their salvation. But compensating for an impoverished religious network and vying for attention with the numerous attractions—religious and otherwise—on the Strip and in its vicinity proved significant challenges for Graham and BGEA. Ultimately, it is difficult to come to any conclusions about the long-term or permanent effects of Graham’s large-scale efforts at evangelism without surveying the experiences of residents and workers who witnessed the Crusade and the changes it wrought in the years that followed. Still, as an effort to penetrate the interdependent cultures of space, work, and lived religion on the Strip itself, BGEA’s and Graham’s campaign in Las Vegas seems to have managed an image of success that simultaneously leveraged and salvaged Vegas’ tarnished reputation, perhaps at the expense of fundamentally transforming faith at work on the Strip.



## Endnotes

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- 4 David G. Schwartz, *Suburban Xanadu: The Casino Resort on The Las Vegas Strip and Beyond* (NY: Routledge, 2003), 173.
- 5 David A. Skeel Jr. and William Stuntz, “The Criminal Law of Gambling: A Puzzling History,” *Gambling: Mapping the American Moral Landscape*, eds. Alan Wolfe and Erik C. Owens (Waco: Baylor U Press, 2009), 285.
- 6 Interview of Helen R. Early by Dale Forsee.
- 7 Larry Turner, qtd. in Karen M. Galtz, “Devout, Doubtful Prepare for Billy Graham LV Crusade: Spiritual Big Business,” *Las Vegas Sun*, Sunday, January 22, 1978, 16.
- 8 Galtz, “Devout, Doubtful Prepare for Billy Graham LV Crusade,” 16.
- 9 Crucially, Graham lacked the endorsement of one of Vegas’ most significant religious institutions: the Church of Jesus Christ of the Latter Day Saints. While he made light of the barely “lukewarm reception” before reporters and acknowledge that he did not agree with the Church’s teachings, Graham also insisted that Mormons would find their way to the Las Vegas Convention Center, injudiciously adding, “Some of my best friends are Mormons.” See Karen Galatz, “Graham Arrives in LV ‘To Proclaim Gospel,’” *Las Vegas Sun*, January 31, 1978, 1.
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- 18 “Church Directory,” *Las Vegas Sun*, January 28, 1978, 19.
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## About the Author



**Michelle Robinson** received her Master’s of Theological Studies from Harvard Divinity School and completed the Ph.D. at Boston University’s Program in New England and American Studies. She is currently an Assistant Professor of American Studies at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. Her current research employs case studies to investigate the interdependent histories of metropolitan and regional growth, cultures of work, and lived religion in the late-nineteenth and twentieth centuries.



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Founded in 1987, the Center for Gaming Research hosts scholars investigating a variety of subject areas. Located within Special Collections at UNLV's state-of-the-art Lied Library, its main resource is the Gaming Collection.

Many unique primary resources can be found only within the Collection. We preserve and make accessible company documents, state publications, and other important resources.

The Center's Gaming Fellow program, active since 2007, brings scholars from around the world to Las Vegas to perform research in Special Collections. Fellows use the Center's resources to further their study of gaming and become ambassadors for the Center and UNLV.

The Center is committed to providing support for scholarly inquiry into all aspects of gaming. We serve as an unparalleled resource for students, faculty, and independent scholars.

Students, faculty and community members interested in academically-oriented gaming research are welcome to use the collection and the resources of the Center.

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Authors include faculty affiliated with the Center for Gaming Research, particularly Eadington Fellows. As part of their residency, fellows complete a paper for the series.

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Number 24 | April 2014

Series editor: David G. Schwartz

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