

Evangelist preacher who worshipped money

The Irish Times - Saturday, December 19, 2009

Oral Roberts: MANY OF America's televangelists have had more than their fair share of scandals involving sex, fraud and extremist politics. But Oral Roberts, who has died aged 91 of complications from pneumonia, always devoted himself to money – and, occasionally, God. He even justified his love of wealth with a biblical source.

At the age of 29, he was a struggling part-time preacher with church pastorates in Oklahoma, and his college studies had not brought him a degree.

He told the story of how he picked up his Bible and it fell open at the Third Epistle of John. His eye caught verse two, which read: "I wish above all things that thou mayest prosper and be in health, even as thy soul prospereth."

He had not heard this verse before and neither had his schoolteacher wife Evelyn, although both were the offspring of preachers. Roberts decided immediately that it was all right to be rich.

The next day he bought a Buick and God appeared, he said, telling him to heal people. Roberts then added this aspect to his tent revival meetings. A month later in Enid, Oklahoma, he cured, he claimed, a woman the use of whose hand had been impaired for 38 years.

After leaving the Pentecostal Holiness church to become leader of the Oral Roberts Evangelistic Association, he was on his way to becoming the richest US evangelist. With his pioneering exploitation of radio and – from 1954 – television, he headed a broadcasting empire that transformed religion in America.

He also ran mailshot campaigns promising prosperity in return for financial expressions of faith in God: his message of health and wealth held enormous appeal for poor Americans.

At its height in the early 1980s, Roberts was chief of a \$120 million a year business employing 2,300 people and controlling Oral Roberts University (ORU) – which opened in 1965 – a medical school and hospital and buildings on 50 acres south of Tulsa, Oklahoma, valued at \$500 million.

Students at ORU, whose members were forbidden to drink, smoke or have sex before marriage, went on to reach 5,400.

Roberts's broadcasts went to hundreds of radio and television stations, his appeals for money continued non-stop, while sales of his 120 books and hundreds of audio and video cassettes boosted the cashflow. In 1987, he created headlines by saying that unless he got another \$4.5 million for his hospital in a few weeks, "God will call me home".

He retired to his 10-storey prayer tower on campus and emerged – on the deadline – to declare that he had raised the sum. As usual, there was only his word for it.

Over the years there were various exposés of fraudulent healing practices and in 1989, he had to close his uneconomical City of Faith hospital. He even sold his holiday homes in Palm Springs and Beverly Hills, California, and three of his Mercedes cars, but continued to wear his Italian silk suits, diamond rings and gold bracelets – airbrushed out by his staff on publicity pictures.

In his last years, he retrenched the Roberts ministry, but was never engulfed in the scandals that brought down some of his peers, even though on several occasions people died at his "healing" prayer sessions.

He was ranked second only to Billy Graham in the hierarchy of US evangelists and was still referred to as "Dr" Roberts, despite having only honorary degrees.

Born into rural poverty in a log cabin near Ada, southeast of Oklahoma City, he nearly died of tuberculosis when he was 17. His family had joined the Pentecostal Holiness church and he credited God with his recovery after attending a revival meeting.

That launched his religious career, although one local newspaper sceptic wrote that Roberts treated religion the way that Tulsans went into oil: to make money.

At 18, he began preaching for the Pentecostal Holiness church.

Two years later he married Evelyn, who died in May 2005, aged 88. They had two sons and two daughters. His elder son, Ronald, shot

himself dead in 1982, and his daughter Rebecca and her husband Marshall Nash died in an air crash in 1977, leaving \$10 million, their proceeds from the Roberts empire. In the 1990s he had two heart attacks, and in 2006 he broke a hip.

Roberts's daughter Roberta and his son Richard, who followed him as president of ORU until 2007, when he was forced to take leave of absence following allegations that he had used university funds for personal purposes, survive him.

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