

scholarly history of American military policy during a critical thirty-year period.

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Oral Roberts: An American Life. By David Edwin Harrell, Jr.
(Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985. Pp. xiv, 622.
Illustrations, bibliographical essay, notes, index. \$29.95.)

In this path-breaking biography of America's foremost Pentecostal evangelist, David Edwin Harrell, respected historian of southern religion at the University of Alabama, Birmingham, begins by examining the social context of rural, small-town Oklahoma where experiential religion was a way of life. Born in 1918, Oral Roberts was a product of this environment. Embarking upon a preaching career in the mid-1940s, he clawed his way to the top of the heap of independent Pentecostal evangelists by means of itinerant healing crusades that made him a national figure. Around 1960 he sensed that healing had just about run its course and jumped on a new bandwagon, the charismatic renewal that was starting to sweep through mainline Protestant and Catholic churches alike. He folded up the big tent and turned to television, replaced miracle-working with soul-saving and the baptism of the Holy Spirit, and through a simple, positive, inclusive message gained a worldwide ecumenical following. With this came money, power, and acclaim; the Oklahoma farm boy had made good.

Roberts was fascinated by wealth and its symbols, as could be seen in the succession of homes he acquired; the futuristic buildings of Oral Roberts University, which he created to "perpetuate" his ministry; and the grandiose City of Faith medical center, a monument to human ego rivaled only by the Pyramids. The friendship of Billy Graham, his junior by nine months, enabled him to enter the mainstream of American evangelicalism, and in 1968 he transferred his membership and ordination from the Pentecostal Holiness church of his youth to the United Methodist church. At the same time, Roberts became accepted by the community in Tulsa, where his operation was centered, because of the vast amount of money it brought into the local economy, the clean-cut youth that populated the ORU campus, and Roberts's own political and economic conservatism.

Although accepting neither Roberts's theology nor his claim of miracle-working power, Harrell endeavors to portray the

evangelist fairly and open-mindedly. He describes the Oklahoman as "an ultimate romantic, a prophet of the intuitive," one who speaks out of a "tradition of Christian mysticism and pentecostal ecstasy" (p. 484). For many lower middle-class Christians who had been reared in conservative churches but felt alienated from them, Roberts provided a church home of sorts. An experiential theology almost devoid of content gave his ministry a wide appeal, while the Pentecostal background with its vision of equal rights for blacks meant his crusades were integrated from the very beginning. At the same time, Roberts was a very human person, one who ruled his own home and organization with an iron hand and who alternated between violent displays of temper, moodiness, and frenetic outbursts of energy.

The research in the book is indeed prodigious, and one gains the impression after reading the 107 pages of notes that Harrell has left no stone unturned. He received excellent cooperation from the ORU archives and interviewed some fifty people who were associated with the ministry or knew the evangelist personally, including Oral and Evelyn Roberts themselves. However, he does not pay sufficient attention to Roberts's critics or to the virtually totalitarian atmosphere that prevails in the Roberts organization, and in Harrell's quest for objectivity he ends up being a little too easy on the evangelist. Given the shaky condition of the operation, which is being bled financially by the escalating costs of the underutilized City of Faith facilities and undercut economically by the new generation of political television evangelists, one wonders how long it will last. The aging Roberts will soon pass from the scene, and few believe his son Richard can hold the organization together or build a new one around himself. In spite of its strengths, and they are many, this book may have been written a little too soon. Still, it makes good reading and it provides the kind of insights into the Oral Roberts enterprise that cannot be found anywhere else.

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