

# WHY ORAL ROBERTS STUDIES?

## AN EXPANDED EDITORIAL MARKING THE HUNDREDTH YEAR OF HIS BIRTH

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### Introduction

My own experience with Oral Roberts University (ORU) is relatively short, about two years at this writing. Although I grew up as a Pentecostal believer, later a minister and missionary from Korea, my academic pursuits in Pentecostal studies did not intersect with Oral Roberts (OR). My first attention was to Asian Pentecostalism with an established platform of Asia Pacific Theological Seminary, Philippines, and *Asian Journal of Pentecostal Studies*. When my academic horizon expanded at Oxford Centre for Mission Studies, global Pentecostalism in the context of world Christianity loomed high. Therefore, names familiar to me were William Seymour, Pandita Ramabai, David Yonggi Cho, and the like. The only glimpse of Roberts was several TV sermons I watched during my doctoral studies in the 1990s. For an unknown reason, his close relationship with, and influence on, Cho was not known even to his church folks, although some of us closely followed the impact of Watchman Nee, Robert Schuller, and Norman Vincent Peale.

When the possibility of joining the theology faculty of ORU was actively explored, I began to search for studies on Oral Roberts in academic journals on American church history, the Pentecostal and Charismatic Movements, theology, and ministry. After a disappointing yield, I moved to Ph.D. dissertations, which again resulted in a very small number. However, an Amazon.com search yielded “tons” of books either by him or on him: ranging from sermons and autobiographies, to

commentaries and theology books. Although mostly written in popular format and language, they are valuable data for research.

Among biographies, including ones written by Roberts himself, one work stands out: *Oral Roberts: An American Life* by David E. Harrell, Jr. (1987).<sup>1</sup> This massive book (622 pages, including notes) is a gem in Oral Roberts studies. However, this book has one serious weakness: the biography is not complete, as Roberts lived twenty-two years after the publication of the book. There are no other equally critical biographies of his life to complement or cross-reference Harrell's monumental work.

Any new study would begin with a bibliographic survey. In a sense, the introductory part of this reflection is a bibliographic observation: stating the meager amount of critical work on OR, Daniel Isgrigg, the new director of the Holy Spirit Research Center, lays the first step towards the cataloging of relevant resources to facilitate future studies on Roberts. Due to Roberts' keen interest in the media as an effective tool for communication, many books, pamphlets, periodicals, and audio and video records are available. In addition to the holdings at the Center, there is a separate archive at ORU that holds a large number of records. Equally fruitful would be the holdings at the Oral Roberts Ministries. The process of cataloging and digitizing some of these resources needed for potential studies is underway—however, some issues of copyright must be settled before making many of these items available for researchers. Reports on Roberts by Christian and secular media are another important area for research. For example, *Christian Century* published a large number of studies on Roberts, many of which were critical assessments. This first bibliographic effort in this volume will continue to grow.

This editorial identifies several key reasons why OR studies would be an important contribution of ORU to studies of American church history, the Pentecostal-Charismatic Movement, and global Christianity. This expanded editorial will also serve potential areas of fruitful research while placing the studies included in this issue of the journal as examples.

## ORU and OR Studies

As a university bearing Roberts' name, ORU is expected to be a resource center for OR studies. While the university has faithfully served as the depository of OR resources, it has not been intentional in producing or promoting such studies. Considering the national and global impact of his ministry, the scarcity of OR studies is in part to be blamed on the university that bears his name.

But the importance of OR studies to ORU is far more than the obligatory guardianship of OR resources. It has to do with the identity of ORU as a learning and research community. When I first visited the campus, I was immediately surprised and impressed by the ecclesial diversity of the theology faculty. Yes, I had known that ORU was a charismatic university with no particular denominational affiliation. However, discovering the Catholic, Orthodox, and Episcopalian members of the faculty was not what I anticipated. Then I began to ask, "Where did it come from?" It has much to do, I discovered, with Roberts' journey through several ecclesial traditions. The much-publicized healing teams program of the university is another example. Its multidisciplinary approach to the transformation of a target community finds its origin in Roberts' radically holistic understanding of God's healing. Kevin Schneider's historical probing is only the beginning of rich and fruitful mining of Roberts' unique theology of healing. There are many keywords and values in the university that trace their origins to Roberts: "whole person education," "impacting the world with God's healing," the global vision, the empowerment of the Holy Spirit, commitment to mission, "every man's [sic!] world," and many others.

If ORU desires to find its uniqueness in the ever-expanding sea of Christian higher education, it is essential to find where and how it began. But more importantly, the most foundational question will be: Who was Oral Roberts and what motivated him to establish the university? It has something no other institutions have as part of its very core: Oral Roberts. He was a son of Pentecostalism and a father of the Charismatic Movement, and the institution has him in its identity. Indeed, he is the unique and valuable asset to the university. William

(Billy) Wilson, the current president of the university, rightly draws the institution's core identity (or "DNA" in his words) from its founder. In the context of today's global Christianity, this legacy places the ORU community in an extremely rare, privileged place.

## **Oral Roberts in Studies of American Christianity**

Oral Roberts stands tall in twentieth-century North American Christianity. It is argued that Billy Graham and Oral Roberts are the two "giants"<sup>2</sup> of evangelism in this era. Their relationship began by Graham's controversial (among his staff) and surprise (to Roberts and his colleagues) invitation to the Berlin Congress on World Evangelism in 1966. It is agreed that the conference marks a watershed moment when Christian mission, which had run as a united movement from the Edinburgh Missionary Conference (1910), was divided between the ecumenical and evangelical camps. Pentecostals had rarely been recognized by the mainstream churches, even if their missionary zeal and success were already noticed. Roberts' participation in the Congress had ever changed the scope and impact of his ministry and his engagement with the broader church world. Although not included in the present issue, a scholar has already begun his research on the relationship between these two Christian leaders. With his innovative TV ministry via a nationwide network carrying his message of healing and a "good God," he stirred the American Christian landscape once and for all. Among his significant feats is the establishment of the university with his stubborn persistence in maintaining its unique spiritual values, the opening of the City of Faith as a holistic healing and research center, and forming a gravitating center for the fledgling Charismatic Movement. His message of a "good God" raised many eyebrows, but he was taking his social context into his theology. He once said, "I tried poverty, but it didn't work!" At the same time, he intentionally distanced himself from the emerging Word of Faith (or also the Prosperity) Movement.

The biggest question one can raise is why no mainstream American church historian has paid any sustained attention to him and his impact on American Christianity. As mentioned above and confirmed by

Isgrigg's initial list of sources for Oral Roberts study, only several Ph.D. dissertations were written to provide critical and in-depth studies. Most, if not all, of them are comparative studies, treating Roberts along with several others, and most were written in the 1980s. Among graduates in the two doctoral programs at ORU (ministry and education), no dissertation was dedicated to the study of Roberts. We are pleased, for this reason, to provide a valuable study on Roberts' TV ministry, whose example many have followed, taken from Jim Hunter's dissertation.<sup>3</sup> The study on the root of Roberts' theology of healing by Vinson Synan and another on the never-reported second healing experience of Roberts by Synan and Isgrigg exemplify the formation of one's theology and spirituality through the influence of one's experience, church tradition, social context, and reading of the Scriptures. Also significant is the study by Timothy Hatcher on Roberts' Native American roots, which was recently disputed,<sup>4</sup> and a valuable study by Thomson K. Mathew on the development of Roberts' healing theology through the years.

The editors of *Spiritus: ORU Journal of Theology* are committed to encouraging studies on Roberts. In the first two relaunch issues, such studies were published. This special issue of the journal is dedicated fully to studies on Oral Roberts to commemorate the one hundredth year of his birth, and we hope that this will encourage others to develop their interest in OR studies. The newly launched Ph.D. program in theology at ORU may recruit students to research on his life, ministry, theology, and impact. This "insider" work is important, as it will eventually inspire outsiders to take his role in American Christianity in earnest. To challenge the university community, I offer an example of this kind of work. It is well known that David Yonggi Cho of Yoido Full Gospel Church of South Korea, who has openly admitted the influence of Roberts, maintained a close relationship until OR's passing. (Another study on this relationship is being prepared for the next issue of the journal). When Cho retired from his fifty years of pastoral leadership in 2008, a substantial collection of academic studies was published,<sup>5</sup> and another group of publications is already out to mark the sixtieth anniversary of his ministry. It is not to erect another monument to hail a hero; it is to learn from him and help new generations to stand on his and others' shoulders to advance knowledge for the kingdom's sake.

## **Roberts' Role in the Development of Pentecostal and Charismatic Christianity**

Roberts' contribution to the growth of Pentecostalism owes much to his tent healing crusades and the message of a "good God." His mammoth-sized tents broke several records, and claims of miraculous healing caught the imagination of the media. He could be the first Pentecostal who was intensively covered by secular media, especially when his TV programs began to reach the living rooms of millions of Americans. The "virtual" Pentecostal church was born, yet, not without controversies. However, his place in American Pentecostalism was one among many figures. Thus, Synan calls him "a son of Pentecostalism." However, his role in the emerging Charismatic Movement was decisive.<sup>6</sup> And the process through which Roberts experienced changes had a direct impact on the university. According to Synan, Roberts' contribution to the Charismatic Movement was predicated on a radical change in his ecclesial positioning. The first step, Synan contends, was his entry into the wider evangelical world, providentially facilitated by Billy Graham at the Berlin conference (1966). Through his participation in the conference, Roberts gained "a wider view of the body of Christ and a new sense of mission."<sup>7</sup> This new relationship was publicly demonstrated when Graham spoke at the dedication of the ORU campus in 1967. His move to the Methodist Church in 1968 is considered to be the second step of his journey towards ecumenical engagement. To many, this was more than a change of denominational affiliation; it was a radical theological realignment from his narrowly defined denominational Pentecostalism to liberal Methodist tradition. However, it was the theologically "liberal" mainline churches where the emerging Charismatic Movement found fertile ground, not the evangelical cousins. Roberts, as expected, became a leading figure in the fast-growing charismatic sectors in the Methodist Church. For the one-million-strong Methodist charismatics in the U.S., Oral Roberts became their hero as a professed charismatic.<sup>8</sup> The re-opened Graduate School of Theology was a Methodist school in every aspect: in leadership, faculty, and ecclesial endorsement. Although this surprise partnership did not last any longer than two decades, this change had a substantial

impact on the nature and theology of the whole ORU community. Roberts then aligned with and led the burgeoning interdenominational Charismatic Movement. He began his own association of charismatic ministers called “International Charismatic Bible Ministers” and held annual conferences throughout the 1990s. Most, if not all, of the famous charismatic ministers of that decade attended: Billy Jo Dougherty, Kenneth Copeland, Jessie Duplantis, Keith Butler, Earl Paulk, Benson Idahosa, Marilyn Hickey, Benny Hinn, among many others. Consequently, the university, especially its School of Theology, had still another theological and ecclesial repositioning with a new dean, Larry Lea, drawn from the Charismatic Movement. Soon, the ORU campus became the visible center for the Charismatic Movement, and its chapel services brought many key leaders of the movement from a wide range of church traditions, including Roman Catholics. After the retirement of Roberts, this “journey” did continue.

The series of changes, sometimes quite radical, is part of the history and identity of the university today. Although historical questions may be important, the most important is investigating the theological impact of each major realignment. This brief survey already introduced almost all the major theological players in today’s world: Pentecostal, charismatic, evangelical, mainline Protestant, and Catholic. This in part explains the ecumenical diversity observed in the theology faculty of the university. A new repositioning does not simply mean the assumption of a new ecclesial theology: rather, it is adding another theological layer to the previously accumulated deposit. Often such a process is far from neat; indeed, it appears messy. It is particularly the case when a seemingly “accidental” element is introduced to the already confusing state, such as the association with the Word of Faith movement. But this is precisely what has made the theological identity of ORU unique and creative. It has afforded a capacity to embrace a wide range of theological traditions, around one shared commonality: the belief in, and experience with, the reality of God through the Holy Spirit. Several studies in the journal address this important aspect. And all of them come with an assumption that the theological formation of the ORU community was not an accumulation of random accidents. Indeed, God’s wisdom has been the main mover of the journey, in

spite of human shortsightedness at times. Wilson's "DNA" sermon leads the list, followed by Samuel Thorpe's theological overview of Roberts. Schneider's study on the healing team concept, albeit historical in nature, demonstrates the development of Roberts' theology of healing. Mathew takes his theology of healing directly and traces its development over the decades. Isgrigg's study on Roberts' theology of the baptism in the Holy Spirit signals the ORU community's growing interest in the theological orientation of the university, via the lens of Roberts.

## **Influence on Global Christianity**

Until the opening of the university and TV ministry, Oral Roberts' influence was limited to North America. Sensing that the era of the tent meetings was coming to a close, the institution was established, initially to bring Christian leaders from different parts of the world to Tulsa for training. Therefore, the first program was the School of Evangelism. The often-quoted vision statement of the university speaks of this founding vision:

Raise up your students to hear My voice, to go where My light is dim, where My voice is heard small, and My healing power is not known, even to the uttermost bounds of the earth. Their work will exceed yours, and in this I am well pleased.

This commission is evangelistic and missional, defining the actors ("students"), the action ("to go"), the implied message (in the way of "light" and "voice"), the dynamic ("healing power"), the extent ("the uttermost bounds of the earth"), and the ultimate outcome ("pleasing God"). The mission statement reflects the vision of the university and adds "wheels": "To build Holy Spirit empowered leaders through whole person education to impact the world with God's healing." In addition to the thousands of ORU graduates impacting "the world with God's healing," Eim's study on the Korean Doctor of Ministry program showcases how 200 or so graduates from a broad spectrum of Korean Christianity were equipped to strengthen their ministry



impact. He argues that the program served as a unique process to spread the movement of God's healing (literally) throughout the nation and beyond. The study on the healing teams illustrates a similar impact through its holistic approach to community development.

Now positioning itself in the context of fast-changing global Christianity, ORU prepares itself to serve the global Spirit-empowered movement, which is the fastest growing segment of all religions. For example, its new Ph.D. theology program takes global Christianity and the Spirit-empowerment movement as the two foundational layers. The Contextual Theology track facilitates research that incorporates a variety of contextual elements to construct unique local theologies. These become critical pieces of the puzzle that will picture what the Holy Spirit is doing globally. Empowered21 is the university's sister network bringing an incredible variety of Spirit-empowered worldwide communities into fellowship, celebration, and strategizing. They are the primary constituencies of the university's work, and this is clearly in line with the global vision of Roberts for the university. His TV ministry, originally aimed at reaching millions of living rooms in America, has had an extremely long shelf-life. When I visited Lusaka, Zambia, years ago, one of the public TV stations broadcasted Roberts' program on a Sunday morning. An African scholar contends that "his use of media in the popularization of a certain type of Pentecostal culture has been intense and immense."<sup>9</sup> J. Kwabena Asamoah-Gyadu assesses Roberts' financial "sowing and reaping" principle as a "transactional" relationship between God and his people.<sup>10</sup> In his view, this is a forerunner of the problematic prosperity gospel, which has done much harm to African Christianity. The ORU community is, then, called to provide careful theological discernment on this controversial and yet powerful part of the Christian message.<sup>11</sup> The global impact of Roberts' life and ministry will require an ongoing assessment.

## In Closing

The present issue of the journal is a modest addition to the small body of Oral Roberts studies. But, it also signals a new beginning, finally, to bring to the fore the significant impact of Roberts on the ORU

community, American Christianity, the global Pentecostal-Charismatic Movement, and global Christianity. The ORU community will continue to function as the custodian of Roberts' material.

The Holy Spirit Research Center, the co-publisher of the journal, has been committing its efforts to capture eyewitness memories of Roberts' generation. His life, ministry, theology, and impact will be the subjects of the continuing study not only by the ORU community but also by others. Thus, readers are cordially invited to join in this effort. The ultimate motivation is not to erect another monument for Roberts, but for new generations to be able to advance God's kingdom by standing on his shoulders.

This special issue of the journal is organized in the order of OR's life, ministry, theology, and impact. As the lead editor of the issue, I would like to express my deep appreciation to the contributors who have brought their valuable studies so that we can begin this "new era" of OR studies. My editorial colleagues spent long hours verifying references, working with the authors, and copyediting each study. This special issue is a brilliant example of the journal partnership between the Holy Spirit Research Center and the College of Theology and Ministry of Oral Roberts University. Through all these efforts, our prayer is: May the empowering work of the Holy Spirit expand far and wide!



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## Notes

- 1 David Edwin Harrell, Jr., *Oral Roberts: An American Life* (San Francisco, CA: Harper & Row, 1985).
- 2 David E. Harrell, Jr., *All Things Are Possible: The Healing & Charismatic Revivals in Modern America* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1975), 27–52, which forms a chapter entitled "Two Giants," in which he singles out William Branham and Oral Roberts.
- 3 Jim E. Hunter, "A Gathering of Sects: Revivalistic Pluralism in Tulsa, Oklahoma,

1945–1985” (Ph.D. diss., Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 1986).

4 Joseph P. Gone, “Indigenous Healing Past and Present: Exploding Persistent Binaries,” in *Indigenous Cultures and Mental Health Counselling: Four Directions for Integration with Counselling Psychology*, ed. Suzanne L. Stewart, Roy Moodley, and Ashley Hyatt (New York: Routledge, 2016), viii.

5 In 2008, a massive collection of five volumes was published to mark the event. Youngsan Theological Institute, ed., *Dr. Yonggi Cho’s Ministry and Theology: A Commemorative Collection for the 50th Anniversary of Dr. Yonggi Cho’s Ministry*, 5 vols. (Gunpo, Korea: Hansei University Logos, 2008); studies in English in vols. 1–2, and those in Korean in vols. 3–5. Glancing through the first two volumes, the following section titles are found: “Good God and Man” (with contributions by Rodrigo D. Tano, Donald W. Dayton, Young Hoon Lee, Konrad Stock, and others); “Blessing and Healing” (with contributions by Vinson Synan, Thomson Mathew, Sam Hwan Kim, and others); “Hope and the Kingdom of God” (with contributors including Jürgen Moltmann, Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen, Hwa Yung, and Christoph Schwobel), and “The Holy Spirit and Pentecostal Theology” (including contributions by William W. Menzies, Allan Anderson, Myung Soo Park, and others). What impressed me most is the attention he has received from worldwide scholars.

6 Vinson Synan, “Oral Roberts: Son of Pentecostalism, Father of the Charismatic Movement,” *Spiritus: ORU Journal of Theology* 2:1–2 (2017), 5–21.

7 Synan, “Oral Roberts,” 14.

8 Synan, “Oral Roberts,” 16–17.

9 J. Kwabena Asamoah-Gyadu, “‘Your Miracle is on the Way’: Oral Roberts and Mediated Pentecostalism in Africa,” *Spiritus: ORU Journal of Theology* 3:1 (Spring 2018), 5–26.

10 Asamoah-Gyadu, “‘Your Miracle is on the Way,’” 10.

11 There are several helpful resources: (Lausanne) Theology Working Group, “A Statement on the Prosperity Gospel,” January 2010, n.p., <https://www.lausanne.org/content/a-statement-on-the-prosperity-gospel> (13 August 2018); Wonsuk Ma, “Blessing in Pentecostal Theology and Mission,” in *Pentecostal Mission and Global Christianity*, ed. W. Ma, V-M. Kärkkäinen and J. K. Asamoah-Gyadu (Oxford: Regnum Books, 2014), 272–91.

# ORU

ORAL ROBERTS UNIVERSITY

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ORU's College of Theology & Ministry is excited to announce the launch of its Ph.D. Program in Fall 2019. This degree explores the contextual theologies of global Christianity and the phenomenal growth and emerging scholarship within the global Spirit-empowered movement. It aims to equip scholars and practitioners to engage, impact, and serve the Kingdom of God.

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College Dean &  
Distinguished Prof. of  
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Dr Vinson Synan  
Ph.D. Director &  
Scholar in Residence



Dr Eric Newberg  
Associate Director &  
Prof. of Theological &  
Historical Studies



Dr Julie Ma  
Prof. of Missions &  
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