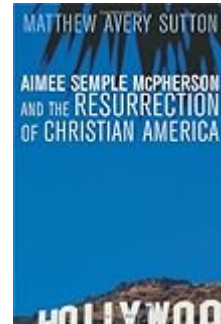


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Matthew Avery Sutton. *Aimee Semple McPherson and the Resurrection of Christian America.* Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007. 351 pp. \$26.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-674-02531-8.



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One cannot help but wish to have been there, centrally seated in the first row of Angelus Temple's lower balcony, to view the spectacle up close. Imagine the intensity of the moment, the palpable pangs of spiritual bliss, anguish, and surrender all around as Sister Aimee draws your seatmates into her fanciful world of biblical prophets and priests, heroes and villains. And what must it have been like to stand with thirty thousand others gathered at Los Angeles' train station on that June day in 1926, cheering rapturously at the first sight of Sister Aimee after her return from a mysterious disappearance; or to sit nervously in the court room later that same year as she attempted to answer the mystery and defend herself against charges of conspiracy?

That such sentiments stir frequently when reading Matthew Sutton's biography of Aimee Semple McPherson is tribute to his rare story-telling abilities. By pricking the emotions as much as intellectual curiosity, Sutton provides us with an opportunity to appreciate McPherson sympathetically as someone trying her best to negotiate the cultural opportunities, pitfalls, and blessings of her day. At the same time, he offers room to feel what it would have been like to be part of McPherson's multitude of followers or cadre of critics. McPherson was, to say the least, a polarizing figure. All who encountered her during her lifetime thus seemed compelled to declare

publicly their feelings of loyalty or loathing for the female evangelist. Sutton asks us to suspend such judgment and instead carefully measure the intensity of these responses against the realities of the day—against the constantly expanding range of possibilities that seemed only to encourage Sister Aimee's exploits, well meaning and successful, poorly conceived, or otherwise.

As much as Sutton rouses sympathy for McPherson, he also subjects her to sharp but balanced criticism. His eagerness to analyze Sister Aimee within the political and cultural context of her day is the book's driving impulse and organizational determinant. Based on an impressive mound of research findings, most of them gleaned from previously un-viewed sources housed within the International Church of the Foursquare Gospel (the evangelical Protestant denomination McPherson founded), Sutton's narrative moves through nine chapters. In each he effectively connects McPherson to one or more of the touchstone issues of her day. Prominent among these are race relations, interregional migration, urban boosterism, media and broadcasting, federal social policy, and wartime mobilization, all of which animated Southern California between the early 1920s and early 1940s, McPherson's prime years as a public figure and the focus of Sutton's book. Drawn together as a whole, these dimensions promote a central claim: that by actively investing

herself in these issues, McPherson “brought conservative Protestantism back from the margins to the mainstream of American culture” and ultimately helped reshape the social, cultural, and political destiny of “one of the twentieth century’s most explosive religious movements—evangelicalism” (pp. 3-4). This thesis is not necessarily pivotal on its own terms, nor is it meant to be, for this is a book meant for a broad readership to enjoy as much as ponder. Still, when viewed in its distinctive chapter-by-chapter parts, Sutton’s thesis demonstrates significant scholarly weight. Three examples drawn from different sections of the book illustrate this point.

Early in his book, Sutton describes McPherson’s use of media to promote the peculiar blend of pentecostalism and fundamentalism that became the cornerstone of her own denomination. Many of McPherson’s contemporaries chastised her for embracing these forms; many writers since have followed this line of criticism by seeing Sister Aimee as little more than a media hound desperate for mass approval and full acceptance by her Hollywood friends. But Sutton follows a different track by suggesting that McPherson’s motives were authentic and sincere. By blending piety and performance she hoped to embody “faith before her constituency’s very eyes” and, in the process, rivet their attention to classic revivalist themes (p. 69). By linking faith and the media in this way McPherson ultimately fused the two, making the essence of theology inseparable from the manner of its delivery. The formula became one for other twentieth-century evangelists to follow.

At the book’s center is an exploration of McPherson and gender, a theme curiously understudied by others. Sutton demonstrates how constructions and prescriptions of gender during the formative 1920s often played out in the religious sphere. In the person of Sister Aimee, people of all ideological stripe found a “malleable symbol,” one onto which they could project their meanings of womanhood (p. 128). Not surprisingly, the intensely masculine fundamentalist world in which McPherson operated (or tried to operate) was outright hostile to her leadership claims. Los Angeles’ own champion of fundamentalism, “Fighting” Bob Shuler, was usually the one to vocalize this hostility by highlighting Sister Aimee’s drift away from accepted standards of female propriety. However, in the pews of Los Angeles’ evangelical churches (especially pentecostal ones), Sister Aimee also found support from parishioners willing to suspend their Victorian Protestant views of limited female authority for the sake of effective evangelism. What Sutton makes clear is that religious priorities sometimes worked at cross-

purposes when gender was concerned. The picture becomes even more muddled when viewed from outside the church. Indeed, Sutton is most effective at highlighting ways McPherson galvanized gender debates among “secular” liberals. For male liberal critics in the media McPherson’s penchant for drama raised doubts about her ability to lead women and the church respectfully into the modern age. For the era’s “new women,” however, McPherson represented the much-needed breakthrough. Although hardly religious or socially conservative like their champion, these young flappers identified with Sister Aimee’s “career success in terrain dominated by males, her defiance of social convention, and her unwavering determination to create her own public persona” (p. 128). What Sutton shows, then, is that when premised on gender, the sources of McPherson’s support and opposition were usually difficult to predict.

Finally, by the book’s end one is left with a more complex understanding of religion and politics in the interwar period. At present, historians tend to assume that conservative evangelical Protestants operated only on the political fringe during this time, either as voices for the reactionary, anti-Semitic Old Right of the Gerald Winrod variety, or as an insignificant minority embarrassed into submission by the recent failings of fundamentalist politicians like William Jennings Bryan. Yet McPherson’s career offers correction to such assumptions. Although often sympathetic to demagogues like Winrod and willing to speak as if hers was an embattled minority, McPherson more commonly drew energy from active involvement in mainstream political processes availed her by California’s unique political environment. Whether in opposition to the teaching of evolution in California’s schools or advances made by Upton Sinclair’s EPIC (End Poverty in California Campaign), whether in the promotion of social welfare programs or support of the working class, McPherson demonstrated a political consciousness that was rather sophisticated and respectable for her time. She also wielded considerable political influence through official channels and effective lobbying, making her voice heard in each level of government, all the way from Los Angeles’ City Council to the White House. In short, what Sutton offers through McPherson is a paradigm-altering picture of evangelicalism’s sustained politicization through the 1920s and 1930s.

Among Sutton’s standout strengths, therefore, are his skills at drawing out the dramatic flair of Sister Aimee’s life and using central themes in this story to challenge assumptions about the workings of faith, politics, and cul-

ture. At times his eagerness to do both simultaneously gets the better of him. From its beginning, Sutton's narrative heads steadily toward McPherson's peak performance in 1926: her mysterious disappearance. Sutton spends considerable time in the middle chapters of the book describing and offering suggestive explanations of this event. All of this proves quite riveting; yet the pinnacle comes too soon. Sutton uses his last three chapters to explain McPherson's social and political activities in the 1930s and early 1940s, all of which are impressive and important but none of which match the intensity of what came prior to the disappearance. And by this time the reader is left with an uncertainty about whether to take McPherson—and her religious, social, and political activism—seriously, or at least as seriously as before. Of course, much of this is out of Sutton's hands since McPherson dealt him these cards. But, by emphasizing the drama of the disappearance in the mid-1920s, Sutton slightly dampens the impact of McPherson's more substantive activities in the mid-1930s.

The privileging of dramatic effect also leads to a second minor shortcoming. Perhaps in an effort to broaden its marketing appeal, Sutton's book often makes mention of Sister Aimee's direct bearing on recent American pol-

itics. On the jacket cover and in paragraphs scattered throughout the text readers learn that McPherson's life is a prologue to the life and times of Pat Robertson, Jerry Falwell, and George W. Bush. Of course there is a connection between McPherson and the latter, but it is misleading to hint that it is any more direct or important than the one linking other pre-1940s evangelicals (like Fighting Bob Shuler) with the post-1980s Christian Right. And it is a bit illusory to suggest this connection when little sustained analysis of the forty years in between is forthcoming. So in an effort to make his subject count in the flourishing field of late twentieth-century conservatism, Sutton slightly overstates a case for McPherson's "relevance," as if this "relevance" can only be defined in relation to present political concerns.

But the true worth of McPherson is that her life is incredibly relevant for a fresh understanding of American life prior to World War II. Sutton, in the main, recognizes this, and offers us multiple ways of approaching and applying this new understanding. In the process he also offers us a first-rate scholarly model of substantive historical investigation, intellectual engagement, and stimulating writing.

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