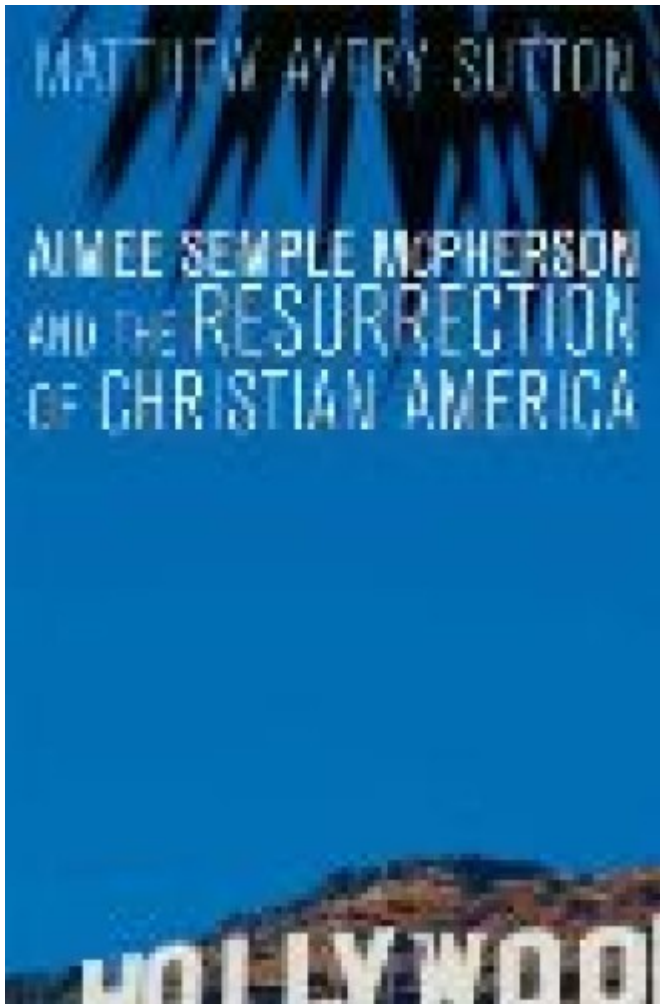


Aimee's America

By [Anne Blue Wills](#) in the [October 2, 2007](#) issue

In Review



Aimee Semple McPherson and the Resurrection of Christian America

Matthew Avery Sutton
Harvard University Press

"America! Awake!" Thus did evangelist Aimee Semple McPherson rouse interwar audiences to do battle against communism and atheism. According to Matthew Avery Sutton, McPherson's cry—disseminated through her newspapers, the *Bridal Call* and the *Crusader*; over the airwaves of her church's radio station, Kall Four Square Gospel (KFSG); and in person from the pulpit of the Angelus Temple in Los Angeles—"brought conservative Protestantism back from the margins to the mainstream of American culture, by arguing that Christians had an obligation to fight for the issues they believed in and boldly proclaiming that patriotism and faith were inseparable."

Sutton's study, part biography and part cultural history, attempts to explain the long 20th-century run of traditionalist Protestantism on the political stage. It is, therefore, an important book, even though it overstates the connections between McPherson's era and contemporary expressions of religiously motivated political activism. Armed with Sutton's work, we understand that Jerry Falwell and Pat Robertson do not represent anomalous incursions of Protestantism into political territory. Even if McPherson did not directly inspire them, as Sutton suggests, she preceded them in giving voice to conservative Protestants' political concerns.

Aimee Semple McPherson was born in 1890 near Ingersoll, Ontario. She married Robert Semple in 1908 and traveled with him to work in China's mission fields, but returned with her infant daughter when he died of malaria months after their arrival. She then married businessman Harold McPherson, but she proved ill-suited to domestic life. She left him and made her way across the U.S. with her mother, her daughter, and a son by Harold, settling in 1918 in Los Angeles.

In 1923 McPherson dedicated Angelus Temple, which dominated its corner of Sunset Boulevard with its glittering dome and aggressive outreach to the city's unfortunate. She made the church into a religious, cultural and, Sutton argues, political powerhouse. Initially she propounded the moderate Pentecostal theology of the "Four-Square Gospel," preaching Christ as Savior, Sanctifier, Healer and soon-coming King. Her "illustrated sermons"—featuring costumed extras, magnificent sets, and dramatic enactments of Christian teaching often drawn from her own experience—made the temple a favorite tourist attraction in Hollywood's golden age.

McPherson's mysterious six-week disappearance in 1926 only fanned the flames of her celebrity. In the 1930s, McPherson began speaking more self-consciously about politics by invoking a "Christian America" narrative. She therefore gave her followers both the rationale and the permission to speak and act as Christians on behalf of the American experiment.

McPherson has been the subject of several books, but Sutton brings new attention to her political activism at a moment in our own time when combinations of faith and politics frequently make news. In 1993, poet and novelist Daniel Mark Epstein and American religious historian Edith Blumhofer each produced a biography of McPherson. As Sutton notes, these efforts explore her origins, early life and work as an evangelist but leave the years after the 1926 disappearance mostly unexplored. McPherson's later years matter most to Sutton because from the late 1920s until her death in 1944, she made her most pointed political interventions, endorsing candidates and engineering the temple's vast social- service efforts.

Sutton does not explore the substance of his title's claim until the final two chapters, but the idea that McPherson "resurrected Christian America" promises to change how history views her—and how it views conservative American Protestant politics more broadly. The evangelist's showmanship and her determination to flout religious authority and the conventions of womanhood made her a target of Christians and non-Christians alike. Detractors enjoyed an extended field day when, in the spring of 1926, McPherson vanished from Venice, California, only to resurface six weeks later, telling a sensational story of kidnapping, captivity and escape through the Mexican desert. Other studies of these events focus on the ensuing investigations and the indictment of McPherson on several counts of conspiracy and obstruction of justice (the indictments were later dropped). Sutton takes a new approach by placing the disappearance and its aftermath into the context of civic battles in Los Angeles over creeping cultural change. Where McPherson spent those six weeks still remains a mystery, but Sutton walks his reader through some possibilities.

Rather than definitively untangling the disappearance story's various strands, he concerns himself with unpacking McPherson's treatment at the hands of both sympathizers and critics. As Sutton interprets McPherson, for some she embodied the last defense against secular modernity, and for others, the best argument for encouraging its advent. The city's many midwestern and southern transplants understood the scandalous speculation about McPherson as the devil's attempt to defeat her; meanwhile, city boosters feared that her notoriety would demote their

city to the ranks of Dayton, Tennessee, made a national laughingstock the previous summer during the John Scopes trial over the teaching of evolution. “The greatest irony” of the postdisappearance debates, which centered on a possible affair between McPherson and KFSG’s radio engineer, “was that a fundamentalist minister adopted an open, evolving view of gender, while her ‘secular’ critics, seeing only in categories of black or white, painted all women as either Victorian ladies or whores.”

If Sutton wants to argue for McPherson’s lasting impact, he needs to explain why her “open, evolving view of gender” did not and does not prevail among conservative American Protestants. Along the same lines, how did evangelicalism lose the thread of McPherson’s efforts—admittedly spotty, but still striking in those Jim Crow days—to unite Christians across lines of race and ethnicity?

There may well be direct contemporary survivals of McPherson’s politically engaged Christianity, but the heirs that Sutton cites—“from local school board members to President George W. Bush” to the “modern neoconservatives” who stand behind him—do not seem to qualify. Sutton writes as if an unbroken line existed between McPherson’s groundbreaking work in the 1930s and early 1940s and the current generation of conservative religionists, and as if present-day religious activism takes marching orders straight from McPherson’s example. She did not bridge a gap between politics and conservative Christianity once and for all; she did, however, stand as one important instance of connection and adjustment between world and faith.

The real significance of Sutton’s book rests in its implicit claim that the Scopes trial is not a good starting point for understanding the relationship between Christian traditionalism and American modernity. Even though John Scopes was found guilty, the events in Dayton proved more detrimental to the reputation of Christian fundamentalism than to that of modernism. If Americans looked back to McPherson rather than to Scopes, Sutton suggests, we might understand more clearly the continual renewal of “old-time religion”—and its particular ability to appeal to the country’s broad middle by combining innovative popular modes with God-and-country tropes.

In *Selling God* (1995), religious historian R. Laurence Moore shows how American evangelicals from Jonathan Edwards on have always plundered popular culture for effective ways of communicating the gospel. If such combinations constitute the heart of evangelicalism, it seems fair to take note of McPherson as a 20th-century instance of the tradition. Doing so also seems more accurate than to insist on her

role as an originator of Christian political conservatism. Sutton wants to say that McPherson “changed the way American religion is practiced” by popularizing a blend of patriotic Protestantism. But if one takes a longer view, she appears as an utterly traditional evangelical, practicing her faith as evangelicals always have, by fusing extraordinary faith to the ordinary stuff of life.