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PENTECOSTALISM, POLITICS, AND POPULAR CULTURE: THE CASE OF AIMEE SEMPLE MCPHERSON

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Matthew Avery Sutton. *Aimee Semple McPherson and the Resurrection of Christian America*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2007. 416 pp. Illustrations, notes, and index. $26.95.

If one wishes for a biographical case study that maximizes entertainment value while intersecting with major issues in 1920s and 1930s cultural history, one can scarcely do better than the revivalist preacher, media celebrity, and religious empire-builder Aimee Semple McPherson. McPherson was a key player in the early years of the global Pentecostal movement, the rise of radio, the boom years of Los Angeles, and the tradition of right-wing populism that today is a building block of the Republican Party. She was one of the top U.S. religious leaders of the century, and possibly the most influential of these who was a woman. Moreover, her fame is a largely a result of her entertainment value in a culture of celebrity—both her mastery of spectacle and her entanglement in high-profile sex scandals. Her theatrical productions, called illustrated sermons, drew on an endless supply of props: a huge cardboard gorilla symbolizing Darwinists, a live camel trying to pass through the eye of a needle, a signature costume in which she dressed as a milkmaid, and other outfits such as policewoman's uniform complete with motorcycle. She conducted massive faith healings, entered floats in the Tournament of Roses Parade, staged publicity stunts with the Ku Klux Klan, built a radio presence that brought her voice into homes throughout the country, and performed vaudeville routines on Broadway. Tabloids trumpeted stories about her facelift, travels, and willingness to pose in a nightgown during the honeymoon of her third marriage (which soon crashed and burned in the public eye). Most notoriously, she disappeared from a California beach only to reappear weeks later, exactly three days after her funeral, telling a story of her heroic escape from Mexican kidnappers—a story unconvincing to most people since the evidence pointed to an affair with a married former employee. In an era of Hollywood celebrity, she was as famous as its biggest stars; in an era of few female ministers, she was one of the best-known preachers in the country.

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Few issues are in greater need of scholarly attention than the internal complexity of Pentecostalism, especially as this relates to the middle ground between two stereotypes of U.S. religion: on one side, an image of dominance by a Christian majority conceived as predominantly, if not monolithically, conservative and authoritarian, and on the other side a vision of triumphant secularism—possibly tempered by a few religious liberals sliding down a slippery slope from "normal" religion toward secularism. Moderate Christians are the largest block of U.S. religious people, but they often drop out of analyses as exceptions that prove the above rule. Alternatively, they appear as just one more name (rarely the one deemed most interesting) amid long lists of pluralist choices in models of a Christian center failing to hold and giving way to pluralism—which conservative Christians see as little more than another way to speak about secularism.

The fascination and frustration of Sutton's book is that it offers a fine-grained and well-written case study that illuminates part of the messy middle ground that complicates this common wisdom, yet ultimately it fails to escape the gravity of a framework defined by the above images. Much of McPherson's story, especially her interaction with consumer culture and gender issues, exists in tension with stereotypes about evangelicals of her era. Although she was not a moderate by most measures, she dramatizes the plasticity of Pentecostal practice, and she set precedents for later developments that complicate monolithic understandings of the evangelical world. For example, it is hard to fully understand Tammy Faye Bakker or the rise of megachurches without considering her. Leaders of the so-called "Jesus People" emerged from her network, before influencing phenomena as diverse as the film *Jesus Christ Superstar*, the Promise Keepers, and Bob Dylan's music.[1]

So far so good, but Sutton frames his argument with the idea that McPherson's career represents the "resurrection" of a Christian America perceived to be slipping away at the hands of secularism and leftist subversion. Note the passive voice I have just used. Is this a change perceived by McPherson? By Sutton? By us? Is this perception accurate? In Sutton's account of McPherson's "rise, fall, and redemption," her preaching about this matter is integral to her redemption (p. 5). At his best, Sutton documents how McPherson presented issues in these terms—and he adds mild criticisms of her for taking Christian nationalism too far. But he slips between this descriptive voice and a perspective that lacks enough distance from McPherson's worldview to fully clarify how her images of a dying Christian nation were a routine part of evangelical scripts—neither as unique to McPherson nor as stable a baseline against which to analyze her contributions as he imagines. Sutton posits the existence of "a seemingly dead movement" of evangelicals at "the margins" of U.S. culture; he portrays McPherson as "convincing . . . [them] that their citizenship in heaven did not nullify their citizenship on earth, but rather that

they should work for a more Christian nation" (p. 4). Was the movement really so marginal, and did evangelicals ever stop presupposing such things? Perhaps one could demonstrate this claim for some early Pentecostals—Sutton does not attempt it—but in general the claim is far too simplistic. This does not deny McPherson's distinctive importance, but it suggests a need to use Sutton's evidence more as grist for a critical and comparative analysis of her tradition—as a treatment that often mirrors standard rhetoric used within her tradition—rather than a fully satisfying analysis of the overall picture within which she fits.

For placing McPherson within the world of conservative evangelicals, Sutton adds relatively little to Edith Blumhofer's 1993 biography.[2] Blumhofer undertook more ambitious archival work and provides a richer picture of McPherson's life before she became famous in the 1920s. McPherson was born Aimee Kennedy in 1890 in a small town in southern Ontario. She became involved in the Salvation Army through her mother, Minnie Kennedy, who later became her business manager during the most successful part of her career. At age seventeen she was converted to Pentecostalism by Robert Semple and felt her first sense of calling to preach. Almost immediately she married Semple—thus her spiritual and sexual awakenings are hard to disentangle—and they moved to Chicago to seek a niche in international Pentecostal networks. Their mentor was William Durham, who in turn had been mentored by William Seymour at Azusa Street. Before she turned twenty-five, McPherson moved to China as a missionary with Semple, gave birth to a child (Roberta) and watched Semple die within a few months, moved to New York to work with the Salvation Army (joining her mother, who had left her father), married Harold McPherson and had another baby (Rolf, who later took over as leader of her movement), experimented briefly with domesticity, and rejected it to begin a career as an itinerant faith healer—which soon led to a divorce.

Blumhofer shows how the Salvation Army taught McPherson to transcend conventional gender roles in the name of following a call to ministry, to focus on works of charity, and to drum up audiences using flamboyant theatrical techniques. Whether discussing McPherson's early or late career, Blumhofer is more informative than Sutton about policy debates and personnel issues within her organization; she is also more illuminating about McPherson's place amid the theological and institutional conflicts within Pentecostalism, for example over the importance of healing, the value of separate denominations, whether tongue-speaking is essential for salvation or merely desirable, and the contest between Trinitarian and Oneness theology. Although Sutton touches on these points, he is less curious about the internal dynamics of her movement (even in moments of conflict and schism) and about McPherson's relations with other evangelical leaders (even when this bears on his arguments about her innovations and legacies). For better or worse he sticks closely to

reports in McPherson's publications and the public discourse about her in Los Angeles newspapers. Too often he cites McPherson's promotional literature as his main source for whether, for example, she had a reputation as a friend to minorities, considered her radio station a "vehicle for social revolution," or could plausibly shift the blame for scandals to underlings and/or external enemies (p. 80).

Sutton offers strength, however, on two fronts that will interest many readers. First, whereas Blumhofer sometimes bogs down in a chronicle of one revival meeting after another (resulting in a book that would not teach well in most schools) and paints a defensive portrait of an upstanding protagonist (whom she calls "Sister" and presents as more matronly and mission-focused than sexually charged and politically connected), Sutton puts more stress on the juicy parts. He covers McPherson's life before the 1920s in ten pages and jumps straight into her years of fame. More than 20 percent of his book (compared to less than 5 percent of Blumhofer's) treats her alleged kidnapping, and he highlights the sexual aspects of her preaching and image. True, he gives mixed signals on issues of sex/gender. For example, he notes that she was "chubby" and "frumpily dressed" during her rise to fame, treats the most sexualized part of her career in the "fall" stage of his narrative of "rise, fall, and redemption," and calls attention to the conflicts she negotiated between the Victorian gender roles that she taught overtly and the stress on consumer culture and women's emerging public voice that she modeled (p. 164).[3] Nevertheless, he stresses how McPherson pioneered new public roles and greater openness toward sexuality for women in evangelicalism. His two key paragraphs introducing McPherson describe her as "stunning," "radiant," "magnetic," "buxom," "Junoesque," "shapely" and "fully ripened" (pp. 2, 8). He highlights her use of bridal imagery and cites an observer who felt that her sermons "woo[ed]" listeners, such that to resist her altar call was "to refuse haughtily a tryst with an alluring and beautiful woman" (pp. 164–5). Second, Sutton is more interested than Blumhofer in how McPherson fit into politics and was received by larger publics. Although he, too, is rather defensive of McPherson's reputation, he draws more heavily on journalistic treatments of her activities. Thus he better conveys her public engagement and the gaps between insider and outsider perceptions of it.

By 1919, at age twenty-nine, McPherson had chosen Los Angeles as a base; local Pentecostals built her a house in a de facto decision to call her as a minister. By this time she had built a national reputation as a revivalist and healer, enabling her to conduct major revivals in San Diego, San Jose, Denver, and other cities. Largely through these rallies, she raised funds to build an elegant 5300-seat church/theater complex called Angelus Temple in Echo Park, near downtown Los Angeles. This is where Sutton picks up the story. McPherson hoped to take advantage of the emergence of Los Angeles

as a tourist destination, so that crowds would come to her and she would not have to travel. Although people could become members of Angelus Temple, she conceived Pentecostalism as a cross-denominational movement and saw her temple mainly as an ecumenical center for people based in diverse local churches. Thus she downplayed divisive issues and aimed for a middle ground between the "Refrigerator and the Wild-fire"—the "Formalism" of theological liberals and the "Fanaticism" of radical Pentecostals (p. 44). For a time she was affiliated with the Assemblies of God (the largest white Pentecostal denomination), while simultaneously holding a Methodist preacher's license and Baptist ordination. (Translated into left-wing politics of the era, this was like being a card-carrying Communist while simultaneously a Trotskyite and Christian Socialist—or perhaps an exceptionally zealous Popular Fronter.) From her start as a touring revivalist who built a permanent base to entice pilgrims to come to her, her movement evolved first into what we would today call a megachurch, and later into a denomination called the International Church of the Foursquare Gospel. By the end of her life it had grown to nearly four hundred local churches, not including its foreign missionaries and breakaway schisms; today it claims six million members. Although Sutton downplays the point, McPherson's empire-building strategy was common among ambitious preachers of the day: establishing radio networks (her station KFSG broadcast from towers on top of her church), building Bible colleges (hers was called Lighthouse of International Foursquare Evangelism, or LIFE), and sending out graduates of these schools to staff new churches.[4]

Sutton stresses how McPherson became an ally and partner of Los Angeles civic elites. She shared stages with mayors, judges, and newspaper editors—both at her church and various civic events. The Chamber of Commerce hyped Angelus Temple as a top tourist attraction, and McPherson hyped Los Angeles. Sutton suggests that McPherson's trial for lying about her kidnapping (which garnered more coverage in the *New York Times* than the Scopes Monkey Trial) was related to power struggles among Los Angeles elites, some of whom were rivals of McPherson's allies and others who felt that her anti-evolutionism tarnished the image of Los Angeles. In this regard we might compare her trial to Bill Clinton's impeachment for lying about sex with Monica Lewinsky, which sold newspapers because of its prurient interest but was more about politics than sex, and which eventually rallied people to Clinton's defense who assumed that he *did* "have sex with that woman" but who did not care. Sutton argues that many journalists and professional women—and even H.L. Mencken—took a related position sympathetic to McPherson, even though the evidence left little doubt that she was covering up an adulterous affair and/or a publicity stunt that got out of control. In any event, the government abruptly withdrew its case; Sutton argues that "a probable explanation" was a threat by McPherson to blackmail William Randolph Hearst by publicizing

evidence of his affair with actress Marion Davies and his possible involvement in a murder (p. 139). Sutton comments that the trial is an example of how McPherson lived by manipulating the media and her elite contacts, and thus could also die by the same means.

After the trial McPherson pursued the image of a Hollywood star, maintained public visibility through ongoing spectacles and scandals, and engaged in institutional infighting that resulted in breaks with her mother (her manager), daughter (her heir-apparent), her third husband, and dissident ministers in her movement. For Sutton, her "antics" beginning in the mid-1920s represent a "wilderness wandering" until her "return to Pentecost" in the mid-1930s (pp. 152, 185).

After 1927, Angelus Temple became a node in the Los Angeles social service system, first through its commissary run by the Temple's "Society Sisters" (some with tenuous spiritual credentials) and in the 1930s through a large soup kitchen and services to women and children. She garnered contributions both small and large, including a warehouse from Yellow Cab Company and donations from the police chief. By 1933 Los Angeles civic leaders felt that their city was coddling unworthy poor people and attracting too many migrants, so they began to impose restrictions on "moochers." Sutton is evasive about how McPherson related to this change; he reports that "a near riot" ensued when her soup kitchen began to toe the new policy line, but he also underlines McPherson's claim to serve all comers according to need, in tension with city policy (p. 193). He writes both that the Temple "never received public funds," so that it could continue serving anyone, and that it used police and fire department vehicles (p. 316). Thickening the plot, temple workers were caught making bootleg liquor with donated fruit; Sutton claims that McPherson had no prior knowledge of the scandal and promptly cleaned house.

Whatever McPherson's limitations, she made significant charitable commitments. If we consider (in addition to this) that Pentecostalism was among the more racially integrated cultural spaces in the United States at this time, it becomes fascinating to explore McPherson's relations with the Ku Klux Klan and other far-right leaders such as Gerald Winrod (whom she invited to speak in 1938) and a "Cowboy Evangelist" who led a 1932 service for three thousand hooded Klansmen at her church. The KKK raised money for Angelus Temple, and she called upon the KKK to defend her honor during her trial. In 1940 a group from her church picketed a Langston Hughes speech under a banner featuring her name and the words "100% American," while her newsletter called Hughes "half human, half ape" (p. 246). She interpreted the Nazi persecution of Jews through a heavy filter of end-times prophecy. A writer in her newspaper, while tackling the question "Why are Jews obnoxious?" described Jews as "apostates" who "sink to the lowest of levels in world society" (p. 250). All this is evidence offered by Sutton—yet he frames it as McPherson

backsliding from her core values under stress. He argues that her underlying vision of God's love showed no personal racism, that some non-whites attended Angelus Temple (specifically, its black membership tripled from the 1920s to the 1930s from 9 to 27 members of a 7000 member church—most non-whites in her denomination were in segregated divisions), that she worked with selected black and Latino clergy, and that she pioneered a moderate path compared to extremists like Winrod.[5]

Sutton retells an uplifting story about McPherson preaching against the KKK—but it is based solely on evidence from her daughter's unpublished memoirs, and this is a good example of questions that sometimes arise about how Sutton marshals evidence. If we read his book as a running dialogue between McPherson's perspective on events and that of the press—an account granting her the benefit of doubt while maintaining its critical bearings—his analysis appears in its best light. However, questions remain about the insider perspectives he sometimes echoes.

Let us consider how slippery such questions can be. Although skeptics and true believers will not agree on the deep causes of Pentecostal behavior, this should not distract us from a point that is clear and noteworthy: being drawn into Pentecostal discourse can unlock potent resources of personal transformation and collective purpose, and truth claims accepted within Pentecostal networks can be quite significant within this sphere. For example, McPherson was able to stretch hegemonic gender roles, work as a healer, and pursue ambitious mission work—all based on her conviction of responding to God's call. Such considerations lead toward the challenge of evaluating other Pentecostal claims, from straightforward ones like "I was immediately and partially healed and have continued to improve ever since" as stated by 85 percent of people healed at one McPherson revival, to more complex cases which blur the lines between what rationalists would call visions and facts (p. 19). Often the disagreements turn on what counts as trustworthy evidence about disputed questions.

We are dealing here with low-brow versions of truth claims that scholars typically discuss in more philosophical terms: claims based not on unambiguous tests against stable evidence, but on pragmatic persuasion in a context of postmodern diversity.[6] What "really" happened when McPherson heard God call her to leave her husband? Suppose we grant that—at least in some sense—what matters is that she and her followers accepted her claim. But if so, can we say the same about what happened between McPherson and the KKK? Sutton shows that many insiders believed that McPherson accepted KKK support only in passive and unsolicited ways (except when backsliding under stress), while preaching against racism. Insofar as her supporters accept this spin, was she "really" a critic of the KKK? And can we pursue this logic even further? What about her claim to have been kidnapped by Mexican

gangsters? Most evidence is against her, but the case was not 100 percent conclusive; for many it remains a "fact" that she was a martyr persecuted by God's enemies, following in the footsteps of Joan of Arc and William Jennings Bryan, exactly as she claimed.

Such logic takes us rather far down a slippery slope. Most readers (even those prepared to consider whether McPherson's discourse might in certain senses constitute her truth) would be cautious insofar as the evidence only reflects McPherson's perspective; they would hope to critically compare a range of perspectives. Such is the caution that I recommend bringing to a key aspect of Sutton's book—his framing of McPherson's career as resurrecting Christian America. True, Sutton does not go so far as to agree that McPherson was a martyr like Joan of Arc, but he does use related logic—that is, he works from within a discourse that assumes a baseline of evangelicals being persecuted, relatively marginal, and apolitical during this era. McPherson staged a resurrection after her "kidnapping"—but if she was not actually kidnapped, can we paint her as a martyr to enemies who sought to "discipline" her (p. 149)? Similarly, but on a wider canvas, was an evangelical subculture really fading and in need of resurrection during the 1920s? Sutton is remarkably casual about assuming this common wisdom. When he perceives McPherson out of step with this wisdom—since, after all, she was hardly marginal, apolitical, or persecuted by most measures—he presents her as an anomaly and/or a precursor of later activists such as Pat Robertson. But how unique was she, if approached comparatively? We might test this by comparing her with Bryan, John Roach Stratton, William Bell Riley, and Charles Coughlin among others, but Sutton barely pursues the matter.[7] Did a culturally conservative and anti-subversive tradition in evangelicalism ever really disappear, from Billy Sunday through McPherson to Billy Graham and beyond? One may wonder.[8]

Sutton is on firmer ground when he avoids claims about resurrection from a baseline of secularism and apolitical theology, and simply treats McPherson as a key leader who set significant precedents—one who blended state-of-the-art media techniques with tried-and-true religious rhetoric that valorized nationalist discourse while carrying racist and militarist undertones. He gets the nuance right when he says that "she tied her long-standing theological stridency to a nationalist militancy" (p. 244). By no means were "obnoxious" Jews and "half ape" black writers the only subversives she demonized as less than 100% American. Sutton shows that her targets were often movements friendly to labor and/or the left, such as Upton Sinclair's 1934 campaign for governor of California. He closes his book—before McPherson's 1944 death from a drug overdose—stressing how she harnessed her religious vision to U.S. efforts in World War II.

Thus I encourage readers not to approach the more successful parts of Sutton's book—his more narrowly focused evidence—by assimilating them to

common wisdom about the supposed eclipse of fundamentalists by secularists in the 1920s and their supposed political disengagement before the 1970s—an eclipse which, if true, would make Sutton's theme of resurrection seem natural and make McPherson's political alliances seem surprising and/or anomalous. Rather, readers should assume the ongoing cultural weight of Protestantism, its cultural-political resonances that have continually been available to mobilize (whether implicitly or explicitly, and not least in relation to gender) and its character as a place of hegemonic contestation and cultural innovation. Approached in this light, McPherson remains an extraordinarily interesting case to set alongside others from her era (for starters, Father Coughlin, Dorothy Day, William Bell Riley, Marcus Garvey, and Reinhold Niebuhr) as well as others who came before and after in traditions of revivalism and/or women's religious leadership (Phoebe Palmer, Dwight Moody, Frances Willard, Billy Sunday, Evangeline Booth, Oral Roberts, Tammy Faye Bakker).

Despite the limitations that I have noted, Sutton's book is very much worth reading because of the rich details he brings to light about this nexus of revivalism, moderate Pentecostalism, media savvy, sexuality, charity work, and conservative populism. McPherson's story is more than simply entertaining; it has great substance for interpreting U.S. culture. We are in Sutton's debt for keeping it at the forefront of our attention.

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1. On the later trajectory of Foursquare Churches, see Donald Miller, *Reinventing American Protestantism: Christianity in the New Millennium* (1997). On Dylan's involvement with them, see Clinton Heylin, *Behind the Shades Revisited* (2001).

2. Blumhofer, *Aimee Semple McPherson: Everybody's Sister* (1993).

3. For more on these issues, see Diane Winston, *Red-Hot and Righteous: The Urban Religion of the Salvation Army* (1999); and Margaret Bendroth and Virginia Brereton, eds., *Women and Twentieth-Century Protestantism* (2002).

4. William Vance Trollinger, Jr., *God's Empire: William Bell Riley and Midwestern Fundamentalism* (1991); George Marsden, *Reforming Fundamentalism: Fuller Seminary and the New Evangelicalism* (1989).

5. Sutton seeks to "complement and correct" books like Leo Ribuffo's *The Old Christian Right: the Protestant Far Right from the Great Depression to the Cold War* (1983), which he sees focusing on "villains" as opposed to McPherson's more feel-good message (p. 235).

6. For more on this issue see Susan Harding, *The Book of Jerry Falwell* (2000).

7. Key books bearing on this issue that are not cited by Sutton include Alan Brinkley, *Voices of Protest: Huey Long, Father Coughlin, and the Great Depression* (1983); Trollinger, *God's Empire;* Michael Kazin, *William Jennings Bryan: A Godly Hero* (2006); C. Allyn Russell, *Voices of American Fundamentalism* (1976); and Diane Winston and John Giggie, eds., *Faith in the Market: Religion and the Rise of Urban Commercial Culture* (2002).

8. In addition to books already cited, see Sara Diamond, *Roads to Dominion: Right-Wing Movements and Political Power in the United States* (1995); and Mark Hulsether, *Religion, Culture and Politics in the Twentieth-Century United States* (2007).