Billy Sunday and the Mystique of the Middle West

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THE ERA from roughly 1880 to 1920 was one of extraordinary economic, cultural, and social transformation in the United States. Given the tide of change flowing about them, it is hardly surprising that it was also an age of considerable uncertainty and ambivalence on the part of the American people. They generally welcomed and were proud of the unprecedented material progress resulting from the enormous expansion that had transformed their nation's economy since the Civil War. Yet they were often wary of the kaleidoscopic cultural shifts that seemed to threaten conventional patterns of life. Many longed for familiarity and certainty, but few actually wished for a genuine return to an idealized bygone era. Rather, most preferred a new order in which change would be tempered by tradition and progress informed by the past. For a time, the popular image of the Middle West seemed to offer a viable model of such a society, and William Ashley "Billy" Sunday, one of the region's most famous native sons, exemplified for a substantial number of people the kind of vigorous, successful, righteous, modern American it could produce.

Sunday's appeal as a revivalist was subtly linked to his audiences' perceptions of the "heartland" from which he sprang. There is an intriguing and illuminating congruity between the course of the evangelist's singular career and his native region's shifting fortunes as national symbol. In many respects, his popularity as preacher and public figure waxed and waned with the ebb and flow of the potency of the Middle West's cultural mystique. The region and the man emerged slowly into the national consciousness in the late nineteenth and early twen-

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tieth centuries. Their significance peaked during the 1910s and declined thereafter. For millions of middle-class Americans, both Sunday and the Middle West, at the zenith of their appeal, symbolized characteristics such as youthful vigor, pietistic morality, democratic egalitarianism, self-reliance, and progressive idealism. Many Americans considered such characteristics vital to national greatness, but feared that the profound socioeconomic changes occurring in the years between the Civil War and World War I imperiled their survival. As such traits were redefined or the connection between them and national identity waned after the Great War, so too did the cultural power of the Middle West and the popularity of Billy Sunday.

AN AMBIVALENCE TOWARD CHANGE and the consequent effort to bridge the traditional and the modern is apparent in some of the popular myths and symbols prevalent at the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth centuries. John Bodnar has observed that the late nineteenth century was an era of considerable competition among local, regional, and national constituencies with divergent, though not necessarily mutually exclusive loyalties and agendas. He contends that in public ceremonies commemorating the past the local populace often stressed a pioneer motif celebrating the struggles and triumphs of the common people, while cultural or commercial elites frequently emphasized a patriotic motif extolling national ideals and cohesiveness. Michael Kammen, too, has noted a persistent localism during these years, but he stresses a "renaissance of patriotism" which began in the late 1880s and surged during the 1890s.[1]

A mythology featuring local custom and tradition affirmed norms and afforded a sense of continuity and security while that emphasizing a national point of view was consistent with the contemporary faith in economic and social progress. These themes were not necessarily incompatible; sometimes they con-

1. John Bodnar, *Remaking America: Public Memory, Commemoration, and Patriotism in the Twentieth Century* (Princeton, NJ, 1992), 28–35; Michael Kammen, *Mystic Chords of Memory: The Transformation of Tradition in American Culture* (New York, 1991), 179.

verged in myths and symbols that simultaneously acknowledged and preserved elements of local or regional culture while serving national interests. For example, by 1909, the centennial of Abraham Lincoln's birth, the popular perception of Lincoln as a rail-splitting son of the frontier had merged with that of his image as president and American messiah to create a heroic figure embodying a broad range of cultural ideals.[2] By that time, too, some Americans had begun to regard the Midwest from which Lincoln had sprung as itself representative of many quintessentially American traits. By the early twentieth century, when to many people the South seemed exotic, the West inchoate, and the East in decline, the Middle West epitomized traditional, wholesome, vibrant, prosperous, democratic American civilization. For a brief time in the midst of an era of rapid transition, this mystique of the Middle West constituted something of a point of cultural orientation for the nation.[3]

The value system at the core of the Midwest's identity began taking shape in the middle years of the nineteenth century and evolved in response to the changing economic, social, and cultural conditions that were the corollaries of industrialization, immigration, and urbanization. As Andrew R. L. Cayton and Peter S. Onuf have reminded us, midwesterners' sense of who they were was closely related to the ideology that underlay the Republican Party. Born in the 1850s in opposition to the spread of slavery, the party emerged from the Civil War as the champion of an economic creed that featured individualism, acquisitiveness, competitiveness, and freedom from governmental restrictions, and a moral code that stressed "sobriety, self-restraint, decorum, industriousness, and piety."[4] A blend of yeoman and commercial capitalistic ideals permeated with evangelical morality, this value system retained much of its vitality well into the late nineteenth century.

Middle West, in other words, represented mature Americanism.[5] open, honest, kind, energetic, industrious, self-reliant, moral, and progressive. Society was democratic and egalitarian. The

2. Kammen, *Mystic Chords of Memory*, 128.

3. James R. Shortridge, "The Emergence of 'Middle West' as an American Regional Label," *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 74 (1984), 213, 216–17.

4. Andrew R. L. Cayton and Peter S. Onuf, *The Midwest and the Nation* (Bloomington, IN, 1990), 11–12.

The rise of large-scale capitalism, with its burgeoning working class and ethnically diverse population, posed a formidable threat to the bourgeois ideology that lay at the core of midwesterners' identity. By the 1890s, however, some residents of the region had begun to accommodate themselves to the new and more complex economic order. Others yielded more slowly to change. Most people, however, regardless of their attitude toward the rise of industrial capitalism, retained their traditional faith in the relationship between character and material success. They believed that, in spite of the accelerating pace of change around them, their region continued to exhibit those egalitarian, democratic, self-reliant, and voluntaristic values characteristic of American civilization at its best. By embracing material progress while eschewing cultural change, midwesterners created a mythology that suggested that tradition and modernity could in some way be reconciled.

From the turn of the century through World War I, writers such as Edward A. Ross and Charles M. Harger who described the region increasingly linked it with a body of images and ideas epitomizing the essence of American culture. Cullom Davis has argued persuasively that parts of the Midwest rather accurately reflect the diversity and complexity of American life, but the early twentieth-century image of the "Heartland" conveyed something more idyllic. According to geographer James Shortridge, the Middle West evoked visions of a pastoral paradise strewn with villages, towns, and a few dynamic urban centers. The region supposedly possessed a fortuitous combination of youthful western and mature eastern characteristics. It had advanced beyond the adolescent excesses of the West and had not yet fallen victim to the deterioration, loss of idealism, and decline of vitality that allegedly characterized the increasingly urban, industrial, and heterogeneous aging East. Its people were open, honest, kind, energetic, industrious, self-reliant, moral, and progressive. Society was democratic and egalitarian. The Middle West, in other words, represented mature Americanism.[5]

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5. James R. Shortridge, *The Middle West: Its Meaning in American Culture* (Lawrence, KS, 1989), 30–33; Cullom Davis, "Illinois: Crossroads and Cross Section," in James H. Madison, ed., *Heartland: Comparative Histories of the Midwestern States* (Bloomington, IN, 1988), 127–57.

THE FLAMBOYANT EVANGELIST William Ashley "Billy" Sunday was one of the best known but most controversial progeny of the emerging Middle West. Sunday was born in a log cabin in Story County, Iowa, in November 1862, in the twilight of the state's frontier era. He lost his father, a Union soldier, to disease less than a month after his birth. Throughout much of his childhood his family lived on the edge of poverty. Ultimately, conditions became so difficult for his mother that, for a time in the 1870s, she placed Sunday and his older brother in an orphanage for the children of victims of the Civil War. By the time he reached his early teens, Sunday had assumed responsibility for his own support. He worked in a variety of agricultural and manufacturing jobs in Nevada and Marshalltown, Iowa. As he matured, he earned a local reputation as an exceptional athlete, especially as a daring and fleet-footed baseball player. As a result, in 1883 Adrian Anson, a Marshalltown native who was captain of the Chicago White Stockings, invited him to join his team on a trial basis. Though a mediocre hitter, Sunday was skilled on the base paths and consequently enjoyed a colorful though not exceptional eight-year career in major league baseball.[6]

While playing for the White Stockings in Chicago, Sunday experienced a religious conversion that was ultimately responsible for his commitment to full-time Christian work. In 1891 he abandoned baseball and joined the staff of the local YMCA in Chicago. Two years later he became an advance man for evangelist J. Wilbur Chapman and remained with him until Chapman's return to the parish ministry. In 1896, with some trepidation, he launched his own evangelistic work. He remained passionately committed to that work until his death in 1935.

In the early years of his ministry, Sunday toured what he called the "Kerosene Circuit," preaching to ever larger crowds in the small towns and mid-sized cities of the Midwest. By the 1910s, however, Sunday had become the most sought-after preacher in the nation and held evangelistic crusades in most of the country's major metropolitan areas. One of the best-known

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6. Lyle Dorsett, *Billy Sunday and the Redemption of Urban America* (Grand Rapids, MI, 1991), 6–20; Adrian C. Anson, *A Ball Player's Career: Being the Personal Experiences and Reminiscences of Adrian C. Anson* (Chicago, 1900), 133.

men of his age, he was received at the White House by Woodrow Wilson, admired and entertained by business leaders such as John D. Rockefeller Jr. and John Wanamaker, given extensive coverage by newspapers and magazines, and heard daily by thousands who flocked to services in cavernous wooden tabernacles constructed especially for his campaigns. From the confines of a log cabin on the Iowa prairie in the 1860s, Sunday had journeyed by 1915 to preach in the spacious elegance of Carnegie Hall.

BILLY SUNDAY'S SUCCESS lay, in large measure, in the power of his dramatic persona and in the skill with which his revivals were organized and executed. His charisma, showmanship, and businesslike methods do not, however, wholly explain Sunday's appeal. Among the factors that drew crowds to his revivals and captured their attention were his youthful vigor, pietistic morality, democratic egalitarianism, self-reliance, and progressive idealism, traits that many Americans at the turn of the century also identified with the Middle West.

Although middle-aged by the time he became a national phenomenon, Billy Sunday epitomized for his audiences a kind of youthful, manly vigor associated with the vitality of the Middle West as a region and with American manhood at its best. Cultural historian Gail Bederman has recently described efforts on the part of the middle class to redefine manhood at the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth centuries. She contends that "manliness" as understood by Victorian Americans suggested qualities of character and morality, while the term "masculinity," which began to appear in the 1890s, connoted physical attributes such as strength, energy, muscularity, and athletic prowess.[8] Sunday's evangelistic persona combined

7. Dorsett, *Billy Sunday*, 65–66; Roger A. Bruns, *Preacher: Billy Sunday and Big-Time American Evangelism* (New York, 1992), 112. The biographical summary in the above paragraphs appears by permission of *The Historian*. See Robert F. Martin, "Billy Sunday and Christian Manliness," *The Historian* 58 (1996), 811–23.

8. Gail Bederman, *Manliness and Civilization: A Cultural History of Gender and Race in the United States, 1880–1917* (Chicago, 1995), 18.

the emerging notion of "masculinity" with the traditional understanding of "manliness."

Congregations marveled at his remarkable agility and energy, and journalists commented on his stamina. One reporter estimated that Sunday traveled a mile during each sermon and more than a hundred miles in every campaign. In 1914 the *Des Moines Register and Leader* reported, "He fully measured up to his reputation for dramatic presentation of his themes. He charged back and forth on the platform, dropped to his knees at times, flopped into a chair, jumped upon it, waved his handkerchief and shook his fists, shouted, laughed, stormed, sweated, and performed a variety of other feats which would put an ordinary man in bed for a week."[9]

Had there been no more to Sunday's manhood than an extraordinary display of masculine vigor, it would have been of little consequence beyond revivalistic theatrics, but he also conveyed an aura of manliness that extended beyond physical agility and endurance to a kind of combative moral courage that would take on all comers in defense or advocacy of a just cause. His faith was militant, and he admonished Christians to have the physical courage of David and the moral courage of Old Testament prophets. He frequently lamented in his sermons the deplorable lack of manliness in contemporary society and contended that the country needed men "full of good red blood instead of pink tea and ice water." As if to prove that no such insipid fluids flowed through his veins, Sunday assured one tabernacle audience, "If I knew that the chief of devils sat out there on one of those benches, and that all the cohorts of hell were in front of me, sneering and leering, I would preach anyway, and I would preach the truth as God has given it to me."[10]

The truth granted to Sunday was that bestowed on his generation of midwesterners. It was more a matter of morality than theology. He clearly believed in the substitutionary atonement of Jesus's death, and his evangelistic crusades always included altar calls that drew "converts" by the hundreds or even thou-

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9. *Des Moines Register and Leader*, 2 November 1914.

10. Elijah Brown, *The Real Billy Sunday: The Life and Work of Rev. William Ashley Sunday, D.D., The Baseball Evangelist* (New York, 1914), 220–21.

sands. Yet his sermons were, for the most part, lessons in his version of applied Christianity rather than discourses in fundamentalist theology or emotional appeals for repentance, and his message was usually oriented as much toward social as personal salvation.

The zenith of Sunday's career coincided closely with that of the Progressive Era, and some of the causes he championed, especially prohibition, occasionally converged with those of contemporary political reformers. In the eyes of some at least, this fact, coupled with the crusading tone of his evangelism, lent a progressive aura to his ministry, and he was perceived as a fearless champion of change. While he shared much of progressivism's optimism, patriotism, and conviction of the superiority of American civilization, Sunday was essentially an evangelical reformer for whom sin, not society, was the problem, and the individual, not the state, the instrument for its solution. He considered the Social Gospel heretical and, despite his support of such moral strictures as Sabbatarian or prohibition laws, he generally had little faith in statutory or economic solutions to most problems. He explained, "Now moral statutes may be needed but statutes cannot put morals where morals do not exist. You cannot raise the standard of morals by raising the scale of wages; you've got to go higher than the pay envelope to find out the cause of vice and of virtue—and it's in the heart of men and women."[11]

Sunday was convinced that the "trouble with America" was "a lack of moral principle" and that he was in the world "for the purpose of making it easier for people to do right and harder for them to do wrong."[12] His notion of righteousness was informed by the pietistic norms of the Iowa towns of his youth, and he understood evil as a matter of personal or societal deviation from those norms. He railed against a litany of individual evils from masturbation to intemperance, from gambling to greed, but the evangelist's message clearly went beyond

11. Billy Sunday, Sermon Transcript, New York, 15 April 1917 (evening), 33, Papers of William and Helen Sunday (microfilm, reel 9).

12. Douglas Frank, *Less Than Conquerors: How Evangelicals Entered the Twentieth Century* (Grand Rapids, MI, 1986), 195.

individual piety. Laziness, drunkenness, licentiousness, selfishness, or irreligiousness were unquestionably sinful tendencies endangering the soul, but they were also sins with broad social implications. Reflecting the ideal, if not necessarily the reality, of community cohesiveness prevalent in the Midwest of his youth, Sunday believed that such irresponsible habits were unproductive and a threat to family, church, community, and the larger economic and social fabric of the nation. Much of his grievance against demon rum was a result of his belief that it brutalized and stupefied and sent "a man staggering and vomiting home drunk with a wrecked manhood instead of sober and decent and an asset to the community in which he lives."[13] In speaking of the consequences of venereal disease, Sunday said,

> It is a social evil too—not alone a moral question. But it is also a question of the preservation of civilization. And when I stand here and speak to you men I am not simply talking from the moral standpoint, valuable as it is. I am talking from the standpoint of civilization.
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> Abraham Lincoln said no nation could exist half slave and half free. We can't exist half drunk and half sober, half pure and half impure, and I am preaching for civilization as well as morals when I say that.[14]

Yet for all his prophetic fulminations against the decline of American society, throughout much of his career there was about Sunday and his message an aura of youthful optimism and idealism. He thanked God that he was not "one of those who believes that all the young men of America are devoid of virtue and of goodness."[15] Like many of the progressives of his age, he had a profound faith in the potential inherent in American society. The challenge was to mobilize that potential. His sermons were, therefore, as much a call to action as a call to

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13. Billy Sunday, Sermon Transcript, New York, 15 April 1917 (afternoon), Sunday Papers (microfilm, reel 9).

14. Billy Sunday, Sermon Transcript, New York, 6 May 1917 (afternoon), Sunday Papers (microfilm, reel 10).

15. Billy Sunday, Sermon Transcript, New York, 4 May 1917, Sunday Papers (microfilm, reel 10).

salvation. There was no limit to what the Christian men and women of the United States could accomplish if only they would have the courage to stand up for what was right. Tides of change were eroding American life, but courageous action rooted in loyalty to Christ could stem the tide. Douglas Frank has written perceptively that "the good news, in Sunday's hands, became the proclamation that men and women could be good and strong; and that if enough people were good and strong, politics would be purified, insanity and poverty would disappear, families would be made whole, young people would grow up to be solid citizens, and, in general, America would be saved. . . . What excited Sunday was not that people would hear of the love and merciful forgiveness of God, but that they could use God to make themselves and their country good."[16]

One of the reasons that Sunday's social critique was more moral than institutional was that his own experience and the ideology of the region from which he came seemed to offer few grounds for socioeconomic criticism. An important feature of the mystique of the Middle West, and one that the evangelist's life seemed to validate, was its apparent blend of socioeconomic mobility, egalitarianism, and democracy. For many, the region epitomized the free play of competition in every aspect of life and the opportunity for the able to succeed by virtue of their ability. Unlike the East, the playing field was, for the most part, still level and opportunities abundant. What better example of this reality than Billy Sunday, whose story suggested the extent to which an individual could overcome adversity. The evangelist occasionally reminded audiences of the social distance he had traversed, as when he declared to New Yorkers in 1917, "I've been thirty years getting here. It's a long trip from a little log cabin out in Iowa to the Tabernacle on Broadway."[17] Even without a reminder, the point was not lost on those attending Sunday revivals. Frank "Home Run" Baker, a major league baseball star of the early twentieth century, recalled of his experience at a Sunday revival in Baltimore in 1916: "As Billy Sunday spoke

16. Frank, *Less Than Conquerors*, 193–94.

17. Billy Sunday, Sermon Transcript, New York, 6 May 1917 (afternoon), Sunday Papers (microfilm, reel 10).

I looked around that vast tabernacle. It appealed to me as a miracle of our country's democracy. The people met to see and hear a man born in a log cabin, trained in professional baseball, converted in a rescue mission, and the most potent single personality in our land to-day."[18] While the saga of Sunday's life was not precisely a journey from rags to riches, it was clearly one of marvelous mobility. Furthermore, at the zenith of his success, despite his tailored suits and expensive cars, he conveyed the image of just plain "Billy" Sunday, a son of rural America who had made good but who, like Abraham Lincoln, retained his rural simplicity. He affirmed for Americans that upward socioeconomic mobility was still possible even in a rapidly changing nation.

Sunday's style of evangelism also heightened the aura of egalitarian democracy that surrounded his religious crusades. He never communicated to his audiences an air of superiority. In 1914 Sunday biographer Elijah Brown reprinted a Humboldt, Iowa, reporter's impressions of the evangelist. "There is none of the puffed-up Pharisee about him, and that is why he is so well liked by those to whom he preaches."[19] His revivalism was open, simple, and direct. In the plain speech of the common people, he delivered a message void of equivocation and sophistication. In an increasingly complex age in which American society was becoming more impersonal, bureaucratic, and institutionalized, Sunday spoke frankly and personally. As he expressed it, "I put the cookies and jam on the lower shelf so an audience don't have brain fag when they sit and listen to me."[20] Some equated Sunday's use of the vernacular with the vulgar and condemned his methods. Others, however, appreciated his efforts to preach a gospel that would reach the masses. One contemporary observer wrote, "It has been our habit for centuries to discuss religion and the affairs of the soul in a King James's vocabulary; to depart from that custom has come to seem something like sacrilege. Billy Sunday talks to people

18. "How a Baseball Idol 'Hit the Trail,'" *Literary Digest* 53 (8 July 1916), 95.

19. Brown, *The Real Billy Sunday*, 86.

20. William T. Ellis, *Billy Sunday: The Man and His Message* (Chicago, 1936), 504.

about God and their souls just as people talk to one another six days in the week across the counter or the dinner table or on the street."[21] In the early 1910s Bruce Barton observed, concerning the organization of Sunday's revival services in the Middle West, "Even the baseball game, democracy's national sport, has its boxes and its bleachers. But there are no boxes here. Those who occupy seats do so because they came before twelve o'clock and sat in them: the service was scheduled for two. The president of the First National Bank sits tight pressed between two sooted miners. The Mayor is on the platform—perhaps—that is, if he happens to be a choir singer. Otherwise he takes his chance with his masters, the common people."[22]

Billy Sunday was, then, for many Americans, a kind of latter-day Lincoln, a strong, vigorous, self-made, egalitarian hero, who came out of the prairies of the Midwest to summon the nation back to its highest ideals.[23] Yet neither the man nor his message captured the imagination of the age simply because they represented a nostalgic longing for a bygone era. Rather, by weaving many of the practices and values of both the old and the new into the colorful fabric of his career, Sunday and his evangelism helped alleviate the tension and anxiety that resulted from the transition from the rural agricultural America of the nineteenth century to the urban industrial nation of the twentieth.

Rising out of rural poverty, this orphaned son of a Civil War soldier had become, by the 1910s, an integral part of the popular culture of the new industrial America. He sometimes railed against the sinfulness of the cities and urged young men to go West or at least to seek opportunities on the farms or in the villages of the countryside, but was himself attracted to the city, and it was there that he scored his greatest success.[24] He had

21. Lindsay Denison, "The Rev. Billy Sunday and His War on the Devil," *American Magazine* 64 (September 1907), 452.

22. Bruce Barton, "Billy Sunday—Baseball Evangelist," *Collier's: The National Weekly* 51 (26 July 1913), 7.

23. *Philadelphia Evening Ledger*, 22 December 1914.

24. Billy Sunday, Sermon Transcript, New York, 13 April 1917 (evening), Sunday Papers (microfilm, reel 9).

first achieved a limited measure of fame in professional baseball, a game with a pastoral ethos but a city context. His version of the Gospel resembled closely that of the small-town preachers of his youth, but his evangelism was very much an urban phenomenon, and, for a time at least, he had a remarkable rapport with the throngs that packed his tabernacles.

Although he could claim some identification with the working class because of his humble origins, his greatest affinity was with a sizable segment of the middle class because he affirmed its values and it respected his accomplishments. Sunday's success as something of a religious entrepreneur undoubtedly enhanced his appeal for his bourgeois admirers. His crusades were as businesslike as his sermons were spectacular. Although he espoused the work ethic of the small-town businessman, he and his staff approached their task with an emphasis on efficiency, cost, and organization worthy of the most astute capitalists of the age. He never preached in a city where another significant revivalist had recently engaged in evangelism, regarding such an effort as an unwarranted investment of time, money, and energy. Furthermore, he accepted no invitation to preach until local interests agreed in advance to underwrite the cost of his campaign. Once a city was on Sunday's schedule, his staff carefully orchestrated publicity, prerevival prayer meetings, the evangelist's agenda during the crusade, and all the other innumerable details of modern urban revivalism.[25]

Billy Sunday's life and work seemed to many to demonstrate the continued relevance of traditional ideals and mores for a new era, and he gave people a sense of empowerment. Out of his experiences and those of his audiences he fashioned a vision of the future that built upon the values of the past and convinced ordinary men and women that they could take control of the present and, with the help of God, shape their destiny. He, like the region from which he sprang, represented to an uncertain people the possibility of mutual accommodation between the best of the old and the new.

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25. William G. McLoughlin, *Billy Sunday Was His Real Name* (Chicago, 1955), 50–51, 96.

BY THE 1920s, the fortunes of both Billy Sunday and the Middle West were beginning to decline. In the aftermath of World War I, the nation's cultural center of gravity had shifted toward modernity. An increasingly urban, industrial, heterogeneous populace was growing more comfortable with modern America and thus less in need of the sort of psychic linkage between tradition and modernity that Sunday and his region had afforded.

To be sure, there were those, primarily though not exclusively in rural and small-town America, who were unwilling or unable to embrace or even acquiesce in the emerging sociocultural synthesis. These individuals sensed that they were now part of a substantial but declining minority, and as confidence in their ability to significantly shape the nation's destiny ebbed, many grew increasingly shrill in their critique of American life. Some were drawn to one or another of a host of eccentric and sometimes bizarre minor prophets of economic or political salvation. Others donned the regalia of the Klan, while still more rallied beneath the banners of fundamentalism. Most, however, merely retreated into a quiet provincialism that usually welcomed material advances but yielded only grudgingly to cultural change. Such resistance to modernity led only to further alienation, isolation, and social strain. Consequently, during the twenties and thereafter, the growing urban majority began viewing the Middle West less as a vibrant heartland and more as a stodgy, backward, complacent, declining region, out of touch with the main currents of American life.

As the cultural power of the mystique of the Middle West began to diminish in the postwar era, Billy Sunday's appeal also waned. During the 1910s he had been a national sensation, preaching to millions in the country's great metropolitan centers. Now, however, invitations to challenge the devil and his worldly minions in their major urban bastions were rare. He continued to tour mid-sized and smaller cities, especially those of the South and Midwest, but the campaigns were shorter, the crowds smaller, the converts fewer, and the press coverage more limited. Sunday's decline stemmed, in part, from the fact that a man in his sixties could no longer sustain the kind of dramatic expenditure of energy characteristic of his earlier campaigns. Furthermore, as age sapped his physical strength, the scandals that swirled about

his sons because of their moral lapses and financial difficulties enervated him psychologically.[26] His revivals retained something of their attraction for the admiring and the curious, but they lacked their former power and seemed to astute observers to have a perfunctory quality.[27]

Beyond these personal factors lay the larger sociocultural ones. It was in urban America that Sunday had enjoyed his greatest success and there that he had had his greatest impact. By the 1920s, however, his message, always as much social as religious, no longer rang true to many of the denizens of the city. At best, his gospel had never been more than marginally relevant for the ethnically diverse non-Protestant immigrant population. His primary appeal had been among refugees from rural America and established urbanites steeped in the Protestant hegemony of the nineteenth century. For them his revivalism provided a continuity between past and present and an affirmation of the best of both worlds that facilitated accommodation to the new era in American life. By the 1920s, that kind of affirmation was becoming less necessary and less meaningful. The majority of urban Americans were groping toward a reconciliation with the present.

Progressivism, through economic regulation and social legislation, had begun to confront at least some of the excesses of industrial capitalism and the problems that were its corollary. The decisive role the United States had played in the Great War had confirmed the importance of the new economic order, promoted patriotism, and validated American manhood. Prohibition had placed demon rum on the defensive. In the National Origins Act, Congress had moved to parry the perceived cultural threat posed by the postwar onslaught of immigrants. Automobiles, movies, and spectator sports provided unprecedented diversions and vents for the tensions latent in the process of modernization. While problems and anxieties remained, millions of Americans were becoming more accustomed to and comfortable with an urban, industrial society.

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26. See Dorsett, *Billy Sunday*, 124–43.

27. Homer Rodeheaver, *Twenty Years with Billy Sunday* (Nashville, 1936), 141–42; McLoughlin, *Billy Sunday Was His Real Name*, 270; Dorsett, *Billy Sunday*, 135–36.

Sunday sensed that he was losing touch with the pulse of urban life, and that realization was profoundly troubling. In 1920 he wrote to his wife, "I seem more and more afraid to act on my own initiative or judgement. The big cities scare me."[28] This loss of confidence was apparent in the diminution of the fundamental optimism that had permeated Sunday's evangelism through World War I. His message grew more defensive and negative, and that further alienated him from the mainstream and diminished his credibility as role model and symbol.[29] Sunday's appeal, like that of the Middle West, had lain in the capacity of each to affirm the relevance and efficacy of traditional norms for a nation in transition. By the 1920s, that era of transition was nearing completion. As that occurred, both Billy Sunday and the Middle West seemed to millions increasingly quaint, ludicrous, or irrelevant.

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28. William Ashley Sunday to Helen Sunday, 1920, Sunday Papers (microfilm, reel 7).

29. McLoughlin, *Billy Sunday Was His Real Name*, 276–77.

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