

Aimee Semple McPherson and Writing the Faith into the Modern World

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Aimee Semple McPherson was a major figure of American religious life in the early twentieth century. She was an evangelist, prodigious author, teacher, missionary, and founder of the Foursquare Gospel. Aimee influenced innumerable people in her lifetime and was one of the most recognizable figures of her generation.<sup>1</sup> At a remarkable time of modernization that shaped the religious life of America, Aimee served as a bridging figure between the apostolic faith and modern life. The extensive scholarly work on Aimee has clarified that she developed methods to reconcile the apostolic faith<sup>2</sup> with modern life that were the most influential of any 20<sup>th</sup> century religious thinker.<sup>3</sup> This study, however, seeks to understand her literary contribution by examining her books, magazines, published and audio sermons, and transcribed college lectures. Until now, her writing has not been celebrated or emphasized for its role in shaping the faith. Thus, this study focuses on the intellectual contribution that she made to the development of American religious life through her writings and brings awareness to the writing tradition in American evangelicalism that is still unfamiliar to many scholars today.

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<sup>1</sup> Many scholars have clarified Aimee's influence in American public life, with one scholar arguing that she was the most famous female figure in America until Eleanor Roosevelt; See Ferenc Morton Szasz, *Religion in the Modern American West* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2000), 111. Also, see Grant Wacker, *Heaven Below: Early Pentecostals and American Culture* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001), 145, and Chas H. Barfoot, *Aimee Semple McPherson and the Making of Modern Pentecostalism 1890-1926* (Equinox, 2011), xvii-xxiii.

<sup>2</sup> Another word that could be used is "primitivism" to characterize the faith that Pentecostals endorse, since Pentecostals specifically sought to reestablish miraculous healings and speaking in tongues as active parts of the Christian faith in the modern world, both of which were aspects of the Christian faith in its beginnings during the first century. See Wacker, *Heaven Below*; 12, 72.

<sup>3</sup> Matthew Sutton's study has provided the meaning of Aimee's influence within the larger framework of American political and religious life, and he argues that she laid the patterns for evangelism in America that would reemerge after WWII. He calls attention to how she maintained a religious voice in mainstream society even when other religious sects had retreated to segregated spheres from the secularized world, especially after the highly dramatized Scopes trial of 1925. See Matthew Avery Sutton, *Aimee Semple McPherson and the Resurrection of Christian America* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007).

Aimee Semple McPherson was born on October 9, 1890, just outside of Ingersoll, Ontario, in Canada,<sup>4</sup> above Lake Erie.<sup>5</sup> Throughout Aimee's upbringing, her mother, Minnie Kennedy, worked as a Methodist minister.<sup>6</sup> She also served as a general in the Salvation Army,<sup>7</sup> which was a new religious movement in Ingersoll at the time.<sup>8</sup> In many ways, she gave Aimee a way of thinking that legitimized a more fluid religiosity, one that took into account the complexities of the modern experience. Aimee was raised in an environment where spirituality and religion were central to her upbringing. Throughout her career, her childhood experiences provided the context for her spiritual metaphors, certainly the metaphors by which she would later relate to her audience at the level of everyday, 19<sup>th</sup> century middle class American life. From her parents, Aimee inherited a hybrid Christian faith of Salvationism and Methodism: the Salvationist use of spectacle informed her theatrical preaching methods, which garnered her popularity in mainstream society, while Methodism, with its strong writing tradition,<sup>9</sup> informed her writing habits and rhetorical style. Aimee later said that she "was brought up with one foot in the Methodist church and the other foot in the Salvation Army."<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Aimee can be understood as an American thinker because she thought of herself that way and because she explicitly furthered American thought. As an example, Aimee says, "Say, "Mrs. McPherson your not preaching Christ you're preaching America," and I say I guess I am... As American citizens we want a revival." Aimee Semple McPherson, "God Goes to Washington" mp3 audio sermon (Los Angeles: The Heritage Center Department of the Foursquare Church, December 10, 1939, 25:15, 35:58.

<sup>5</sup> Aimee Semple McPherson, *Life Story*, sermon (1939. Los Angeles: The Foursquare Church), mp3 audio, 1:55.

<sup>6</sup> Aimee Semple McPherson, "Aimee Elizabeth: Chapter 13, Where's the Door?," *Foursquare Crusader*, June 1936, 6.

<sup>7</sup> Diane Winston, *Red-Hot and Righteous: The Urban Religion of the Salvation Army* (Cambridge: Harvard University, 1991), 149.

<sup>8</sup> *Life Story*, 3:29.

<sup>9</sup> Vicki Tolar-Burton argues that literacy was central to John Wesley's Methodism, that the writing of sermons served more than keep a record of teachings; it also created spiritual experiences. Wesley's emphasis on literacy as a habitual aspect of the faith had far-reaching, transformative effects on the communication styles of 18<sup>th</sup> century England. Wesley, in short, developed a new writing tradition that was intrinsic to the practice of the Christian faith and highly influenced Western culture; see, Vicki Tolar-Burton, *Spiritual Literacy in John Wesley's Methodism* (Texas: Baylor University Press, 2008)1, 10, 27, 298.

<sup>10</sup> Aimee Semple McPherson, *My Dear Diary*, sermon, (1938; Los Angeles: The Foursquare Church), mp3 audio, 2:48.

While Aimee's community participated in the Salvation Army movement during her childhood, her family and those in her religious circle thought of themselves as Methodists. She was raised to primarily identify her spiritual inheritance as the Wesleyan tradition: "My people had all been Methodists,"<sup>11</sup> and "Our family had been a straight line of Methodists... right down from the time of John Wesley."<sup>12</sup> One scholar argues that Aimee viewed Pentecostalism as a more genuine, pure form of Methodism.<sup>13</sup>

Aimee had a public education and was an honor student throughout her studies. At fifteen, she began high school, where she learned of Darwinism, which was just making its way into the public education system in the U.S. and Canada.<sup>14</sup> Scholars have emphasized that the theory of evolution pervaded every area of thought for Aimee's generation of thinkers.<sup>15</sup> This is captured in the dialogue that Aimee had with her father:

I said, "Dad how do you know there's a God?" ... And he said, "Well Darling, who do you think made the sun and the moon and the stars of the earth?" And I said, "Oh, Dad, the schoolbook explains all those. You see it says right here that the sun and moon and stars were all one mass of hot, molten lava and they began because of the heat of whirling motion and as they whirled the sun flew off and the stars flew off and the earth flew off and we flew off and here we are," (audience laughter). He said, "Whoa how did man come out of this scene, my Dear?" And I said, "Dad when the earth grew cool it caved in here and there like an apple when you're baking when in the oven and the ocean filled the spaces and from that came a little amoeba." He said, "What's that?" "Well," I said, "they're so small that fifty thousand could go through the eye of a needle without crowding, so we're told, but that's our great-great-great-great-great-great-great-great-great grandmother, the grandmother of the elephant and the monkey and the kangaroo and the giraffe and the whale and the birds." He said, "They all came from this amoeba?" I said, "Yes Daddy. 'Course you wouldn't understand this Daddy. This is something new. Since your age they've discovered these things."<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Aimee Semple McPherson, "Trial of the Modern Liberalist College Professor Versus the Lord Jesus Christ," (sermon transcript, The Foursquare Church, October 14, 1923), 2.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 3.

<sup>13</sup> Barfoot, *Aimee Semple McPherson*, 513.

<sup>14</sup> Aimee Semple McPherson, *The Story of My Life* (Waco: Word Books, 1973), 16-20.

<sup>15</sup> Richard Hofstadter, *Anti-Intellectualism in American Life* (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1963), 121.

<sup>16</sup> McPherson, *Dear Diary*, 7:15-9:00.

In what can be considered the beginning of her writing career at sixteen, Aimee wrote to a Canadian newspaper decrying the effect that Darwinism had on Christian faith and advocating to remove the teaching of Darwinism from the public school system.<sup>17</sup> Her letter was an intense reaction against modernistic thinking and reflected the feelings of her generation of the issues raised with Darwinism:

...how could any scholar of ordinary intelligence avoid being turned, in time, from their old [Christian] beliefs to these new ones, which are taught in the [geography] books supposed to contain only the truest facts... let me appeal to every student, to rally and stand by the sacred old truths... in spite of all the cold-blooded reasoning of scientists. "For what shall it profit a man if he gain the whole world and lose his own soul?"<sup>18</sup>

With the publication of this article, her protests over Darwinism exposed her to the central concerns of the world beyond her childhood and allowed her to take part in a wider conversation among a variety of thinkers; she received responses to her article from "England, New Zealand, Australia, and all parts of America..."<sup>19</sup> Elsewhere throughout her sermons and writings, Aimee's response to Darwinism was one voice in the chorus of 20<sup>th</sup> century religious thinkers sounding the alarm over Darwinism's effect on religious thought, which, for those like Aimee who responded negatively, ranged from deep disillusionment regarding the nature of biblical interpretation and creationism to fiery rejection of the theory of evolution. Every account of Aimee's experience regarding the effect Darwinism had on her faith has a similar refrain:

The horror of it all broke over me. Had the martyrs died in vain? Was it all a ghastly mistake? ...Had all these trusting souls been deceived?...And if there was no God, in all likelihood there was no life beyond. All churches and church

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<sup>17</sup> Aimee Kennedy, "Infidelistic Geography" *Family Herald and Weekly Star*, 18 July 1906 (Hamilton, Ontario: McMaster University Archives).

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Aimee Semple McPherson, *The Story of My Life: In Memoriam* (Los Angeles: Echo Park Evangelistic Association, 1951), 27.

workers were wasting their time and man was as dumb driven cattle; he ate, he slept, he died, and was no more.<sup>20</sup>

Here Aimee articulated the importance of faith in the Christian God for understanding the meaning of human existence. Like many others, Aimee aimed to reconcile the issues raised by Darwinism by confronting them head on.<sup>21</sup>

Shortly after her encounter with Darwin, Aimee attended a Pentecostal<sup>22</sup> revival for the first time. She entered the cacophonous atmosphere of revival in a local church and sat in the back to observe. While music played, people earnestly prayed and others sang and shouted, lifted their hands, and spoke out their testimony of faith.<sup>23</sup> At this revival Aimee experienced the baptism of the Holy Spirit, which firmly rooted her in her faith.<sup>24</sup> In general, this experience, as for other Pentecostals, is essentially the foundation of the Pentecostal faith. This experience was so formative in her spiritual life that the teaching of Holy-Spirit baptism and fostering the atmosphere of revival would be central to her ministry. The baptism of the Holy Spirit was an intense spiritual experience of the inner life. As Aimee describes it, the Holy Spirit is not a coercive force; rather, Aimee was aided by a divine being to enact new potential.

In her autobiography Aimee wrote that after coming home from the revival and baptism experience, while alone in her room, God told her she was to be a preacher. This spiritual ordination reflects the Pentecostal notion that – regardless of gender, race, or class – anyone

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<sup>20</sup> Aimee Semple McPherson, *In the Service of the King The Story of My Life* (New York: Boni & Liveright, 1927), 72.

<sup>21</sup> David A. Hollinger, *After Cloven Tongues of Fire: Protestant Liberalism in Modern American History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013), 8.

<sup>22</sup> Pentecostalism is a movement that seeks to restore the apostolic faith. It emphasizes experiential knowledge of the Holy Spirit as more viable than theological dogma. Thus, it is dismissive to theology that discredits experiences of the Holy Spirit, such as miraculous physical healings and xenolalia, the ability to spontaneously speak in another language(s) that an individual has not learned.

<sup>23</sup> Aimee Semple McPherson, *This is That: Personal Experiences, Sermons, and Writings* (Los Angeles: Foursquare Publications, 1923), 35; McPherson, *Story of My Life* (1973), 22.

<sup>24</sup> McPherson, *Story of My Life* (1973), 23; McPherson, *This is That*, 38-39.

could command authority in the religious sphere when empowered by the Holy Spirit<sup>25</sup>: “...the call and ordination were so real, that although later set apart and ordained by the saints of God, the memory of my little bedroom, flooded with the glory of God as He spoke these words, has always been to me my real ordination.”<sup>26</sup> Her personal sense of divine ordination would empower her throughout her life in an American religious culture that was dominated by professional male leaders.

At eighteen, Aimee began to work as a minister with Robert Semple. Semple was an Irish traveling preacher who had led the Pentecostal revival where she had been saved.<sup>27</sup> During their two-year marriage, Aimee traveled with him as he preached and taught, first in Chicago and Ohio and later in the Ontario region in Canada.<sup>28</sup> When they visited his family in Belfast,<sup>29</sup> Aimee gave her first sermon in London, England, to an audience of 15,000 people.<sup>30</sup> She also spoke to the workmen from the keel of the Titanic.<sup>31</sup> Eventually, Robert and Aimee went to China as missionaries.<sup>32</sup> These two formative years with her husband before the age of 20 were definitive for her spiritual life. They grounded her belief in a revival-centered faith and instilled an awareness of the Holy Spirit that remained throughout her life.

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<sup>25</sup> Wacker, *Heaven Below*, 105.

<sup>26</sup> Aimee Semple McPherson, *The Personal Testimony of Aimee Semple McPherson* (Los Angeles: Foursquare Missions Press, 1997), 13.

<sup>27</sup> McPherson, *This is That*, 35.

<sup>28</sup> McPherson, *This is That*, 58; Epstein, *Sister Aimee*, 57; Edith Blumhofer, *Aimee Semple McPherson: Everybody's Sister* (Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 1993), 82; McPherson, *Personal Testimony*, 19.

<sup>29</sup> McPherson, *Story of My Life* (1973), 42.

<sup>30</sup> McPherson, *Personal Testimony*, 24. Although the particular denominational affiliation was not recorded, this more than likely was a Pentecostal meeting, since Aimee was invited to speak by Cecil Polhill, who was a very wealthy and well-known Pentecostal missionary, founder and president of the Pentecostal Missionary Union for Great Britain (PMU). During the early years of the Pentecostal movement in Europe, PMU was the “most active” of the Pentecostal organizations. Today, Polhill is considered a forerunner of the Pentecostal movement’s spread in Britain. See Gary B. McGee, “The Notable Women in Pentecostal Ministry,” *Assemblies of God Heritage*, Spring 1985-1986, 16; and “P.M.U. (The Pentecostal Missionary Union for Great Britain),” *Confidence*, 2, no. 11 (November 1909), 254.

<sup>31</sup> McPherson, *Story of My Life* (1973), 79.

<sup>32</sup> Blumhofer, *Everybody's Sister*, 87.

After Robert died of malaria in China,<sup>33</sup> Aimee's daughter was born and they then sailed back to join Aimee's mother in New York.<sup>34</sup> During the 30-day voyage Aimee led weekly Sunday services aboard the ship.<sup>35</sup> Shortly after her return from China, she married Harold McPherson, a middle class American businessman, in 1911.<sup>36</sup> Thereby, she became a U.S. citizen.<sup>37</sup> The two had a son in 1913.<sup>38</sup> About four years into the marriage, Aimee left him with the resolution to be an evangelical<sup>39</sup> minister in 1915.<sup>40</sup> After a couple of months Harold joined her at one of her first independent revival meetings and thereafter periodically traveled with her ministry.<sup>41</sup> Yet, for unclear reasons, they divorced in 1921.<sup>42</sup> In a later interview of Harold by Aimee's daughter Roberta, Roberta indicates that Harold spoke affectionately of his time with Aimee, like an "older man remembering his sweetheart," yet Harold was reticent regarding the details of the divorce.<sup>43</sup> Upon reflection, Roberta thought that Harold, as a "man of that generation," could not withstand the reversal of he and Aimee's gender roles.<sup>44</sup>

From 1916 to 1923, Aimee traveled up and down both coasts and across the United States, first by train and later by personal automobile. She spoke to combined congregations from local churches or crowds that she drummed up from public demonstrations at churches that invited her, in rented public spaces like theaters and opera halls, and in the 40'x80' tent she

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<sup>33</sup> McPherson, *Story of My Life* (1973), 65; McPherson, *Personal Testimony*, 29.

<sup>34</sup> McPherson, *This is That*, 69; McPherson, *Story of My Life* (1973), 68.

<sup>35</sup> McPherson, *In the Service of the King*, 136.

<sup>36</sup> Sutton, *Aimee Semple McPherson*, 12.

<sup>37</sup> Blumhofer, *Everybody's Sister*, 102-103; 133.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 104.

<sup>39</sup> Evangelicalism is an interdenominational movement that focuses on revival experience to further the faith rather than on formal teaching of theological issues; it is not affiliated with any one institution. See Dwight M. Moody's description in Hofstadter, *Anti-Intellectualism in American Life*, 108, and George M. Marsden, *Understanding Fundamentalism and Evangelicalism* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1991), 1-2.

<sup>40</sup> Blumhofer, *Everybody's Sister*, 105.

<sup>41</sup> Blumhofer, *Everybody's Sister*, 110, 112.

<sup>42</sup> Epstein, *Sister Aimee*, 217-218.

<sup>43</sup> Roberta Star Semple Salter, "Harold Stewart McPherson," New York, November 1979, unpublished, Los Angeles: Heritage Center; 5, 18.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 17.

traveled with.<sup>45</sup> Aimee's popularity grew from word of mouth and ministry updates in religious publications, such as *The Pentecostal Evangel*. She started writing her own monthly magazine in 1917.<sup>46</sup> In her magazine she published sermons and ministry updates and handed out copies wherever she went and sent copies to subscribers. She continued to publish several monthly magazines throughout her ministry.<sup>47</sup>

On January 1, 1923, Aimee established a revival center,<sup>48</sup> Angelus Temple, in Los Angeles, California.<sup>49</sup> The temple functioned as Aimee's home base, and its founding marked the end of her continuous itinerant preaching career, although she continued to conduct revival campaigns throughout the U.S. and abroad for the rest of her life. Aimee also founded radio station KFSG at Angelus Temple in 1924 and rounded out her establishment in L.A. with L.I.F.E. Bible college, which was dedicated in 1926.<sup>50</sup> Aimee continued her writing career throughout her ministry, despite the religious and civic commitments that demanded much of her time.<sup>51</sup> Often, she stayed up late into the night writing.<sup>52</sup> For her, writing was a way of life.

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<sup>45</sup> McPherson, *Service of the King*, 153-154; McPherson, *Story of My Life* (1973), 84; McPherson, *This is That*, 88.

<sup>46</sup> McPherson, *Story of My Life* (1973), 94.

<sup>47</sup> Including *The Bridal Call* during her itinerant days, the *Bridal Call Foursquare* from 1923 to 1934, the *Bridal Call Crusader Foursquare* from 1934 to 1935, the *Foursquare Crusader* from 1926 to 1928 and from 1936 to 1944, and the *Foursquare Magazine*, which started the same year she died, in 1944, and continued to be published until 1964.

<sup>48</sup> Angeles Temple dedication plaque reads: "Dedicated unto the cause of Inter-Denominational and World Wide Evangelism."

<sup>49</sup> Aimee Semple McPherson, *The Bridal Call*, December 1922, 20.

<sup>50</sup> McPherson, *Personal Testimony*, 63; McPherson, *Story of My Life* (1973), 144.

<sup>51</sup> For example, in the first few years after Angelus Temple opened she held services for an average of 5,000 attendees each night of the week, with 3 Sunday services. Simultaneously, Aimee published magazines and books, wrote songs and produced illustrated sermons. See William G. McLoughlin, "Aimee Semple McPherson: 'Your Sister in the King's Glad Service,'" *Journal of Popular Culture* 3, no. 3 (1967), 212-213.

<sup>52</sup> Aimee Semple McPherson, "A Page from the Evangelist's Diary," *Foursquare Crusader*, May 16, 1928, 8; "Sister," *Foursquare Crusader*, January 15, 1930, 1; Aimee Semple McPherson, "Drops from Ye Editorial Brow," *Bridal Call Foursquare*, April 1930, 2.

Aimee's writing continues and furthers the Wesleyan tradition of writing about personal spiritual experiences as a practice of faith.<sup>53</sup> What's more, she believed her writings went beyond herself and could provide a direct experience of God for the reader: "... so as you read, forget the poor earthen vessel... forget the present writer, and give the glory to the Lord."<sup>54</sup> She was not the first to use autobiography to legitimate and further the Christian faith, but her use of personal story as metaphor structured the meaning of the faith in the modern world for her millions of readers and listeners in ways that went beyond those before her.

Aimee's use of personal story as metaphor informed the content and method of her preaching, and she saw her use of metaphor as the preaching method most appropriate to her times, a form of biblical application that adapted to the changes occurring in her society. In large part, she shaped her methods and writing in contrast to the irreligious, modernistic way of life, which she felt not only stymied spiritual growth but was unable to satisfy the deepest needs of humanity. In *Give Me My Own God*, Aimee repudiated modernistic thinking and argued that Christianity is ideologically superior:

If you take the hand of God from the guiding wheel of any nation it will crash as inevitably as though you removed your hand from the wheel of your powerful, speeding motor car...civilization and Christianity are slipping. Nations have sought peace without the Prince of Peace, men have striven to erect a tower to the skies without the aid of the Master Builder... Capital, which smoothes [*sic*] with gold, cannot comprehend Labor, which wields the hammer. The Hearer of pillars in the Senate disagrees with the draftsman in the White House. The world, caught in the whirlpool of confusion, contradictory advice, money getting, oppressions, depressions, communism, socialism, and jazz-isms, has not realized why she is being sucked down toward the vortex of broken governments.<sup>55</sup>

Elsewhere, Aimee noted the failure of the church to effectively confront modernistic thinking. Her reproach reveals a spiritual crisis felt by the majority of American religious

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<sup>53</sup> Tolar-Burton, *Spiritual Literacy*, 297.

<sup>54</sup> Aimee Semple McPherson, "Lost and Restored or the Dispensation of the Holy Spirit from the Ascension of the Lord Jesus to His Coming Decension," *The Bridal Call* 1, no. 11 (April 1918), 2.

<sup>55</sup> Aimee Semple McPherson, *Give Me My Own God* (New York: H.C. Kinsey & Co., 1936), 2, 4-5.

thinkers of her generation: “Empty pews! Deserted Churches!... Christian thinkers are starting to their feet in horrified attention everywhere, realizing that a grave crisis is facing them!”<sup>56</sup>

And Aimee saw Pentecostalism and her ministry as able to shape the world more so than modernism.<sup>57</sup> Aimee saw her style of ministry as a necessary alternative to her militant fundamentalist colleagues<sup>58</sup> who did not acknowledge the emotional aspect of the inner life, as well as liberal Protestants who rejected the notion of miraculous healings and who applied Higher Criticism to biblical texts.<sup>59</sup> At the same time, Aimee envisioned the conflict with modernity as a challenge that created the opportunity to affirm and reestablish the faith in America:

...our coins still bear the inscription, “In God we trust!”... Let us wander for a while from the old trails blazed out by the Pilgrim Fathers; but, like the Prodigal Son, we shall arise and go back to our Father and home... Let the scornful scoff for the moment, and clouds veil the face of Truth; we are still able to see the light...<sup>60</sup>

Aimee was most disturbed by stolid liturgy that represented God’s connection to the world as out of touch with the day-to-day reality people experienced and the impact of modernism on the inner life of the individual: “Men and women of today are glad to know the Lord once healed the people and delivered from bondage those of long ago but we live in the everpresent today and have burdens of our own to carry and wish to know what the Lord is able

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<sup>56</sup> McPherson, *What’s the Matter?*; 5,9.

<sup>57</sup> Modernism or modernistic in this context is the ideological framework that subverted Christianity to science, with Higher Criticism and Darwinism as two of the key dogmatic theories. Characteristically, it was an indifferent attitude regarding the inner experience of man, including emotions and spirituality. It rejected previous religious expressions of spirituality, particularly revival, as antiquated or no longer relevant.

<sup>58</sup> Fundamentalism was a specific self-designation that generally meant anti-modernist and conservative, and most Fundamentalists were vehemently antagonistic to Pentecostalism. See Barfoot, *Aimee Semple McPherson*, 519. Fundamentalists considered themselves separate from Pentecostalism. This means that while Aimee endorsed many Fundamentalist ideals, she would not have been called a Fundamentalist by her colleagues. See George Marsden, *Understanding Fundamentalism and Evangelicalism*, (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1991), 1-4.

<sup>59</sup> McPherson, *What’s the Matter?*, 8-9.

<sup>60</sup> McPherson, *Give Me My Own God*, 309-310.

to do *today*.”<sup>61</sup> By extrapolating metaphors from her personal life, she connected with and addressed the present concerns of her readers and listeners.

Within her writings, Aimee showed that she spent a significant amount of time pondering spiritual growth and worked to see God written into all of modern life, even in the details of everyday tasks. In her view, the most menial aspects of life could be opportunities to experience a spiritual truth about the Holy Spirit’s engagement with the believer. Her view was a way of looking at the world that attempted to mitigate the harsh effects of industrialized life on the soul by restructuring tasks to not only serve practical purposes but to engage the psychological and emotional aspects of the inner life. For example, in her sermon, “No Tickie, No Washie,” Aimee used an example of the menial, day-to-day labor typical of people’s daily life (whether it be laundry or factory work) and interpreted the act of doing laundry to illustrate a spiritual truth.<sup>62</sup> Her listeners learned how to be aware of a deep, personal spirituality within industrialized, modern culture.

Critics of Aimee’s ministry were distraught by this emphasis she placed on the emotional aspects of faith, and interpreted her methods as specious and emotionally manipulative, going so far as to accuse her of hypnosis and possessing an unabated sexual attraction that her followers succumbed to.<sup>63</sup> Additionally, they did not see Aimee as a rational, logical thinker. In part, this misconception was due to her personality. She was as playful as she was pious. Because her classmates saw her as the class clown, they thought she was joking when she first converted to Pentecostalism:

Those at school believed I was just pretending because I had usually been a fairly good imitator, and even when they saw me go to the Mission and go to the front they said, “uh oh, she’s carrying the joke pretty far going right down there

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<sup>61</sup> Aimee Semple McPherson, *What’s the Matter?* (Los Angeles: Echo Park Evangelistic Assoc., 1928), 9.

<sup>62</sup> Aimee Semple McPherson, *No Tickie No Washie*, sermon, (1939; Los Angeles: The Foursquare Church), mp3 audio.

<sup>63</sup> Sutton, *Aimee Semple McPherson*, 18, 60.

and laughing at the people.” But when someone came to the front and saw me kneeling and saw the tears streaming down, they said, “Oh, she’s really gotten the power of this thing in her soul.”<sup>64</sup>

Even her father did not take her seriously when she told him about her conversion: “Father took it quite philosophically, but “opined” that I “would not hold out two weeks.”<sup>65</sup>

Yet Aimee considered herself a logical person and thought of her sermons as cogent, intelligible presentations of the gospel: “... He [God] had given me such a clear mind... such a logical presentation of the truths of my message.”<sup>66</sup> The culture of Pentecostalism and revival was generally characterized as fanatical, which added to the perception of her as either irrational or cut off from traditional orthodoxy and mainline Protestantism.<sup>67</sup> Yet Aimee saw hers as a balanced faith and described her gospel metaphorically as walking the narrow line between fanaticism and apathetic liturgy like that of railroad tracks.<sup>68</sup> The other part of her critics’ misperception was that she gave spiritual significance to secular objects and stories from popular movies, novels, and songs. Undoubtedly, many who endorsed the literalist, inerrant Bible agenda found her use of secular metaphors and accompanying visual demonstrations problematic.<sup>69</sup>

Aimee’s use of metaphor writings and sermons were her most didactic tool. She instructed her Bible students to use metaphors to “brighten up your sermon and help you drive

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<sup>64</sup> McPherson, *Life Story*, 20:17

<sup>65</sup> McPherson, *In the Service of the King*, 80.

<sup>66</sup> McPherson, *This is That*, 179.

<sup>67</sup> Hofstadter clarifies that starting with Dwight L. Moody, a forerunner of American Evangelism, the revival atmosphere was much more restrained and controlled, and displays of emotion were no longer felt to be appropriate. In general, religious leaders since downplayed all aspects of emotionalism to garner respectability in the public sphere, which continued throughout this period of modernization in America. See Hofstadter, *Anti-Intellectualism*, 116-117.

<sup>68</sup> Aimee Semple McPherson, “The Narrow Line or ‘Is Mrs. McPherson Pentecostal?’ No? Yes?? *Bridal Call* (October 1922): 7, 10.

<sup>69</sup> Sutton notes: “Many critics despised the seeming irreverence of combining show business with an ancient creed.” *Aimee Semple McPherson*, 5.

home a truth.”<sup>70</sup> It is misleading to limit understanding of Aimee’s illustrated metaphors as entertainment. Even though hers may have been “the most perennially successful show in the United States,”<sup>71</sup> her sermons were never just a show. With inherent aesthetic skill, she connected to the interests and emotions of her audiences, saying: “There must be something in the introduction of the sermon that will arouse interest and get people in a good humor. Never start preaching in a dry manner.”<sup>72</sup> Thus, in her method it was the preacher’s responsibility to appeal to the mind of readers and listeners and help people to understand the gospel message emotionally.

With her illustrated sermons, she used entertainment methods adapted from Hollywood to great effect in order to substantiate the gospel message. Aimee talked about her own salvation story as much as she talked about the biblical story of salvation. Her use of personal stories was not, as some critics have claimed, only to satisfy visitors’ curiosity about her personal life as a celebrity.<sup>73</sup> Well before she achieved fame she talked about her own experiences as a way of explaining the faith. Every metaphor from her personal life corresponded to a spiritual truth in some way. For example, Aimee used a story of how her father would measure her height against the wall with a measuring stick as a metaphor to explain the true nature of the preacher’s role in overseeing the spiritual growth of believers: “Therefore, if it is important for a human child to grow in stature, how much more important is it for a spiritual child to grow.”<sup>74</sup> She emphasized to her Bible students that by using personal metaphors to communicate biblical truths, the audience could more readily grasp what was being taught.

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<sup>70</sup> Aimee Semple McPherson, “Sermonology: A Lesson in Homiletics,” lecture transcript, The Foursquare Church, October 4, 1938, 3.

<sup>71</sup> Sutton, *Aimee Semple McPherson*, 75.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*, 1.

<sup>73</sup> Tona J. Hangen, *Redeeming the Dial: Radio, Religion, & Popular Culture in America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002), 62.

<sup>74</sup> McPherson, “Sermonology,” 3.

Aimee's metaphorical application of her personal experiences to the Bible translated the Bible's apostolic faith into the context of the modern world and closed the distance between ancient narratives and present-day narratives. Saying "I see a sermon in everything,"<sup>75</sup> she gave her readers and listeners a framework of understanding that went beyond a secular/religious dichotomy. In one sermon, "Someday My Prince Will Come," Aimee recast Jesus as the lover figure in well-known love stories, such as *Snow White*.<sup>76</sup> She spun this popular fairytale as a metaphor of the biblical salvation story, with Jesus as Prince Charming. As a result, the next time her listeners watched *Snow White*, they would interpret the fairytale as symbolic of their own personal salvation story. In other words, each listener's salvation story became the *real* fairytale. Because Aimee used popular stories as metaphors, listeners encountered the gospel message outside of church as embedded in their day-to-day, modern lives, and they could understand the faith in a more creative, modern context.

Aimee's writing also made the tacit claim that the Holy Spirit could aid the Christian's intellect to be superior to that of natural reason: "To be Pentecostal in Spirit... is to be something far different than many suppose. To be Spirit filled is the grandest, proudest tribute of sobriety and piety one can possess."<sup>77</sup> In this sense, Aimee applied the intellect to the realm of the Spirit. She was concerned with clarifying nature of the relationship between the Holy Spirit and the intellect and developed a new way for the individual believer to have an intellectual engagement with the modern world that was perceptive and discerning.

Aimee's writing and sermons portray the relationship of the Holy Spirit with the modern individual. Through the use of her personal story, Aimee conveyed the role of the Holy Spirit as a real person who took up residence in her inner life alongside her, as a close

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<sup>75</sup> Aimee Semple McPherson, *Someday My Prince Will Come*, sermon, (1939; Los Angeles: The Foursquare Church), mp3 audio, 12:50

<sup>76</sup> Ibid.

<sup>77</sup> McPherson, "Narrow Line," 7.

companion – not unlike relationships with other people, but far more intimate. Aimee says, “When I’d drive to school he was with me. I had never had a brother or a sister. Oh the companionship of Christ.”<sup>78</sup> What’s more, Aimee conveys the dialogic element in the relationship with the Holy Spirit. She describes interactions with the Holy Spirit as a voice in her inner life, different from her own, that spoke to her. In one sermon she shares how the Holy Spirit spoke to her in the sounds of the train, interpreting the “bumpety-bump, bumpety bump” to say to her, “a sower went forth, a sower went forth.”<sup>79</sup> Another instance occurred on her way back from China when she cried out to God for guidance. Aimee felt the Holy Spirit speak to her through the boat watchman’s call, “All’s well,”<sup>80</sup> as the reassuring promise that she would be okay and her life would move forward after the loss of her husband. For Aimee and others who experienced the baptism of the Holy Spirit, Christ became a present reality and had a deeper sense of God’s presence in their day-to-day lives.

Aimee’s use of her personal stories validated the authority of the individual experience and spiritual growth that occurred outside of any one church. So in one sense, her writings reflected the spiritual autonomy of her generation. Her writings about her inner, spiritual life celebrated the subjective and passionate as superior and more authoritative than the more intellectualized spirituality typical of theologically trained clergymen, such as those who were trained at Princeton or Yale.<sup>81</sup> The strongest spiritual experience of the inner life was the profoundly individualized experience of Holy Spirit baptism. Aimee says: “The baptism of the Holy Ghost touched my soul. And again I was all alone in a home at 5:00 in the morning... I

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<sup>78</sup> McPherson, *Life Story*, 20:11

<sup>79</sup> Aimee Semple McPherson, “The Collected Sermons and Messages of Aimee Semple McPherson: 1910-1919,” (Los Angeles: Heritage Center, 2012), 401-405.

<sup>80</sup> McPherson, *Life Story*, 37:34.

<sup>81</sup> In her sermon, “Trial of the Modern Liberalist College Professor Versus the Lord Jesus Christ,” sermon transcript (October 14, 1923; Los Angeles: The Foursquare Church), Aimee directly criticizes university professors and their anti-emotional influence on Christianity.

was alone, and the Lord filled me.”<sup>82</sup> Aimee’s own baptism experience reflects the shift away from a corporate spirituality inherent in the beginnings of the Pentecostal movement. That is, the most significant aspects of the spiritual life of the individual came through direct communion with God via the Holy Spirit and not those that could be mediated by any one religious institution or leader. Aimee says: “He [God] has done great things for you of course, and yet to each one of us it seems that God has done something more personal and real, perhaps, than to another.”<sup>83</sup>

Elsewhere in Aimee’s accounts of her initial Holy Spirit baptism, there is a sense of a new way that an individual could engage the world:

The girls found me thus praying and did not know what to make of me so utterly was I changed. No more putting glue in teacher’s chair or helping to lock him in the gymnasium, or practicing dance steps in the corridors at noon hour. A wonderful change had taken place—all old things had passed away and all things had become new. I had been born again and was a new creature in Christ Jesus.<sup>84</sup>

Aimee’s heartfelt and blithe style contrasted with the militant Fundamentalists of her time. She explicitly dissociated herself from their style of preaching, when in her own time she was compared to the forceful and brow-beating style of Billy Sunday.<sup>85</sup> One LA Times’ writer even dubbed her the “female Billy Sunday.”<sup>86</sup> Aimee spoke and wrote impassioned sermons that were emotive and regarded the heart rather than the head as the anchor of the soul. Her approach allowed for feelings rather than a firm intellectual order to have the leading role in ordering the life of the person.

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<sup>82</sup> McPherson, *Life Story*, 22:20.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid., 00:50

<sup>84</sup> McPherson, *This is That*, 41.

<sup>85</sup> Billy Sunday was a famous American baseball player turned evangelist who was most known for his masculine, militant preaching style and catchy one-line tags. See “Billy Sunday,” *Christianitytoday.com*, August 8, 2008 (accessed 30 May 2014).

<sup>86</sup> Aimee Semple McPherson, “Editorial Page,” *The Bridal Call*, May 1919, 13.

Scholars have suggested that what was most attractive about Aimee's rhetorical style was that she humanized Jesus and spoke in a commonsense manner that peoples of all backgrounds easily understood.<sup>87</sup> She took the difficult concepts of Holy Spirit and revival and presented them in a straightforward way that was sensible and engaging. She developed her ability to easily engage audiences in part from working with her first husband. Like the generation of Wesleyan women evangelists before her, Aimee learned hands on from an experienced preacher in the field instead of from formal university training.<sup>88</sup> Aimee consistently showed deference to her first husband Robert and his influence on the formative years of her Pentecostal faith, referring to him as her "Bible school."<sup>89</sup> She shared with her students that he had used humor as a rhetorical strategy.<sup>90</sup> Similarly, Aimee was witty and funny in her sermons with an infectious, hearty laugh; indeed, audience laughter peppers every one of the surviving audio recordings of her sermons. Throughout her writings and on stage, her style was engaging and conversational.<sup>91</sup> She often interjected questions directly to her readers in her writings, such as: "Now, dear reader, what do you suppose she said?"<sup>92</sup> Likewise, in her sermons, Aimee often interjected a dialogic exchange from her listeners to herself that anticipated hesitations or objections to the gospel message: "Say, 'I want to live that life Sister,' ... C'mon, in the first balcony... say, 'Sister I want to be a real Christian, really I do.'" <sup>93</sup>

As a continuation of the Wesleyan tradition, Aimee's writings were meant to create spiritual experiences so that readers could grasp the reality of the Holy Spirit for themselves.<sup>94</sup>

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<sup>87</sup> Sutton, *Aimee Semple McPherson* 20; Wacker, *Heaven Below*, 116.

<sup>88</sup> Vicki Tolar-Burton, *Spiritual Literacy in John Wesley's Methodism* (Texas: Baylor University Press, 2008), 157.

<sup>89</sup> McPherson, *Dear Diary*, 22:32.

<sup>90</sup> Aimee Semple McPherson, "The Song of Songs," lecture transcript, The Foursquare Church, n.d., 11.

<sup>91</sup> Burton, *Spiritual Literacy*, 302.

<sup>92</sup> McPherson, *This is That*, 51.

<sup>93</sup> McPherson, "God Goes to Washington," 37:42; for more examples also hear "Someday My Prince Will Come," 8:13, 34:30, 38:05.

<sup>94</sup> Burton, *Spiritual Literacy*, 27.

In this way, her writings were a continuation of the Wesleyan writing tradition and played a vital part in her effort to further a new spiritual culture in American religion. In addressing her reader directly, Aimee says, “And now, dear reader, though we have written and written of San Diego we have only taken you through a portion of two days’ meetings...”<sup>95</sup> and “No—no dear reader; if you stay right by us and see it through our eyes, you must not break down or give way now!”<sup>96</sup> Her monthly publications and books were in many ways more formative role in believers’ lives than her infamous illustrated sermons, since the habit of reading could be a personal, everyday practice of the faith. More than 50 years after her death, her son, in an introduction to a later reprint of her 1923 autobiography wrote: “Many readers tell of the profound effect of “This is That” [the title of Aimee’s autobiography] on their lives.”<sup>97</sup>

Also, the transparency of her writings creates a sense of having one’s own personal Aimee as a guide in the faith. Her writings served the purpose of closing the distance between herself and readers who were living outside of Los Angeles, as well as readers beyond her own lifetime. Her intellectual contribution to the development of American religious life in the modern world made clear that the inner life of spirituality and emotions could be developed within the context of modern life, and still offers a viable way of thinking about the inner life to 21<sup>st</sup> century audiences.

Aimee’s attempt to address the perceived decline in American Christianity burdened her with the task of balancing the religious extremes of her culture, which became increasingly polarized in the early the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Her view of religious life stressed that fanaticism and apathy were the harmful extremes of her generation and that her methods were a way to achieve a balanced understanding of the faith – one that had the power to shape the modern

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<sup>95</sup> McPherson, *This is That*, 294.

<sup>96</sup> Ibid., 280.

<sup>97</sup> Rolf K. McPherson, introduction to *This is That*, (Los Angeles: Foursquare Publications, 2000).

world.<sup>98</sup> Aimee deviated from what was traditional and stereotypical in the intellectual approach of liberal Protestants and Fundamentalists; yet, as much as she distanced herself from her colleagues, she gained the intimate connection and devotion of millions. Thereby Aimee won influence in the political sphere and in modern mainstream culture, and scholars have repeatedly called attention her profound influence on American culture to justify her as a major figure of American history.

Yet what has been obscured by the focus on her popularity is that she was first and foremost a Wesleyan writer, and her writings reflect her transparent and passionate character. Her writings evidence a remarkable willingness to reveal the extent of her struggles in her faith and the toll that ministry work took on her emotions and physical wellbeing. However, this emotional transparency was often exaggerated and taken out of context to cast her as a pitiable, lonely figure. Indeed, this prevalent characterization has hindered understanding Aimee. Scholars have consistently exacerbated the specious characterization of her emotional wellbeing with furthering a one-sided focus on her failed marriages and events of her life while ignoring the rich depths of her inner life that she consistently revealed through her writings and sermons. The extent of this criticism from her own time is encapsulated in the film based on her life *The Miracle Woman*,<sup>99</sup> which dramatized her as not only a lonely woman but ultimately as a show-woman whose ministry was a fake. As a single woman in a predominantly male profession and as a woman in the public eye, Aimee was vulnerable to speculation on her personal life.

However, by and large, Aimee's writing demonstrates a remarkable level of intimacy in her relationship with the Holy Spirit that contradicts claims that exaggerated her loneliness: "I

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<sup>98</sup> McPherson, "The Narrow Line," 8.

<sup>99</sup> *The Miracle Woman*, Film, directed by Frank Capra (1931; Culver City, CA: Columbia Pictures, 1931).

felt that Jesus was with me every moment; a glorious, understanding companion. I was alone no more. He walked by my side, brushing away my troubles. His presence was real to me.”<sup>100</sup>

While Aimee may not have had a constant male companion in her life, she had an understanding of the companionship of Christ that was far more intimate and substantial.

When Aimee shared her struggles, she did so to stress that the Christian life was not one of comfort and to urge those considering joining the faith to be sure of the decision. Using the Cinderella slipper metaphor, she says:

Say Brother if you want to go through with Jesus... you'll have to be sure the shoe fits before you put it on... I don't think that shoe will ever fit the jitterbug. I don't think that shoe will ever fit those on the broad road to destruction. It will be the narrow road that leads to life.<sup>101</sup>

At a glance, her highly creative metaphors may seem primitive and elementary, such as when she used Disney fairytales to bring her listeners to repentance. Yet looking deeper reveals a highly sophisticated and flexible framework of spiritual thought that was highly effective in the exposure of the Christian faith to a widespread audience. Additionally, her methods were strengthened by her willingness to offer her own life as a metaphor to assist other believers in understanding what the Christian life entails. And while scholarly attention has largely emphasized her use of theatrics and fame, her illustrated sermons and political influence are only parts of her story. Her writing furthered the tradition of evangelicalism and played a key role in the development of American religion that has been overlooked, even buried. Thus, through an explication of the body of Aimee's written work, her intentions as an author, and the significant role her prose played in all aspects of her life, this study has sought to make familiar Aimee's intellectual influence and should serve as a necessary supplement to understanding this pivotal figure of American religious history.

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<sup>100</sup> McPherson, *In the Service of the King*, 81.

<sup>101</sup> McPherson, *Someday my Prince*, 21:00-22:30.

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