People and Places:
Aimee Semple McPherson (1890–1944)

Randy Moore

Figure 1. Aimee Semple McPherson contends with the apelike specter of Darwinian evolution. Courtesy of the Oregon Historical Society.
Aimee Kennedy was born on October 9, 1890, in Salford, Ontario, Canada, and by the age of 13 was an agnostic who defended evolution and questioned claims by local preachers. Aimee became a Christian in 1907 during a revival led by Robert Semple, a fiery Pentecostal missionary who died of malaria two years after marrying her. Aimee then married Harold McPherson, an accountant from New York.

By 1915, Aimee was an itinerant evangelist. In 1916, she toured the South in her “Gospel Car,” a 1912 Packard on which she painted religious slogans such as “Where will you spend eternity?” McPherson disliked being compared to fellow evangelist Billy Sunday because of Sunday’s use of “slang.” However, McPherson—like Sunday—always put on a good show. In the early 1920s, she moved to Los Angeles, where she incorporated theater and patriotism into her church services and torch-lit revivals. During one of her most famous and often repeated services, she vilified the villains—Darwin, Hitler, Mussolini, and Lenin—after which the show climaxed with McPherson’s emerging to read the national anthem.

While in California, McPherson became one of the most flamboyant and controversial preachers in the United States. Her theatrical sermons rivaled productions in nearby Hollywood, and her use of spectacle, celebrity status, patriotism, and marketing foretold modern evangelism. Although McPherson seldom delivered “fire and brimstone” sermons like Billy Sunday and Frank Norris, she often spiced her sermons with denunciations of evolution (Figure 1) and ritual hangings of biology teachers in effigy. McPherson—whose enormous church often hosted William Jennings Bryan, John Straton, and other anti-evolution crusaders—proudly proclaimed her willingness to abandon science rather than religion. In 1925, she promised Bryan that 10 000 members of her church would be praying for his success at the Scopes Trial.

McPherson wanted to abolish all barriers between church and state, and urged Christians to seize control of government by boycotting schools that taught evolution. In 1927, “Sister Aimee” denounced evolution as a Satanic plot responsible for jazz, booze, crime, student suicides, murder, and the corruption of young people.

McPherson, who participated in several highly publicized debates with atheist Charles Smith, offered $5 000 to anyone who could find a contradiction in the Bible. Smith and McPherson repeated their debate to overflow crowds all along the West Coast. During her career, McPherson spoke directly to more than 2 000 000 people.

McPherson raised vast sums of money, often instructing her followers to contribute paper money, not coins. On January 1, 1923, her award-winning float in Pasadena’s Tournament of Roses Parade led worshipers to her newly opened Angelus Temple, which became the home base for her religious empire. McPherson held three services per day in Angelus Temple, and most services filled all of the church’s 5300 seats. “Sister Aimee” occasionally spoke in tongues, performed healings, and kept a museum of crutches and wheelchairs of people who had been healed in her services (her 1921 revival in Denver included a “Stretcher Day”).

In his 1927 novel *Elmer Gantry*, Sinclair Lewis modeled Sister Sharon Falconer—an attractive evangelical healer—on McPherson. Indeed, McPherson, who wore make-up, jewelry, and appealing clothes, was flamboyant and attractive, and often preached in a long white
gown while holding flowers. Unsurprisingly, she attracted giant crowds, and critics compared her with Cleopatra and complained of her use of sex appeal to spread her message.

The first woman to deliver a sermon on radio and be granted an FCC license (for her “Foursquare Gospel” station KFSG), McPherson became a celebrity who socialized with movie stars. When KFSG’s broadcasting license was revoked in 1925 for deviating from its assigned frequency, McPherson allegedly sent then-Secretary of Commerce Herbert Hoover a telegram demanding that his Satanic workers allow her church to continue broadcasting.

Despite her fame as an evangelist, McPherson is best known for her alleged “kidnapping” (Sutton 2007). On May 18, 1926, McPherson disappeared when she and her secretary went swimming at Ocean Park, California. Most people assumed that she had drowned (and two people died while trying to find her body). At about the same time, Kenneth Ormiston—an engineer at KFSG—also disappeared.

About a month later, McPherson's mother (Minnie Kennedy) claimed that she received a ransom note from “The Avengers” demanding $500 000 to refrain from selling McPherson into slavery. On June 23, McPherson reappeared in a Mexico desert just across the border from Douglas, Arizona, claiming to have been kidnapped and tortured. There were many inconsistencies in her story (she disappeared wearing a bathing suit, but reappeared in a gown; she wasn't wearing a watch when she disappeared, but was wearing one when she reappeared), and witnesses later claimed to have seen McPherson and Ormiston at various hotels during the time that she was allegedly kidnapped. When McPherson returned to Los Angeles, she was greeted at the train station by more than 30 000 supporters.

A grand jury investigated McPherson’s alleged kidnapping, but adjourned two weeks later without delivering an indictment. The grand jury later reconvened and reviewed hotel documents written in McPherson’s handwriting and witnesses’ claims that Ormiston had been holed up in a beach bungalow with an unknown, disguised woman (more than 75 000 people later visited McPherson’s suspected “love nest”). Although McPherson stuck to her story about the kidnapping, she refused to answer questions about her relationship with Ormiston, and Judge Samuel Blake charged her and her mother with obstruction of justice. However, on January 10, 1927, those charges were dropped, and the $25 000 reward offered by Angelus Temple for anyone who could offer information about McPherson’s whereabouts during her kidnapping was never claimed.

In 1930, McPherson—who by then was more famous than most movie stars—had a nervous breakdown. In later years, McPherson’s impact and popularity waned, but she remained active with her church and its ministries (such as its expanding radio station), as well as with patriotic shows before and during World War II.

On September 27, 1944, McPherson died of a drug overdose in a hotel room in Oakland, California. More than 40 000 mourners viewed her body as it lay in state at Angelus Temple for three days amid $50 000 worth of flowers. McPherson was buried on October 9 (her birthday) in a 544-kg (1200-pound) bronze casket in an ornate hilltop sarcophagus in Forest Lawn Memorial Park Cemetery in Glendale, California. Rumors circulated that she was buried with a telephone in her casket to ensure her survival if her body was resurrected. In decades following her death, McPherson was often portrayed as a religious hypocrite and sexual vixen.
Angelus Temple—now a federally protected historic landmark—stands opposite Echo Park near downtown Los Angeles. Visitors to the parsonage are greeted by a large photo of McPherson and William Jennings Bryan. The Foursquare Gospel Church, which McPherson founded, has more than a million members, most of whom live outside the United States. McPherson continues to be regarded by her followers as a prophetess.

REFERENCES


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Randy Moore is the HT Morse–Alumni Distinguished Professor of Biology at the University of Minnesota. His latest book, coauthored with Sehoya Cotner, is Arguing for Evolution: An Encyclopedia for Understanding Science (Santa Barbara [CA]: Greenwood, 2011).

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