of colloquial knowledge and folk histories.

In the eyes of Internet age utopians—those who herald our digital future with nearly religious fervor—hierarchies are old-guard systems that naturally reinforce a particular worldview or bias, and are doomed to extinction by the democratic, malleable networks that are replacing them. But this is an oversimplification, Wright says. While there is a "fundamental tension" between the two kinds of information systems, they "not only coexist, but they are continually giving rise to each other." Wikipedia, a vast online encyclopedia that accepts and posts entries by virtually anyone, has been forced to institute a supplemental system of hierarchical controls to govern the activities of its contributors.

The current growth of network activity across the Internet—which is also provoking shakeups in the organizational charts of companies and even in the military's traditional command-and-control authority structures—doesn't spell the end of hierarchical institutions, Wright concludes, nor are the tremendous technological shifts we're witnessing unprecedented. History has seen "information explosions" as far back as the Ice Age, when our ancestors began using symbols.

Wright the information architect is less interesting than Wright the historian. He tends to oversimplify in order to impose his universal organizing theory on the entirety of human history. But his book does succeed beautifully as a museum in which various artifacts reveal how humankind has used wit, reason, and imagination to store and compute data. Nothing, in fact, could be more human.

—*Patrick Tucker*

RELIGION & PHILOSOPHY

Call Letters for Jesus

AIMEE SEMPLE MCPHERSON AND THE RESURRECTION OF CHRISTIAN AMERICA.

By Matthew Avery Sutton. Harvard Univ. Press. 351 pp. $26.95

The contemporary holy alliance between evangelism, the media, and politics has roots that are many decades old. Long before Pat Robertson or Billy Graham, there was Aimee Semple McPherson (1890–1944), a self-educated minister mostly

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The people's preacher: While other ministers still used Bibles as their only props, Aimee Semple McPherson's theatrical sermons filled the temple she built in Los Angeles in 1923. A media pioneer, she also started a radio station and appeared in film reels.

remembered now as the model for the hypocritical revivalist Sister Sharon in Sinclair Lewis's novel *Elmer Gantry* (1927). But in her day, McPherson was one of the most famous women in America.

Born in rural Canada, she emigrated to Chicago with her first husband, who died shortly after they arrived in 1910. She soon remarried, but left her second husband to follow her religious calling, eventually founding the International Church of the Foursquare Gospel, a conservative Protestant sect. A charismatic preacher with a flair for drama, she came to exert enormous influence from the 5,300-seat Angelus Temple, which she built in Los Angeles after settling in California in 1918.

Matthew Avery Sutton, an assistant professor of history at Oakland University in Michigan who was himself raised around the Foursquare Church, clearly admires McPherson, but he is not blind to her faults. One of the first women to attain a prominent leadership position in an American church, she was recognized as a pioneer even as she was criticized for her love of publicity, lavish lifestyle, high-profile romances, and flamboyant services.

McPherson was always looking for ways to increase her flock, and early on she saw the potential in the new media of radio and film. She went on the air in 1924 with her own station, Kall Four Square Gospel (KFSG), bankrolled by her followers, and broadcast her services and a variety of other programs, from live music to talks by a local Boy Scout leader. By the late 1920s she was appearing in newsreels and movies.

McPherson's celebrity—and her notoriety—grew with her mysterious 36-day disappearance in 1926, after which she claimed to have been kidnapped. Many people believed she had faked her abduction in order to steal away with Kenneth Gladstone Ormiston, a

married radio engineer at KFSG. She was eventually charged with perjury and obstruction of justice, but the charges were dropped.

She also had a series of well-publicized romances, including one with actor/singer David Hutton, a man 11 years her junior who starred in a biblical opera she composed. After a brief courtship, he became her third husband, in 1931. (McPherson went on the air from their bridal suite.) When Hutton filed for divorce less than two years later, critics—including some of McPherson's own followers—seized upon the failed marriage as evidence of the evangelist's hypocrisy and an ungoverned sexual appetite.

But McPherson persisted in her ministry. She worked with political leaders of both parties to support prohibition and fight communism and the teaching of evolution. During World War II, she was better than Hollywood stars at selling war bonds, and championed nationalism, writing, "The flag of America and the church stand for the same thing. . . . They stand or fall together!"

McPherson's visibility helped the Angelus Temple grow into one of the first megachurches. Today, the Angelus Temple is home to a worldwide spiritual movement with millions of members. However, the pressures on her took their toll. Plagued with ill health and loneliness, she became addicted to prescription drugs and was dead at the age of 53, after an overdose of sleeping pills.

Aimee Semple McPherson may be best known now as the model for the hypocritical revivalist in *Elmer Gantry*, but in her day she was one of the most famous women in America.

Although McPherson was enough of a cultural icon in her lifetime to be the inspiration for characters in popular books and movies, today she's largely forgotten. Sutton has done an admirable job of portraying McPherson's life and work. She deserves no less, for her efforts to reshape the role of Christianity in American life resonate still.

—*Claude R. Marx*

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