

<http://reason.com/blog/2009/12/15/oral-roberts-1918-2009>

## Oral Roberts, 1918-2009

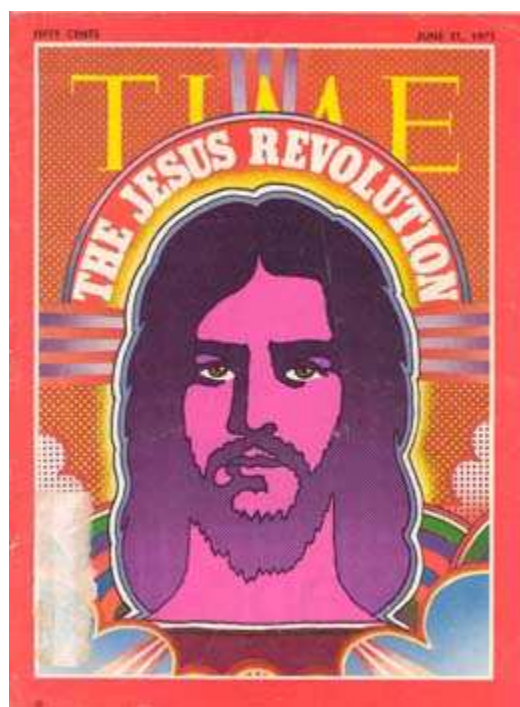
Jesse Walker | December 15, 2009

Twenty-two years after God threatened to call Oral Roberts home to heaven if you didn't help the preacher reach his fundraising target, the Lord's only begotten 900-foot son has welcomed the evangelist to the other side of the pearly gates. Brink Lindsey offered an overview of Roberts' career in a 2007 story for *Reason*, "The Aquarians and the Evangelicals." Here's an excerpt:

In 1947 Roberts, who believed he had been healed of youthful tuberculosis directly by God via a faith healer, was a minister with his own little Pentecostal Holiness church in Enid, Oklahoma. He felt frustrated and trapped as a dirt-poor, small-town preacher with a pleasant but complacent congregation. One harried morning he picked up his copy of the Good Book, and his eyes fell on III John 1:2: "I wish above all things that thou mayest prosper and be in health, even as thy soul prospereth." It changed in an instant his whole understanding of God. God is good, Roberts now saw: God wants us to be healthy; God wants us to succeed; God wants us to be rich!

Roberts achieved great success as a revivalist and faith healer--which is to say, he became a central figure in a marginal movement. But his ministry transcended Pentecostalism's lowly origins. Not content with success as a traveling tent preacher, he built a far-flung empire of evangelical outreach, complete with television and radio programs, magazines, newspaper columns, even comic books. In 1967, as he was being sworn in as president of the university he built from scratch, Roberts knew he had brought his upstart faith into the American mainstream. There to pay their respects were not just government officials but representatives of 120 of the nation's colleges and universities.

Roberts' rapid ascent was only one spectacular example of the larger evangelical uprising. Between 1965 and 1975, while mainline denominations were shriveling, membership in the Church of the Nazarene increased by 8 percent. The Southern Baptists grew by 18 percent, and membership in the Seventh-Day Adventists and Assemblies of God leapt by 36 percent and 37 percent, respectively....[E]vangelicalism aligned Christian faith with the Holy Grail of the affluent society: self-realization. Unlike the classic bourgeois Protestantism of the 19th century, whose moral teachings emphasized avoidance of worldly



temptation, the revitalized version promised empowerment, joy, and personal fulfillment. A godly life was once understood as grim defiance of sinful urges; now it was the key to untold blessings. "Something good is going to happen to you!" was one of Oral Roberts' favorite catchphrases.

Like the late Jerry Falwell, Roberts was an accidental modernist: an alleged reactionary who in retrospect looks more like a radical, a man who did far more to bring such secular forces as television and a love of worldly success into conservative Christian communities than he did to preserve those communities' old character. Part of me dismisses Roberts as a scamster living off gullible people's donations, and part of me can't help but admire the artist who gave us such wonderful Boschian images as a giant Jesus bearing hospital plans. He was a visionary, a charlatan, and a showman, and for better or worse he helped create the world we live in now.