

Oral Roberts: salesman for God

The late Oral Roberts was a healer, an exorcist, a preacher, a televangelism pioneer, an ecumenist and a cultural icon whose life and message united popular religion with the American Dream.

By his own admission he was a businessman. Early on in the post-war Pentecostal healing revival he distinguished himself among his contemporaries by running his ministry on a savvy business model that eventually made it a multimillion-dollar non-profit corporation. It is no coincidence that Roberts was instrumental in the founding of the Full Gospel Businessmen's Fellowship, an organisation at the forefront of the charismatic movement of the 1960s and '70s, when the once-ridiculed Pentecostal experiences of tongues, healing and prophecy broke into the traditional, more respectable churches and denominations worldwide.

In the early days he vowed to touch "neither the gold nor the glory," and proved remarkably resilient to public scandal over the years. Despite his increasingly ludicrous and manipulative pleas for funds, Roberts survived six decades of ministry without the moral and financial scandals that brought down other televangelists.

His message was a simple promise of health, wealth and salvation: Jesus wants you to be saved, healed and prosperous. It was a message that struck a natural chord with Americans, appealing to the desire for both material and spiritual success. His preaching gained traction far beyond Pentecostal circles. Roberts was a pioneer of charismatic ecumenism, counting Roman Catholics and members of every Protestant denomination among his followers. For two decades at the height of his success he returned to the church of his youth, the United Methodist Church.

His message and his manner gained traction with me, too. As a Pentecostal teen, “on fire for the Lord”, I went through a period of devouring his writings and his broadcasts. It was the 1990s, when the UK received its first Christian satellite station, and footage from the old healing revivals was a mainstay of its programming.

There was something avuncular and reassuring about the measured, confident way Roberts would command demons to leave and sicknesses to be healed. It was exciting to be told that Jesus would do miracles if you would “release” your faith by touching a “point of contact”. Your point of contact could be a chair, your TV, an anointed handkerchief, or even Oral Roberts himself if you were fortunate enough to be at one of his crusades. To a young Christian who wanted the best in life, his “seed-faith” concept seemed at the time a practical way to expect things from God – plant a seed and watch your miracle grow. The seed was money and the miracle was one of financial prosperity.

But it was the seed-faith doctrine and its associated ideas that were to lead to what surely will be Roberts’s most enduring legacy – his tastelessly manipulative fundraising techniques.

In 1980, he raised millions to construct his City of Faith Medical Center in Tulsa, Oklahoma, by telling followers he was commanded to build it by a 900ft Jesus. The facility was to unite the twin healing powers of faith and medicine as never before. Along the way, God even commissioned Roberts to find the cure for cancer. When the hospital began to fail, Roberts claimed God would “take him home” – that’s “kill him” in evangelical parlance – if viewers didn’t send in \$8 million. He raised the required amount and more, but City of Faith continued its spiral into debt and was shut down in 1989. The building is now an office block.

I look back on my Pentecostal adolescence and remember well the kind of people who gave money to ministries like this on the back of such claims. They were often lonely, vulnerable types, not infrequently elderly widows with time on their

hands to listen to preaching tapes and watch revival services. They would proudly show me the “personal” letters they received promising them a divine return on their money if they would sow a seed into the ministry of an evangelist.

While televangelists and their followers will remember Roberts as a great healer, teacher and preacher, on the outside he will be chiefly remembered for the crass, cynical brand of money-spinning he pioneered.

I usually feel queasy about piling on even the most dubious of public figures so soon after their passing. But in life, Oral Roberts showed scant regard for his own dignity, casually exploiting his alleged ill health and impending death for financial gain. Would the charismatic luminary himself have the moral right to object?

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