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## **Religious Outsiders in Context: Billy Sunday and Pacific Garden Mission**

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## RELIGIOUS OUTSIDERS IN CONTEXT: BILLY SUNDAY AND PACIFIC GARDEN MISSION

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Perhaps the most colorful revivalist in American religious history, Billy Sunday excited early twentieth-century crowds with his acrobatic sermons and his simple message of Christ's salvific love. Criticized for his lack of sophistication and theological depth, Sunday nevertheless struck an emotional cord in the hearts of thousands of urban Americans who responded to his message. Despite his uniqueness, Sunday was more than just a successful flash in the American religious pan; rather, Sunday's mining of American souls, especially before 1920, greatly contributed to a larger fundamentalist movement at the turn of the century.

To assess Sunday's place in American fundamentalism, this paper first considers the personality, theology and tactics of the man himself. Crucial to this is an examination of his own conversion experience. On south State Street in Chicago, the young baseball player committed his life to Jesus Christ at Pacific Garden Mission, a place with its own rich and influential history. Positioning itself as a warrior against urban evils, the Mission's coupling of evangelism and social responsibility bear similarities to Sunday's post-conversion work. The modern Mission closely resembles its historical forerunner, and this paper will more clearly define its character against that of a very different Christian social service program, the Salvation Army's Freedom Center.

A comparison of these two modern religious groups reveals the problems of an imprecise vocabulary. Both speak of "success," but each certainly defines this in different ways. This moves the paper into a discussion of definitional issues in trying to describe the historical Mission and Sunday as well. The labels "fundamentalist" and "evangelical" necessarily connote certain characteristics, not all of which apply to the Mission and Sunday. In addition to operating outside the perceived religious mainstream, each operated free from the institutional structures within which even some fundamentalists existed. This further calls into question definitional appropriateness, and some new definitions will be proposed.

Finally, this paper will conclude by reassessing the respective historical places of Billy Sunday and Pacific Garden Mission and reasserting each's importance in early twentieth-century American religious history.