

Oral Roberts Are Us

Ken Briggs | Dec. 16, 2009 NCR Today

In the world of allegory, no one was better named than Oral Roberts. Everything he achieved during his 91 year life, which ended yesterday, issued from the thunder of his vocal chords.

The rest was a function of hands that reached out to heal the lines of supplicants stricken with the variety of afflictions from cancer to epilepsy. Many came away declaring that they had been made whole.

He pitched tents to call the people of his land, in and around his home base in Oklahoma, to prayer. His voice box was the equivalent of rock music's full volume. It wasn't only loud; it had emotion, color and texture.

He didn't hide these ministries under the proverbial bushel. There he was, on real-time television, preaching and healing for the world to see. A hire wire act that, whatever else it was, took plenty of courage.

Roberts is described, rightly, as "controversial" in the obituaries. He did some weird things in the name of the faith. He was big on "prosperity"; that trust in God would make you rich. He named a university after himself and stored up much grain in his barns.

I think that makes him not so much a bad Christian than a distinct version of genus American Christian.

Lots of those who think of themselves as sophisticated and urbane loved to make fun of Roberts. To the cultured church goer, he was often ridiculed as a brand of Christianity they had long outgrown and were embarrassed to see. His was the simple-minded tradition they found amusing, at best.

My own view is that Roberts was the real thing, whatever his excesses and missteps. He never tried to shed his small town Oklahoma ways in order to curry favor with the upper crust. He had a rough hewn streak that never went away. For the sophisticates, well, if they had to recognize an evangelist it was likely to be Billy Graham who hung out with Presidents and moguls and was genteel enough to be escorted to lunch at the Yale club.

I liked Roberts's authenticity, even some of his eccentricity. Having attended some of his revival meetings and spoken with him several times, I believe he had a big heart and identified with the suffering, particularly those closest to his roots. He basically stayed near those roots, for better or worse.

He obviously had a sizeable ego. Nobody builds a small kingdom as he did without one. But he wasn't a selfish maniac. There were elements of the commission he believed that he'd received from Jesus in everything he did. Among those who followed him, most of them among America's unknown, he had enormous credibility.

Meanwhile, those who scoffed at his faith healing (The New York Times obituary lists the Catholic church among the denominations that looked down their noses), are turning to their own versions of faith healing from naturopathy and herbalism to homeopathy and Ayurveda.

Personally I find the "prosperity" trumpet a discordant note that ill serves the Gospels. It smacks of idolatry of money. To Roberts it was both a means to lift up the downtrodden and a pretext for giving some of it to him.

There's nothing particularly new about that. And it's prone to larceny. To place him at the fringe of Christianity would be a mistake, however. Most Americans don't think twice about fusing the New Testament with the contrived Gospel of Wealth. Remember greed? No shortage of Christian practitioners there.

So Oral Roberts wasn't such an unusual or bad guy, really, but one whose portrayal now at the time of his death, still reflects the wide class and regional divide between the self-appointed guardians of religion and "those people."

Source URL (retrieved on 07/20/2017 - 08:05): <https://www.ncronline.org/blogs/ncr-today/oral-roberts-are-us>