

Documenting the Spirit

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VLADIMIR ILYICH ULYANOV, better known as Lenin, helped to found a newspaper in 1900. It was called *Iskra*, the Russian word for spark,¹ and he hoped the newspaper would serve as the spark for a mighty revolution. For individuals and for nations, enthusiasm often is such a spark, a starting point for tumultuous and perhaps lasting change, for the creation of new viewpoints, lives, societies—and of documents for archives. The conscientious archivist must consider with care the relationship between enthusiasm and his or her collections. What are the connecting links between the enthusiasm that motivates and the documents that record? How important is enthusiasm? Can enthusiasm itself be documented, or only its effects?

Some of the clearest examples of enthusiasm and its effects can be found in spiritual events. Here are four examples of varieties of religious experience.

In 1900, a group of women in Grand Rapids, Mich., contacted Henry Monroe of the Pacific Garden Mission in Chicago. They asked him for his help in starting a mission in the Grand Rapids slums that would provide food and shelter for the destitute, the alcoholics, the tramps and hoboes of the city, as well as preach the Gospel. He sent them Mel Trotter, an ex-barber who had stumbled into the Pacific Garden Mission in 1897 in an alcoholic stupor. Monroe had helped him dry out, talked to him about Christianity, and led him to Christ. In Grand Rapids, Trotter began a career in rescue mission work. By the time of his death in 1940, he had helped to found 60 rescue missions in all parts of the United States.²

In 1918, with great fanfare, a preacher named Billy Sunday came to Chicago. Hundreds of people had been working throughout the city for weeks preparing

¹*Encyclopaedia Britannica*, 15th edition, s.v. "Lenin." (Chicago: Encyclopaedia Britannica, 1980), vol. 10, p. 792.

²Collection 47, "Papers of Melvin Ernest Trotter, 1899-1972; n.d.," Archives of the Billy Graham Center, Wheaton, Ill.

for his evangelistic crusade. In addition to fighting the Devil, Sunday was taking on another old adversary, Mr. Booze. Chicago was in the midst of a hard-fought petition campaign to decide whether an amendment that would prohibit the sale of alcohol in the city should be put to a vote in a municipal election. For 10 weeks, from 10 March to 19 May, Sunday preached six days a week at the Tabernacle on Chicago Avenue; his simple message of Christian salvation combined with rip-snorting theatrics drew and stirred more than a million people. Those who did not attend the meetings could follow his sermons day by day in the newspaper. Then Sunday left town, the petition drive failed; and the customary controversy among ministers arose, and soon died down, over what lasting effect, if any, Sunday's work had had.³

In the 1930s, black and white Christians in East and Central Africa were swept up in a grass-roots revival called the Roho Movement. At outdoor evening prayer meetings, thousands of people stood up in turn and publicly confessed their sins and pledged renewed obedience to Christ. Later, schism split many churches as congregations doubted the faith of elders, pastors, and missionaries who had not undergone the rite of public confession. Some Rohoists themselves became evangelists and bishops within their own denominations.⁴

In 1932, 26-year-old Otto Frederick Schoerner left his home in Pennsylvania to become a missionary of the China Inland Mission. He and five other novices

joined Rev. George Hunter in northern China. They purchased two Ford pickup trucks and left for a two-month, 1,800-mile journey across the Gobi Desert to Hunter's home and church in the city of Urumchi in the Chinese province of Sinkiang. In Sinkiang, Turks, Chinese, and Red and White Russians were engaged in confused open and covert struggle. Hunter's party arrived in the midst of a Muslim uprising; for the next few months they served as nurses at impromptu hospitals. Schoerner then spent six years traveling with Muslim trade caravans, preaching the Gospel individually to the humble travelers he met. Before 1951, when the Mission summoned all its missionaries out of China, Schoerner also served as teacher in Honan and as hospital administrator in Manchuria.⁵

What do these four stories have in common? At least one major element. They are about manifestations of enthusiasm, more specifically what may be called spiritual enthusiasm. The *Encyclopedia of Religious Knowledge* defines enthusiasm as "an intense moral impulse or all-engrossing temper. The term applied to religion designates a noble temper of mind and moral fervor, and also a misdirected or even destructive intensity of feeling."⁶ The documents of spiritual enthusiasm are not, as might at first appear, a topic relevant only to custodians of materials dealing with religious history. As F. Gerald Ham has said, it is the duty of archivists and manuscript curators to "make an informed selection of information that will provide the future with

³Collection 61, "Papers of William Ashley and Helen Amelia Sunday, 1882-1974; n.d.," Archives of the Billy Graham Center, Wheaton, Ill.

⁴Collection 89, "Interviews with Paul Stough, 1979-1980," Archives of the Billy Graham Center, Wheaton, Ill. See also William B. Anderson, *The Church in East Africa* (Dodoma, Tanganyika: Central Tanganyika Press, 1977), pp. 118-120.

⁵Collection 55, "Interviews with Otto Frederick Schoerner, 1978-1979," Archives of the Billy Graham Center, Wheaton, Ill.

⁶Samuel Macaulay Jackson, ed., *Encyclopedia of Religious Knowledge* (London: Educational Book Company, n.d.), vol. 4, p. 149.

a representative record of human experience in our time.”⁷ This is an active task, not a passive one. And it involves something more than documenting human activity. For experience consists not only of what is done but also of why it is done and how it is perceived. Enthusiasm is part of the why. It is one of the factors that motivate activity—admittedly only one, and not a particularly common one. It is, therefore, an element that should be reflected in archival collections. Somewhere in our vast holdings of paper, film, tape, and other media, we must have material that helps the user understand not only the actions of institutions, but also the upheavals that occur within human hearts and minds that lead people to create institutions and to initiate their activities. “But what do we mean by the American Revolution?” wrote John Adams in 1818 as he thought back on the upheaval of his youth. “Do we mean the American war? The Revolution was in the hearts and minds of the people. . . . This radical change in the principles, opinions, sentiments, and affection of the people, was the real American Revolution.”⁸

Enthusiasm, then, is a factor in history. Even if we consider only spiritual enthusiasm and confine ourselves to the Christian Church, a thousand additional examples of the manifestations of people’s spiritual impulses could easily be gathered in addition to the four given above: Saint Francis’ “Canticle to the Sun,” Zwingli’s conflict with the anabaptists in Zurich, the mission of the Franciscan fathers to the Huron Indians, and the camp meetings at Cane Ridge, Kentucky. But the stories of Trotter, Sunday, the Roho Movement, and Schoerner serve to illustrate both the common elements of a

spiritual enthusiasm and the diverse and even divisive forms it can take. It can be expressed in highly organized channels such as Billy Sunday’s meetings, or it can be a completely spontaneous, grass-roots movement like the one called Roho. It can be a very public, controversial, and militant force as in Sunday’s revivalism and the Roho Movement, or a very private and gentle passion as in the life work of Otto Schoerner. It can cause a person to reject the world as did the Rohoists, or to try to reform, to recreate the world like Trotter. It can cause deep divisions of opinion even among fellow believers as in the case of the Rohoists, or pit enthusiasts against nonenthusiasts, as Sunday’s meetings often did. But there are common elements as well. The Rohoists, Trotter, Schoerner, and Sunday and his adherents all were moved to action, and they were moved to action by a vision of human existence that saw the meaning of that existence not in material or ideological terms, but in spiritual terms, in terms of a personal relationship with God. None of the people in my anecdotes was a theologian in the common sense of the word. Their belief in the preeminence of the spiritual grew out of intense experiences that changed their lives and led them to physical manifestations of their enthusiasm—the outward sign of their inward belief.

How do the spiritual beliefs, particularly the spiritual enthusiasm of a group of believers, influence a society? What mark do they leave upon history? Christ called his followers to be the salt of the earth, but it is notoriously difficult to trace the taste of this particular seasoning. Until recently, most historians have shown little interest in entwining the strand of spiritual history

⁷F. Gerald Ham, “The Archival Edge,” *American Archivist* 38 (January 1975): 5.

⁸Charles F. Adams, ed., *The Works of John Adams, Second President of the United States* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1856), vol. 10, pp. 282-283.

with the more common (and perhaps more tractable) strands of political, economic, military, and social history. There have been many exceptions, of course. Edward Gibbon summed up his history of the decay of his beloved Roman Empire with the phrase "I have described the triumph of barbarism and religion."⁹ Arnold Toynbee, in *Civilization on Trial*, took issue with Gibbon. He did not see religion as a barrier to the development of civilizations; he saw civilizations as nothing more than cocoons created to protect spiritual movements during their formative stages:

The breakdown and disintegration of civilization might be stepping-stones to higher things on the religious plane. . . . If religion is a chariot, it looks as if the wheels on which it mounts toward Heaven may be the periodic downfalls of civilizations on Earth. It looks as if the movements of civilizations may be cyclic and recurrent, while the movement of religion may be on a single continuous upward line. The continuous upward movement of religion may be served and promoted by the cyclic movement of civilizations around the cycle of birth, death, birth."¹⁰

On a less philosophical level, Élie

Halévy has cited Christian enthusiasm—or one particular form of it, evangelism—as a major factor in channeling and controlling a social revolution in early 19th-century England¹¹; and Timothy Smith and others have proclaimed it a major catalyst in the birth of the abolitionist movement and other social reforms of antebellum America.¹² The debate still rages over the degree of influence that the series of religious revivals known as the Great Awakening had on the transformation of colonial America and the coming of the American Revolution.¹³

What does all this have to do with archives? It is our job as archivists actively to collect, preserve, and make available for use documents that create a true picture of the past. We all know this is an impossible job. The few poor, disjointed fragments that we are able to collect are no more a true picture of what actually happened than a skeleton is a human being, but it is the best we can do. A major, and particularly elusive, element in that representative record discussed by Ham is the spiritual. Karel Čapek wrote a novel about a man who discovered a method for manufacturing the Absolute in his basement,¹⁴ but he did not provide the formula. How do we capture the

⁹Edward Gibbon, *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* (New York: The Modern Library, n.d.), vol. 3, p. 865.

¹⁰Arnold J. Toynbee, *Civilization on Trial and The World and The West* (New York: New American Library, 1976), pp. 206-207.

¹¹Élie Halévy, *England in 1815* (New York: Barnes and Noble, c. 1960). See also the introduction by translator Bernard Semmel in Halévy's *The Birth of Methodism in England* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1971).

¹²Timothy Smith, *Revivalism and Social Reform: American Protestantism on the Eve of the Civil War* (Gloucester, Mass.: Abingdon Press, 1957). There are many more recent statements of similar themes, such as Lawrence Thomas Lesick, *The Lane Rebels: Evangelicalism and Antislavery in Antebellum America* (Metuchen, N.J.: Scarecrow Press, 1980), and Bertram Wyatt-Brown, *Lewis Tappan and the Evangelical War Against Slavery* (Cleveland: Press of the Case Western Reserve University, 1969).

¹³The literature on the effects of the Great Awakening is voluminous. Three good places to start are the brief chapter on "Suggested Readings" in David S. Lovejoy, *Religious Enthusiasm and the Great Awakening* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1969), pp. 113-115; the bibliographic essay at the end of Cedric B. Cowing, *The Great Awakening and the American Revolution: Colonial Thought in the 18th Century* (Chicago: Rand McNally, 1971), pp. 226-249; and "A Note on Sources" in Mark A. Noll, *Christians in the American Revolution* (Washington, D.C.: Christian University Press, 1977), pp. 177-190. A recent article of interest is William G. McLoughlin, "Enthusiasm for Liberty: The Great Awakening as the Key to the Revolution," *Proceedings of the American Antiquarian Society* 1977, 87(1): 69-95.

¹⁴Karel Čapek, *The Absolute at Large* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1975).

essence of spiritual enthusiasm and keep it for study in our repositories?

Religious activities, like most other activities, include actions that can be counted and tabulated and thus rather simply recorded.¹⁵ But, just as a pile of bank journals and ledgers can give us only one perspective on the Great Depression of the 1930s, so the minutes and statistics of a denominational headquarters or a nondenominational evangelistic organization or mission board can give us only part of the help we need in understanding the alliance and warfare among spirit, pocketbook, head, heart, and stomach in an individual, a church, and a society. When we document spiritual enthusiasm, we are less interested in what happened and how it was perceived and much more interested in why individuals and groups were moved to remake themselves, others, or society itself. The environment within the head and heart needs to be charted as does the external action it causes. Those in the grip of enthusiasm see the world very differently than do those who are unmoved. The Roman Catholic monk Thomas Merton expressed this difference when describing two different views of his church:

I would not be a Catholic if the Church were merely an organization, a collective institution, with rules and laws demanding external conformity from its members. I see the laws of the Church and all the various ways in which she exercises her teaching authority and her jurisdiction as subordinate to the Holy Spirit and to the law of love. I know that my Church does not look like this to those who are outside her; to them the Church acts on a principle of authority but not of freedom. They are mistaken.¹⁶

Religious archivists must come to grips with spiritual enthusiasm because it is the motivating force that creates so many of the organizations, movements, and activities their archives document. This is not easy to do. The Archives of the Billy Graham Center, for example, is attempting to collect documents about one expression of Christian spiritual enthusiasm, the urge to evangelize, as embodied by one segment of the Universal Church—the Protestant branch—through the nondenominational mode, in one area of the world: North America. Even further qualification is required to describe fully what we do. What is called evangelism within one's own culture is included, more or less, in what is called missions when carried out in another culture. Therefore, we collect materials by and from North American Protestant missionaries, such as Otto Schoerner, as well as from individuals like Billy Sunday, who did their work almost completely within the United States. We are interested in information not about institutions such as mission boards or churches, but about a type of activity: evangelism. We collect the institutional records to get information on that activity.

We have papers of individuals and records of organizations. We have tried to collect representative samples from the typical as well as the exceptional Christian worker. Researchers using our files can study international congresses on preaching and can learn how evangelistic campaigns are planned and carried out in New York City and in Nampa, Idaho. But these are the records of the activity of evangelism, and not of enthusiasm as expressed in, for example, a religious revival (which we could define

¹⁵This idea was suggested by the paper Trudy Peterson presented at the 1981 SAA meeting, which appears on pp. 131-134 of this issue.

¹⁶Thomas Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1966), pp. 75-76.

as a spontaneous, sudden awakening of interest in spiritual matters in a group of people). Evangelism is usually a carefully planned activity as opposed to the spontaneity of revivals, which move to their own rhythm, very different from the tempo of everyday life. For instance, in 1906 a one-eyed black preacher named William J. Seymour arrived in Los Angeles and started preaching in an abandoned store on Azusa Street. The non-stop meetings that followed over the next three years are not very well documented or understood, but out of them grew the modern Pentecostal movement, which today includes at least 12 million adherents around the world and perhaps more than any other segment of the church has managed to cut across economic, social, racial, political, and ideological lines in its appeal.¹⁷ Another type of awakening is the sudden change in a single human personality called conversion. To paraphrase the Gospel of John, the wind blows where it listeth and usually doesn't leave a calling card behind, at least not on paper. The Graham Center Archives does not now have in its collections any records that document revivals.

Yet it is the central mystery, the passion of these spontaneous awakenings, that lies at the heart of the other events we document in the Archives, whether they be the wildfire of the Roho Movement, the gentle passion of an Otto Schoerner, or the institutionalization of charity in the rescue missions of Mel Trotter. How can wildfire or a spark of enthusiasm be documented so that researchers can study both the first cause and its effect? Oral history recaptures memories, which are highly colored by

later events and explanations. While it is possible to discover letters, diaries, and other papers that record impressions formed at the very initiation of a spiritual upheaval, it is much harder systematically to collect materials about enthusiasm as opposed to the records of a person or organization. We have in the Archives an interesting set of questionnaires created to be used as the basis of a dissertation, that were filled out by people immediately after they had come forward at a Billy Graham meeting. The questionnaire was designed to record their description of how and why they had responded as they did.¹⁸ This type of documentation of a spiritual event is one way to catch the fire, but it is too detached and statistically oriented to reflect the entire experience. Perhaps folk art and music should be included in an archives of missions and evangelism to supplement the data in more traditional documents. The task of documenting a spiritual awakening or a revival remains an only partially solved puzzle, for spiritual enthusiasm is, to those whom it moves, by its nature transcendent, spontaneous, and ahistorical. We are trying to preserve historical documents about events that, according to believers, draw their significance in large part outside of historical time.

In the Graham Center Archives are samplings of documents that deal with evangelism and missions in the global village and in actual villages. We have materials about rescue missions, medical missions, mission schools, mass evangelism, media evangelism, personal evangelism, charismatic evangelism, and grass-roots evangelism. We have

¹⁷*Encyclopaedia Britannica*, 15th edition, s.v. "Pentecostal Churches." See also Walter J. Hollenweger, *The Pentecostals/The Charismatic Movement in the Churches* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing, 1972) for information on the Pentecostal Church's origin and development worldwide.

¹⁸Collection 79, "Survey of Inquirers of the Greater Chicago Crusade; August-December, 1963," Archives of the Billy Graham Center, Wheaton, Ill.

evidence of the hatred and love that the preaching of that double-edged sword, the Christian Gospel, can arouse. I do not believe this is sufficient. C.S. Lewis, in one of the Narnia fantasies he wrote for children, records a talk between Eustace, a boy from England, and a kind of angel named Ramandu in the Oz-like land of Narnia. Ramandu tells Eustace how in Narnia stars are living beings. Eustace replies, "In our world, a star is a huge ball of flaming gas." Ramandu replies, "Even in your world, my son, that is not what a star is but only what it is made of."¹⁹ I cannot help feeling that our records tell what the Christian experience is made of and not what it actually is. I do not think our archives has yet succeeded in capturing the essence of spiritual experience, in "catching" the spirit. Perhaps this cannot be done, or perhaps we have been too blinded by the collections of the ar-

chives of institutions to see what is needed for the shelves of the repositories of experience. We have only imprints of enthusiasm left on paper, on tape, on film, and on memory—imprints such as these recollections made more than 60 years later by a visitor to Billy Sunday's Chicago Tabernacle.

I thought he was a tremendous preacher. . . . He was a very demonstrative preacher. Sometimes he would even take a chair. . . and be waving it around when he wanted to make a point. I even saw him jump up on the pulpit one time. And he spoke to the crowds and had a great invitation and people would come down those aisles by the hundreds, you know. Many people were criticizing back in those days saying he wasn't a refined preacher, and all that kind of thing, but oh how people came to the Lord back in those days.²⁰

¹⁹C.S. Lewis, *Voyage of the Dawn Treader* (New York: Macmillan, 1952), p. 175.

²⁰Collection 50, Tape #T2, "Interviews with Merrill Dunlop," Archives of the Billy Graham Center, Wheaton, Ill.