

The Death of Oral Roberts and the Dimming of American Pentecostalism

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Pentecostals have always been the red-headed stepchildren of American Christianity -- holy rollers who were known for [speaking in tongues](#) or laughing wildly and even barking like dogs while seized by religious ecstasy, or producing miracle healings on command and handling venomous snakes without fear.

All of that was made possible, of course, by calling on the Holy Spirit -- yet was too embarrassing for sober-sided mainline Protestants and even hellfire Southern Baptists, and incomprehensible to the point of batty for Roman Catholics and other high-church folks.

Or at least it was until Oral Roberts came along.

Roberts, who [died Tuesday](#) at 91, was a force in American religious history, a pioneer in mass media evangelism and a mentor -- either directly or by his influence -- to a generation of preachers and politicians who continue to shape American culture and global Christianity. He was second only in popularity and visibility to Billy Graham. But before there was Jerry Falwell, before there was Pat Robertson, and certainly before there were striplings like Rick Warren or Joel Osteen, Oral Roberts was holding forth on television and bringing what had previously been seen as a backwoods religiosity into the homes of America's fast-spreading suburbs.

"Oral Roberts helped bring the movement into the American mainstream," Kim Lawton, managing editor of the PBS show "Religion & Ethics NewsWeekly," told me. "He attracted a huge following that included not only evangelicals, but 'spirit-filled' mainline Protestants and Catholics as well." Roberts began broadcasting in 1954, and in the 1970s his program, "Oral Roberts and You," was the most popular religious program in the nation.

"I think he planted the seeds publicly of what became the charismatic renewal after 1960 because the American public first saw Pentecostalism in their living rooms through his televised tent crusades," Vinson Synan, a historian of Pentecostalism at Pat Robertson's Regent University told [Charisma](#) magazine. Jack Hayford, former president of the International Church of the Foursquare Gospel, agreed: "If God had not, in His sovereign will, raised up the ministry of Oral Roberts, the entire charismatic movement might not have occurred."

At his death, however, Roberts also left behind significant questions about the future of Pentecostalism and spirit-filled Christianity.

Even during the latter years of his turbulent career, Oral Roberts came to be known for the kind of spiritual showmanship and financial brinkmanship that gave Pentecostalism the reputation he'd once helped it overcome.

In an episode for which he many will certainly remember him, Roberts told a television audience in January 1987 that unless he raised \$8 million by March, God would "call him home." He retreated to his prayer tower to wait. The money came in, but by then Roberts had become the butt of jokes on the talk shows -- like those of Johnny Carson and Merv Griffin -- where he'd once been a sought-after guest. And the \$250 million faith-healing medical center he was trying to prop up with the money still collapsed.

Scandal also began to dog Roberts because of the failings of a generation of prosperity preachers to whom he taught his popular but controversial "seed faith" theology. "If people would donate money to his ministry, a 'seed' offered to God, he'd say, then God would multiply it a hundredfold," as Hanna Rosin explains it in an essay on the prosperity gospel in the [current issue](#) of *The Atlantic*.

That sales pitch made Roberts, who was born dirt-poor in rural Oklahoma, fabulously wealthy; in the mid-1980s his ministry was taking in more than \$100 million a year. And it naturally drew imitators, including Jim and Tammy Faye Bakker and Jimmy Swaggart, who fell from grace, as well as others, like Randy and Paula White, Kenneth Copeland, Creflo Dollar, and Joyce Meyer, who have come under scrutiny, too, but remain influential figures.

"I have seen how his heart yearned for people of all ages and backgrounds to know Jesus Christ personally and how to enjoy the abundant life that is available to all believers," the popular televangelist Benny Hinn told *Charisma*. "What a legacy he leaves. Only heaven will reveal how many lives have been revolutionized through his seed-faith teaching." Hinn calls Roberts a spiritual father, even becoming his neighbor in California, where Roberts lived out his final years in semi-retirement.

The siren song of the health-and-wealth gospel also lured Roberts' son, Richard. (His daughter Rebecca died in a 1977 airplane crash, his

oldest son, Ronald, committed suicide in 1982, and his wife died in 2005.) In 1993, Oral Roberts named Richard to succeed him as president of Oral Roberts University in Tulsa, Oklahoma, where he'd launched his faith-healing revivalism after surviving tuberculosis -- miraculously, he claimed -- and other life-threatening ailments.

But if Oral Roberts was often criticized for his high-flying lifestyle, he was never caught doing anything potentially criminal. Richard Roberts, on the other hand, was forced to step down over Thanksgiving 2007 amid accusations that he used university funds to support a luxe life, including a \$39,000 shopping tab at a single store for his wife (who was also accused of spending nights with a 16-year-old boy).

To make matters worse, the university was already \$50 million in debt -- God, or the flock, hadn't been answering Oral Roberts' prayers with the same generosity as in previous years -- and there were fears it too would go belly up. The university was saved only when a local billionaire, Oklahoma City businessman Mart Green, donated \$70 million and brought in new management. In September, university officials announced that the school was debt-free and enrollment was up.

Indeed, while Oral Roberts was known for his flamboyant televangelism and claims to have personally healed some 1.5 million sick people (and even to have raised a child from the dead), his enduring legacy may be the university that bears his name.

The GOP's arch-conservative congresswoman from Minnesota, Michele Bachmann, is an ORU alum, as is television personality Kathie Lee Gifford. Conservative talk show personality Michael Graham is a graduate, as is Christian Reconstructionist David Barton, and a number of prominent preachers. Evangelist Ted Haggard was one of ORU's star graduates until he was brought down by a gay sex-and-drugs scandal in 2006, and another, Joel Osteen, remains a huge force in American Christianity.

Other big-name evangelists who sought to move beyond the immediacy of tent or television revivalism -- and to find some way to institutionalize the spirituality that gave birth to the holiness movement -- were following Roberts' example. Moral Majority founder Jerry Falwell started Liberty University in 1971, for example, and Christian Coalition founder Pat Robertson started CBN University -- later re-baptized Regent University -- in 1977.

Despite the survival of Oral Roberts University, however, the bigger challenge to the Roberts' legacy is that the center of gravity in Pentecostalism has now shifted to the Southern Hemisphere -- to Latin America, Africa and Asia, where the outpouring of the Spirit is greater and more explosive than anything North America ever saw, if one goes by the numbers. In fact, some estimates put the number of charismatic, Pentecostal-style worshipers across the globe as high as 600 million -- with perhaps just 20-30 million of them in America.

Moreover, Pentecostalism in America today is tame by comparison to the faith in other countries, a domesticated version of the wild child of Christianity that [traced its lineage](#) to the tongues of fire that touched the Apostles at the first Pentecost 2,000 years ago, and sprang to life again at the Cane Ridge revival in Kentucky in 1801 and a century later in the Azusa Street revival in Los Angeles.

While the patrimony of those revivals can still be seen in storefront churches and on cable television, charismatic Christianity in America is likely found in its purest form among immigrants and working-class whites and African-Americans. Indeed, back in the 1950s Oral Roberts was already insisting that black and white worshipers sit together, a policy that brought him death threats.

Such diversity was characteristic of Pentecostalism in many places -- and much different from other churches back then, and even today, when charismatic Christianity seems to have morphed into the religion-free spirituality of self-selecting congregationalism that traffic in the inward-looking philosophy of self-help books and positive thinking practitioners.

The prosperity theology that may have been Oral Roberts' original contribution to charismatic Christianity is also flourishing in the poorer areas of the globe, but with effects that are arguably even more harmful than in the U.S. because of the poverty of the people there -- and is even more attractive to them for the same reason.

Roberts himself seemed to feel that controversy was simply part and parcel of an inspired faith: "This conviction that God speaks to me, and that I have no choice but to obey when He does, has led me into a life of controversy," he [wrote in his 1995 autobiography](#). "But had I not had this conviction, I don't believe I could have ever scaled the mountain of my calling."

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