

Charisma and Religious War in America

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*Ministries and Rivalries of
Sister Aimee and “Fighting Bob”*

By

Taso G. Lagos

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*For
Nektaria and Elisabeth
&
to my mother and
grandmother
who first led me to the eternal spirit

for affection, joy and generosity*

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PREFACE

On the unusually warm evening of Tuesday, October 22, 1929, Sister Aimee Semple McPherson, preacher and doyen of the powerful Angelus Temple Church in Los Angeles, visited the palatial home of Mrs. Lois Pantages, wife of a famous theater magnate, who was recently sentenced to San Quentin prison on manslaughter charges stemming from her car accidentally killing another driver (she had earlier attended a party with copious amounts of alcohol at time when it was illegal under Prohibition). Pantages refused water or food, and her family, fearing for her life, asked Sister to visit the home. “She is a friend of mine who is in extreme trouble,” Sister Aimee told reporters, “and I want to give what comfort I could.”¹ The visit caused criticism. “I do not see that there can be anything so awfully bad,” she exclaimed bewilderedly to a critical press, “in a stricken woman calling for a minister and the minister responding to that call.”² She had previously visited Mrs. Pantages at the time of the stricken woman’s conviction in September. Sister now offered “comfort” to a woman hanging onto life from the barest of threads.³

Aimee’s archenemy across town, the Reverend Robert Shuler, “Fighting Bob” to many Angelenos and leader of Trinity Methodist Church, reacted differently to Pantages’s suffering. Fiercely passionate and often reckless to rid the City of Angel’s exuberant excess of vice, sin, and corruption, Shuler regarded Lois Pantages as another member of this debauched elite. The vituperation he levelled against Mrs. Pantages was seen by many as a concerned moralist attacking the social ills of a pampered, corrupt upper class; a rebellious soul not afraid to attack the establishment when it needed cleansing, or simply a man who grew up poor and saw the privileged as spoiled children above the law that needed redressing. His calls against Pantages also were meant to right injustices. The truth, such as it is in this case, could touch all of the above, with added emphasis on Shuler’s desire to be the voice of the just against the morally sordid and venal. From the time the car accident story leapt into the press, Shuler took to the airwaves of his church’s radio station, KGEF (“Keep God Ever First”), to cynically assure listeners Pantages would never be convicted. The corrupt justice system of Los Angeles, he raged to his listeners, simply could not deliver fairness. He boldly predicted a hung jury in the trial and even “could name the man who would hang it.”⁴ The

injudicious comments dragged him into court on contempt charges, for which he was convicted and paid a \$75 fine. He took the defeat as a proud and necessary consequence of his fight against raging evil.

How could two personalities such as Sister Aimee and Fighting Bob read the same Bible yet offer such opposing interpretations of the ideal Christian life? While ostensibly part of the same Protestant faith, their relationship to themselves, their families, to the broader community both within and outside the church, and, ultimately, to their God, were marked by a clear and even savage divide. Each regarded faith's labor in mortal lives operating on divergent tracks. Each assumed the embodiment of a purer interpretation of God's will and could not, would not, change one iota of it on pain of spiritual death. The path to holy redemption rested on elements that were not up for compromise or negotiation. Operating in the same city, it seemed only a matter of time before these two outsized egos would clash. They did, with attending fireworks.

Quibbles, tensions, and outright hostility by Church members are a consistent feature ever since Christianity's earliest days. Despite attempts at reconciliation, Biblical misunderstandings of one kind or another exist so long as mortal human beings have any say over such matters. The tension between McPherson and Shuler, however, went beyond mere theology and spiritual interpretation. McPherson and Shuler acted in ways that were bound to get under each other's craw, although most of the vitriol spewed unilaterally from the mouth of Shuler. Rarely did she attack her fierce interlocutor. Shuler, on the other hand, took pernicious delight in denouncing her as loudly, as often, and as viciously as he could—from the pulpit, in the airwaves, and in print. He mastered this odious craft of attack, attack, attack, with a huge list of other victims, deserving or not, spiritually tattooed on his arms. He preached equally God's grace and God's damnation. To outsiders the hellfire seemed pure soap opera: a jealous Shuler attacking a more publicly successful Sister.

Despite similarities in backgrounds, they remained enemies for much of their lives because each saw the purpose and function of religious devotion differently. They are not the first preachers to hurl spoken brimstone upon one another, nor surely the last. This was war not across religious faiths, but within the powerful branch of Protestantism itself. Her brand of Christianity (Pentecostalism) grew out of his (Southern Methodism). Yet, the source of both the vitality and the tension within American Protestantism lies in the religious entrepreneurs it attracts, a facet that few other Christian sects can claim, at least, in the United States. Protestantism uniquely gathers, or perhaps produces, women and men of great oratorical skill and passion, whose confidence in their message is

paramount, but who show little patience for compromise and collegial understanding. It can result in one minister figuratively tearing the eyes out of another, odd given human beings are supposedly built in God's image.

This book does not make any statements about the divine, nor about the inner workings of scripture. And while I offer a history of Protestantism as background to the rise of Sister Aimee Semple McPherson and Rev. Robert Shuler, this should not be interpreted as religious analysis or biblical interpretation. I do not take sides on theological debates, even if such discussions come up frequently. The book's purpose is to illuminate the lives of two distinctly and uniquely powerful personalities, whose careers and ministries speak as much about American religious practices in the first third of the 20th century as it does about the social forces that made their pulpitering possible.

On what grounds do I comment on McPherson and Shuler's spiritual work in the 1920s that made it such an exciting time in church history in Los Angeles? What special knowledge or qualifications do I possess to make sense of these two impressive characters and their immense contribution to American Protestantism specifically and American Christianity generally? What do their stories and rivalries ultimately say about America in the 20th century as far as spiritual practices and urban life are concerned? And why do I use the refractory prism of charisma to study the contrasting preaching styles and public appeals of these two extraordinary gifted personas?

Much of my research practices and scholarly interest involve 20th century American history through the lenses of immigration, media, and democratic participation. The source material for much of my academic work involves newspaper and magazine archives, personal letters, legal documents, oral histories, and published accounts of one kind of another. However, in this case, I rely exclusively on secondary sources, both in the extensive published McPherson's biographies as well as the unpublished dissertation by Mark Sumner Still chronicling Shuler's story.⁵ It was my sleuthing around newspaper accounts while researching for my biography of theater magnate and movie theater pioneer Alexander Pantages that first introduced me to both Shuler and McPherson. The unexpected discovery added to an existing personal interest in religion and the mystical prowess of faith that dates back to the deepest cabinets of my childhood memories. I was also motivated by academe's increasing interest and regard upon the tenets and social spread of American Christianity.

I grew up in an intensely Eastern Orthodox Christian home in a small village in Greece. For both my grandmother and mother the Bible was a

central tenant if not the very engine of their beings. This religious fervor was not a matter of socialization, nor simply inherited, since I am not aware of anyone else in the family being so seriously and equally devoted. Thus I was steeped in Christianity from an early age, and at one point even briefly served as an altar boy in the village church. It did not go well; because of my shyness and lack of cleverness I only lasted one service. At eighteen, I was ready to fly to Belgium to become a Trappist monk, but the plan fell through (I got cold feet at the last moment). Somewhere in the murky recesses of my now battered soul exists some secret desire to be a man of the cloth, even though I remain a skeptical but respectful admirer of organized religion.

By chance I lived in Los Angeles for seven years as I explored a filmmaking career. Few other American cities provide such a startling contrast between wealth and poverty, white and colored worlds, the rich wielding power and influence while those on the lower rungs of society struggling for their daily bread. My time in LA opened me up to the never-settled turbulence of its many diverse social groups, even as its status as an emerging cultural capital after World War I, thanks in part to Hollywood and an exploding population, came to represent a mythical America of sun-drenched dreams, wealth, fame, and entertainment, despite a reality that was often sordid, corrupt, and brutal. My Pantages book tried to capture this Janus-faced city, in all its star-studded glory yet poisonous venality, and the media swirl that surrounded its unseemly side. In the case of Pantages, it was accusations of molesting a seventeen-year-old dancer in 1929, and the trials that followed. Despite being eventually acquitted of the rape charges, the devastating publicity destroyed Pantages's enormous movie theater empire and reduced him, for a while, to a social pariah. Once the Pantages book was completed, I turned my attention to the scandals associated with McPherson and Shuler. In many ways, the Pantages research was a fitting entry point into dissecting the lives of Shuler and McPherson; two determined, hard-working visionaries who like Pantages rose to the top of their professions.

The 1910s and 20s when the two religious exhorters did their most profound work was an era that supported, if not necessitated, souls of great cunning, work ethic, ability, vision, and ruthlessness to build the country. The business titans of the age— John D. Rockefeller, Andrew Carnegie, Joseph P. Kennedy, and Leland Stanford to name a few—were not shy vase-flowers observing reality. They made America America by injecting it with loads of perpetually replenished chutzpah and raw, blinding ambition to out-cutthroat other cutthroats in a highly competitive society. Shuler and McPherson did not operate in the same business world as

Rockefeller et al., despite running operations that required hard business practices. They did, however, pour the same exuberant work, stubbornness, vision, cunning, and deviousness as the business lions of the era on their respective churches. It's hard to imagine McPherson and Shuler operating in another historical period other than the 20th century. Yet, even sharing obvious traits with powerful personalities of the period, McPherson and Shuler's life stories cannot fully explain their success and contribution to the American way of life, certainly in the case of the former. Sister Aimee was not a financial wizard; in fact, quite the opposite. She was incapable of handling money, at least, until well into adulthood when she had finally escaped from under the apron of her mother's overbearing watch. Rev. Bob, on the other hand, was a skillful financial operator and took his Trinity Methodist Church in Los Angeles from debt to "profit." I wanted not just another biography of two successful religious entrepreneurs, but instead sought to explore the motivation behind their amazing work. This could be tricky, since famous personalities don't readily reveal their innermost ambitions, insecurities, and dreams. And, yet, if I were to escape superficial biographical sketches and to refuse to board the cheap train of psychoanalysis, it required a different path to unlocking their personalities altogether. I found it in a slim book that came to me several years ago by accident. When I eventually bothered to read it, it felt as if some hitherto secret doorway of existence was suddenly revealed to me.

David Aberbach's *Charisma in Politics, Religion and the Media* provides the key to fully contextualize Shuler and McPherson's religious war, missionary work and personal vendettas.⁶ Its clear, cogent, punchy prose explains much about leaders who—seemingly out of nowhere—profoundly impacted the course of America's trajectory (e.g., Abraham Lincoln and Franklin Delano Roosevelt). Using wisdom acquired from tragic, difficult upbringings or unhappy childhoods, charismatic personalities utilize their unique abilities and powerful voices to communicate with the masses, gaining for themselves huge appeal during times of deep, social stress and anxiety. The slim volume opened musty doors into both lives of McPherson and Shuler, and suggested to me that charisma may be a key source of passion, commitment, vision, and leadership in critical times in a nation's history.

In promoting this examination, Aberbach does not place the central onus simply upon the individual charismatic, but instead suggests that for charisma-filled individuals, life is a large canvas onto which they knead and battle their personal demons. Society plays a key role, too, providing the rich soil onto which charismatic types find fertile dirt to plant their

seeds. Societies must be in crying need for such passionate figures, often during times of great social stress. Charismatic personalities rise to the top of their profession from personal will, pluck, and devotion, but without a ready audience to externalize and materialize their inner psychological burdens, their lives would be meaningless, obscure and erasable.⁷

I follow Aberbach's trajectory of personal charisma and its aftermath, while also highlighting the social conditions onto which (especially) McPherson and Shuler conducted their missionary work. I explore both personal conditions and familial context to better interpret these two pulpiteers' social influence. Of the two, Sister Aimee exhibited more charisma than the more traditionalist Shuler. Shuler jealously regarded the upstart McPherson with envy and bitterness that this short, stout woman, an immigrant no less, who magnetized audiences around the Western world, exerted such extraordinary influence in religious circles, even founding her own church. That she was a female in a field dominated by men further rattled him, as did the newness and vitality that she brought to Protestantism, while he preferred the tried, historically true, and the safe traditional. Yet, ironically, Shuler never understood, let alone appreciated, that when his exhorting work was done, he went home to a loving family and doting children (there were seven), while Sister entered an empty house of cold, brutal, lifeless silence. She bitterly resented her loneliness, even as she bravely carried on her ministerial duties with dedication, purpose, and smiling tirelessness.

Two rock-star preachers may have been one too many in a city even as big and growing as Los Angeles. He preferred to be the main channel for the voice of God, at least, his particular view of the Almighty. There were more than enough listeners to go around, some of whom were members of both pulpiteers' churches. For Shuler the grace of God involved ridding this world of evil and corruption, whereas McPherson regarded the same grace as an invitation to Jesus' salvation. One saw the potential a clean, well-run, fairer city could do to improve the lives for its citizens, while the other saw in the corruption around her an opportunity not to condemn but to help save souls under the eternal love and guidance of Christ. And these two starkly different visions could not be reconciled, no matter how bountiful the love, compassion, and forgiveness in their Jesus-inspired hearts.

Despite the contrasts, both characters were products of important pivot points in national as well as regional history. Los Angeles in the early 1900s embodied both new trends and old traditions. A rapidly growing city on the Pacific shores, it caught the commercial wave of the future in both its Hollywood movie studios and its manufacturing sector. Yet, even

as it wrote the secular bible on growth and cultural influence, LA also exhibited the same prejudices and corruption that bedeviled other towns within America's deeply poisonous, hate-filled caste system.⁸ A city of immigrants, it also drew in nativists and transplanted Midwesterners that gave the city a traditional, conservative feel. Many of Aimee and Shuler's most devoted worshippers were farmers and rural types from the heartland of America. They brought with them growing alarm at the rising secular culture in their midst (the movie studios of Jewish immigrants in particular), not least of which was the concern that the Hollywood film factories were polluting the minds of decent, hard-working, serious Americans. In their personal battles, Shuler and McPherson captured the larger cultural war in progress at the time, one that continues unresolved today. Much like the then national angst over immigration that echoes in today's political atmosphere, their fights speak to the larger war between rural and urban, religious and secular, and traditional and modern that remains a touchstone of our own present cultural divisions and social anxiety.

Both preachers were fundamentalists, or at the very least, deeply influenced by fundamentalism. From McPherson's version of Biblical infallibility came the rise of Pentecostalism and eventually the founding of her own church, Foursquare, which spread around the globe in ever increasing numbers. Shuler was conservative in his faith, offered none of the spectacular healings that Sister practiced, and shared few of her beliefs in the millenarianist Armageddon and the Second Coming. The final mass reckoning of the end times has had a profound impact on Protestantism, and today millions of Americans earnestly hope a final gruesome war take place to herald the coming of Jesus. How to explain this sincere epochal desire on the part of so many love-minded Christians, when billions of unbelieving women, children, and men are to be butchered—an act of almost species extinction of God's creation? God works in mysterious ways, such believers offer in response. The rationale remains deeply disturbing.

No previous published biography has appeared of Rev. Bob while about a dozen exist about Sister. I suspect it has as much to do with Aimee proving more popular and enduring in America's spiritual realm than Shuler, as it does with her preaching taking place in a man's world and being the founder of her own Christian sect. Scholarly attention has been paid to her also as a proto-feminist, although Sister would be the first to deny such a label. She was no friend of feminists and hued to a more traditional view of gender relations, even as she trail-blazed in an almost exclusively male-dominated profession. Aimee, too, magnetized scandal,

and for a period in Los Angeles in the 1920s she dominated newspaper coverage as no other single Angeleno could and did, further giving onus to her biographical coverage. Shuler, on the other hand, outside of his religious and civic activities, offered hardly any whiff of scandal in his lifetime, and his children remember him as a loving, funny and charming father. His very ordinariness invites little scholarly or even popular attention.

The words of solace Sister Aimee offered Lois Pantages on that balmy evening in October must have helped. Despite being sentenced to San Quentin, Pantages escaped prison and was placed on probation. She paid a settlement to the dead driver's family in the amount of \$78,500. She signed the check "with a hand that shook so terribly that her name was barely legible," one newspaper account claimed.⁹ In time Pantages would recover her health and resume her socialite ways, thanks perhaps in tiny part to Sister's outreach and intervention. McPherson understood human suffering; she herself was no stranger to it.

One the other hand, Shuler's bromides against Lois Pantages and similar taunts against husband Alexander Pantages's own trial for sexual assault that followed, stirred the pot once too often for many of his critics. Scores complained to the Federal Radio Commission about his "misuse of airwaves."¹⁰ Shuler defended himself on the grounds of freedom of speech, or as he preferred, freedom to "prophesy."¹¹ It found little favor with the FRC, which revoked his radio license despite his vehement protests, and so the great voice of the airwaves that had terrorized so many elements of LA society ceased. Shuler laid this sudden calamity on a "conspiracy of the rich and powerful," including the Pantages family.¹² Yet few were sorry that his air-voice dimmed; particularly when America's attention after 1929 turned to more serious matters, like the Great Depression eating away at the country's fabric. That calamitous financial meltdown of the early 1930s, too, brought out a different reaction from Shuler and McPherson: he continued to preach, while McPherson became a city-saving food distributor of the kind never before, or after, seen in Los Angeles. This difference speaks much about religious life in America, as it does about the two powerful, influential and idiosyncratic characters who fill these pages.

Notes

¹ “Bank Account Scrutinized,” *Los Angeles Times*, Wednesday, October 23, 1929, Part II, 20.

² “Bank Account Scrutinized,” *Los Angeles Times*, Wednesday, October 23, 1929, Part II, 20.

³ “Secret Aimee Bank Account Investigated,” *Los Angeles Examiner*, Wednesday, October 23, 1929, 5.

⁴ “Champion ‘Aginner’ of the Universe is Shuler,” *Los Angeles Times*, June 1, 1930, Part II, 2.

⁵ Incredibly, this published book is the first for Robert Shuler. I borrow heavily from Mark Sumner Still’s unpublished dissertation, “‘Fighting Bob’ Shuler: Fundamentalist and reformer” (Claremont Graduate School 1988).

⁶ David Aberbach, *Charisma in Politics, Religion and the Media* (New York: New York University Press, 1996).

⁷ Please note that I use the term “charismatic” to refer to those individuals, like Sister and to a lesser degree Shuler, whose adulation grew from specific circumstances tied to psychological effects of their childhood upbringings. My use of this term contrasts with its use today amongst religious followers (Charismatic Christians or Renewalists) guided by the Holy Spirit, miracles, and other spiritual gifts.

⁸ See, for example, Isabel Wilkerson, *Caste: The Origins of Our Discontents* (New York: Random House Penguin, 2020).

⁹ Taso G. Lagos, *American Zeus: The Life of Alexander Pantages, Theater Mogul* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2018), 127.

¹⁰ Lagos, 2018, 127.

¹¹ Lagos, 2018, 127.

¹² Lagos, 2018, 127.

INTRODUCTION

This book is about the interaction between charisma and modern Protestantism in America in the first third of the 20th century. It speaks to how personal magnetism shaped the careers and lives of Sister Aimee Semple McPherson and, less so, Reverend Robert Shuler, both preachers in Los Angeles and the city's most famous pulpiteers in the 1920s. Why charisma? Because it offers significant and even rich explanatory power of the work of popular religious figures and their spiritual influence on tens of thousands of congregants in Southern California at the time. No two single individuals have had a more profound influence on religious life in the region than Sister Aimee and Fighting Bob; yet on what basis this impact rested has not been thoroughly explored or in several cases even discussed in previous biographies of Sister Aimee or the single unpublished biography of Rev. Bob Shuler.

In its simplest form, charisma involves an unusual or traumatized childhood whose impact is felt in adult life through an incessant desire for adulation and fame. This popularity, once achieved, however, is a poor substitute, and ultimately not a particularly fulfilling one, for growing up in circumstances that prevent deep-trusting bonds with parents or guardians. This was certainly the case with Sister Aimee, whose unhappy domestic life as a youngster in a small farming community in Canada, born to a teenage mother and a father in his fifties, was only one factor in a household of unusual circumstances. Aimee was doted upon in many regards, but she grew up under strict Christian (Salvation Army) rules. Religious families of one kind or another can and do make some accommodation, even in cursory form, with the heathen outside world if they are to remain part of mainstream society, but Aimee's mother would have none of it. Instead, with pride and gusto Mother Kennedy lived her life in faithful compliance with the strict codes and practices of the Salvation Army. The story of Aimee's troubled childhood revolves around her trying to adapt to the family's conflicting demands and contrasting parenting styles, which in time became an overwhelming burden that prevented her from experiencing inner equilibrium. She accepted this heavy psychological burden, even learned to live with it, but lacked the necessary wisdom and emotional intelligence to carry it off successfully. She tried her best to be the mediating influence for her mother's (not her

father's) unbending regard to the outside world, but lacked the private reflection needed to also pursue her own internal needs at the same time. Aimee was determined to succeed as the connecting thread between two seemingly inseparable worlds, the sacred and the profane, and on some level, particularly if measured by popularity and renown, she did, but in heart, soul and spirit she died a lonely, tragic figure.

This is not to imply that a difficult upbringing automatically leads to the publicity-splashed life of a charisma-filled personality; many folks grow up in less than stable households yet develop into mature, grounded, and productive adults without the need for outsized reputation or national—or even international—notoriety to sustain fragile egos. Charisma is not deterministic. It does not follow prescribed formulas or assumed recipes, but instead hovers as background noise for those individuals who are not able to lower its volume dial in order to lead normal, well-adjusted lives. Its call to adulation is unmistakable, and starts with the pressing need to find love and solace in the public eye, or what David Aberbach calls the struggle “to achieve union with a higher power, with the Public or the Universe,” even as these are ultimately unsatisfying as substitutes for lasting, authentic bonds with close intimates, relatives or friends.¹ Some achieve this higher union, and all the glory and suffering that it entails, while others never even come close but perish ignominiously instead. For Aberbach, all babies are born with “‘charismatic’ appeal” and “radiate” this appeal if they are able to achieve “mastery” over their caregivers who satisfy their needs “with quiet confidence.”² If, on the other hand, the baby is not able to achieve this mastery over its caregivers and the personal confidence that comes with it, or is not able to substantively connect to caregivers because of domestic instability, parental death or absence, or some other domestic liability, or the trauma such events cause, then its pursuit of that connection will in time extend to the outside world as a seemingly worthwhile but ultimately unsatisfactory substitute. The result is the charismatic and popular personality the public adores, but in which this adulation is merely used as a blanket to wrap oneself to make up for the times it did not happen in childhood but one that can never completely erase an unhappy or unfulfilled upbringing. Success in the public arena is only a temporary salve and cannot cover up or fill-in the blanks left from scarred childhoods. The result can sometimes be suicide (Marilyn Monroe, Robyn Williams, Virginia Woolf), or risky behavior that leads to death (James Dean, John F. Kennedy, Elvis Presley). It is not unusual to connect charismatic personalities to tragedy.

Rev. Shuler was not raised in the same difficult circumstances as Sister, but his early hard-scrabble years were no picnic either. Yet, in time

he himself developed charisma, seemingly more out of a desire to rid the world of evil and corruption than in seeking the substitute fruits of fame to make up for an unhappy childhood. He was a hell-raiser because that was the only way he understood to cleanse filthy metropolitan stables. Like Jesus wrecking the moneychangers' tables at the Jerusalem Temple, Shuler used his pulpit, his radio station, his pamphlets, his very being to sweep Los Angeles of its corruption and venality. His crusading brought him fame and notoriety, if not always success, but at the end of the day, he went home to a loving family and doting children. Aimee trudged to an empty home lacking genuine human warmth or companionship. No one singlehandedly received more press coverage in Los Angeles than Sister in the 1920s, yet few were as miserable, as devastated, and as visibly lonely as this extraordinary pulpiteer.

Los Angeles was a thriving community in the twenties and the perfect stage for these two fired-up souls to thrive. It was a paradise of lost hearts seeking redemption, and a little fame and fortune along with it. If any city symbolized the raw ambition of the powerful and rich and renowned, it was the City of Angels with its movie industry as the lighthouse to the world. Without Hollywood as a backdrop, Sister and Shuler would have been two passionate preachers briefly lighting a few candles on stage and then passing the torch seamlessly to others. Instead, Sister and Shuler were the main act in the oversized theater that was Los Angeles; no one could replace their roles because they were two of a kind, impossible to replicate, literally unreproducible. As a city too, it provided fertile soil for their outsized personalities to develop; Hollywood encouraged Sister to combine the religious with the entertaining, while for Shuler Los Angeles provided the kind of gargantuan corruption he needed to hurl his thunderstrokes. Each got what he or she wanted, at least, when it came to their ministries.

Both migrated to the city along with many newcomers in the first quarter of the 20th century. LA was a polyglot mixture, despite its advertisement as "the white spot" of America, with many more skin hues than city leaders cared to acknowledge.³ But the color of skin did not simply mark boundaries between social groups, it demarcated borders in the way individuals viewed and interacted with the world. Sister recognized these "other" folks and even sometimes (when it most suited her) catered to their needs, while Shuler dismissed the less-than-white as racially inferior, a stain on his life that at the time spoke widely to mainstream society caught in the shoals of bigotry and racial discrimination. We may today recoil from this ugly past, yet our present age reflects the some of the same white supremacism in practice. What purpose did

charisma play in Sister's regard for the city's minorities and less fortunate? Despite its hosting the movie industry, LA was, and still remains, a profoundly segregated city in which whiteness was a passport to upper mobility, whereas minorities witnessed few such actual opportunities by virtue of their skin color. Sister understood the racial tension brewing beneath LA's paradisiacal reputation better than most, and found ways, when it was most convenient to do so, to reach out to the downtrodden and marginalized of society, particularly African and Latinx Americans. She subliminally understood or at least exhibited some affinity for, as often happens to charismatics, those socially excluded; perhaps it was a way to relieve guilt living in her world of white privilege. Or it may have simply been good publicity, despite alienating many of her unrepentant nativist acolytes.

Los Angeles was also a growing cosmopolitan city, thanks in part to Hollywood films, but also to an expanding manufacturing base. It attracted a wide swath of world travelers, who came to see the factories that produced so many dreams (movies) for the masses, and, coupled with regular immigrants to the city, created what one historian terms, "the hearth of cosmopolitan culture."⁴ As with racial affinity, Sister Aimee grasped the significance of rising tourism to the city better than the small-minded Shuler. She was a cosmopolitan herself; regularly taking trips overseas, to sightsee as well as to preach, and her personal tragedies (one of which took place in Hong Kong, then under British rule) gave her an appreciation of 'otherness' that escaped the wisdom and notice of Fighting Bob. She built an international church, while Shuler never travelled outside the U.S.

The City of Angels, because of its size and the folks it attracted, served as a convenient site of religious contention and caught the wave of internecine warfare raging within Protestantism that involved conservatives and fundamentalists on the one hand and modernists and reformers on the other, with the entire Protestant church verging on being torn apart. Aimee and Rev. Bob were caught up in these battles, even sometimes led them, but while the swirls of religious tension hung in the warm California air, there was always the danger their ministries would be subsumed by out-of-control combat. In that regard, they resemble early Christianity, not long after Jesus' death when the church struggled to survive. Karl Jaspers (1957), in his slim but profound work on history's greatest "paradigmatic individuals," notes the difference between Jesus and the Christ developed by the early Christian church: *Jesus* as the humane figure of soulful development and *Christ* as the institutionally-created deity in whose name the church was founded.⁵ Jaspers suggests that at times it is difficult to

reconcile these two opposing poles, that one exists almost outside the other. Aimee is the updated figure of Jesus fighting the establishment and the suffering this caused her, while Rev. Bob is true to Christ as the all-powerful universal force. "The historic reality of Jesus," Jaspers claims, "is without interest to the doctors of the faith, either among the rebels or the orthodox believers."⁶ Aimee was Jesus and Rev. Bob, the doctor. Aimee would be the one working with existing human nature, while Rev. Bob's moral crusade reveals elements of social engineering, the kind that in the 1930s became increasingly discredited.

There are racist charismatics (e.g., Adolph Hitler) and great humanitarian ones (Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., Mahatma Gandhi, et al.). And all shades in between. The point here is not to slice charisma into microscopic parts, but to better understand the charismatic's personal, professional, and ethical decisions. If it is true, as Aberbach suggests, that we all possess charisma as babies, why is it in some personalities it develops into full-blown neuroses, while in others it gradually transfers to those loved and closest to them that obviates the need for popular attention? And how conscious are charismatics of their choices that involve playing and replaying the instability of their upbringing in the public arena, or at least, their attempt in public view at ameliorating the pain and suffering that they experienced as youngsters at the hands of cruel fate? Did public adulation serve as a call for help for charismatics, but one that was never heeded?

To begin answering these questions requires seeing human behaviors and actions as a series of connecting dots. Rather than random events unfolding without apparent pattern or flow, charisma studies suggest our lives reveal unmistakable threads that when examined from a distance indicate we cascade from one action to another with startling symmetry and purpose. This is not determinism, but instead a process that reveals our capacity to make choices informed by past decisions or events. We may be victims of circumstances, but we also drive them forward in connective ways that are not always apparent at the time they occur. Only with reflection and hindsight do recurring patterns in our actions spring forward and become visible.

No better example exists than Sister's own sudden disappearance on May 18, 1926 from a beach in Los Angeles. The event offers a taste of the wide separation between public glory and private loneliness and angst that likely launched the beach event but which she refused to tackle or face

(through psychotherapy or counseling then becoming increasingly popular). As she had mediated between strict family life and the secular world in her youth, her disappearance was likely a well-orchestrated attempt at reconciling two opposing forces deeply embedded within her that she could not bend together in harmony. How the disappearance unfolded exhibits much about her thinking as it does about charisma's negative side. What started as a quick trip to the beach for some down-time turned into a nightmare that haunted her life. Except for some extraordinary verbal summersaults that exposed her to the kind of human venality she had studiously avoided all her career, it nearly destroyed her ministry. Yet, in some fashion, the beach disappearance was pre-ordained, or at least, the length from hatched idea to execution was not as long or unusual as might be superficially assumed.

Sister Aimee had created a populist—but hermetically sealed—world in which all her actions were accounted for and prescribed with detailed scrutiny. But underneath the huge success (by the 1920s she was internationally known as a preacher), there lay this savage truth: she had become a machine, finding very little actual, satisfying human love in those surrounding her. She had prayed and apparently cured some of physical affliction, built from scratch the hugely popular Angelus Temple in Los Angeles, and brought psychic relief and encouragement to tens of thousands of acolytes. She was the 'Bride of Jesus,' forever working in and under his shadow, extolling the virtues of Christ's love, yet time and again she could not fulfill her own very human need for personal affection and intimate stability that even Jesus knew were important to a reasonably happy existence. By 1926, she had been married twice, losing the first husband to sudden death and the second to matrimonial straightjackets. Jesus in a strange way became her lover, if such a thing is possible, but this is not to say that such a love could be fulfilling or could actually provide for her physical needs. For that, she had to turn to more mortal opportunities. She chose a married, slightly limping, but elegantly attractive former radio engineer under her employ. Scandal, naturally, resulted.

She claimed the beach disappearance was a kidnapping, when all evidence—and reasonable explanation—pointed to a tryst with the engineer. Had she followed a more mature course of action, Sister might have simply declared the truth of the assignation and accepted (and explained to anyone who cared to listen, of which there were millions) that while she's a preacher she's also a human being with needs for love and warmth like the rest of us. The scandal that would have nevertheless resulted would not have been one about lying, cover-up, and tortuous legalities that stretched the judicial and law enforcement systems not only in Los Angeles County,

but also Arizona and even Mexico, but one simply involving two human beings who each provided something salient, comforting, and real to the other. Had this relationship been cemented in this fashion, it is possible to imagine the couple settling down into stable, loving domesticity and continuing with their lives. Certainly, this scenario would likely have brought a level of stability and continuity to Aimee that she desperately craved. Instead, she framed the event as a kidnapping, stretching the bounds of reason, and inviting ridicule into her life as she had never done so before. She never fully recovered from it.

Public veneration cannot substitute for authentic intimate human love, a fact that Sister herself acknowledged several times in her life, but which she had difficulty practicing or realizing that it required some serious effort to achieve. With her hectic schedule and incessant need for public acclaim, the opportunity to develop a serious relationship with another human being was impossible. Her disastrous third marriage put a stop to any further attempts at domestic bliss. She remained, so far as it is known, without a serious lover the rest of her life.

The alleged kidnapping was the opening that Shuler needed to shred her character and ministry. Fighting Bob's righteous streak was in full bloom; he had little tolerance for human foibles and sin. It dented his conceptualization of the universe as an ultimately just one, in which actions and events play out according to God's Will, despite wretched tragedies that bedeviled human beings. To do wrong in Shuler's book was to stain the image of God, even if doing wrong makes up part of the human makeup. For many believers, God is one of forgiveness and second chances, even when individuals do not deserve them. For Shuler a crime is to be punished, irrevocably and without debate or rancor. To his thinking, in the beach disappearance Sister committed an abomination; a hoax perpetrated on her followers and the public at large that gave preaching a bad name. She transgressed the rules of their profession and stained Christianity in the process. And she had pay for it. He unleashed a torrent of vociferous vile going above and beyond his usual bromides in an attempt to turn Sister into an enemy of the people.

In Aberbach's thinking, the charismatic's public appeal has two "meanings: a powerful attraction to the public, and a cry for help artfully disguised or transcended."⁷ In a compelling way, the pseudo-kidnapping plot served both elements. It not only tested her public's loyalty to her and took advantage of her fans' adulation and love commitments to her, but it was loud, unmistakable *cri de coeur* that astute observers recognized. The disappearance plot likely hatched some months prior to its execution seems farcical in hindsight—disguises, run ins with the law, desert treks,

and extortion claims—that had more than a touch of Hollywood theatricality about them. After all, this was a woman who skillfully and artfully merged entertainment and staged acts with religious services. She was an adept producer; the kidnapping scheme seems well within her range of creativity, yet it snared and ruined reputations. There was great human cost to her personal idolatry and silent screams for help, and at the end it's debatable whether she was actually aware of the negative costs in the final ledger of her life.

Yet, strangely, if we assume Sister as a classic case of charisma run amok, she alone cannot be held responsible for the kidnapping plot's ultimately tragic outcome. Those colleagues around her, and chief among them Shuler, might have understood her desperate and miserable cries for relief, but chose not to offer counsel or help. Shuler took the opposite approach, heaping misery and grimy blather upon her reputation that raises questions about his own commitment to the love and forgiveness inherent in Christ's message. A more humane approach would have been to help her explore her past with a qualified professional's help, or at least, give her a chance to confront the deep-seated wounds and angst she daily carried with her like overweight chains, the very ones that lay at the bottom of the beach kidnaping scheme. Too often, as Aberbach assumes, the spotlight is shone upon the charismatic, without duly tilting it towards the very society that sustains and maintains popular stars like Sister. How much should critical attention be focused away from the charismatics but, instead, on audiences who rapturously follow media accounts of their lives that in the end benefit some, harm others, but which leave the charisma-filled individuals feeling ever more lonely, desperate, and unfulfilled?

And there's the mass media itself. Charismatics, not surprisingly, have existed throughout human history, which means unstable childhoods are a staple of our species. What is telling about the modern versions of charismatic types is that they are so common; we have media to thank for their spread, the ones that disseminate their faces and personas to us more easily and more prominently than ever before. Thanks to media we know about the charismatic lives of Winston Churchill, Marilyn Monroe, Charlie Chaplin, Abraham Lincoln, John F. Kennedy, and so many others. It is no secret that media love charismatics. Charismatics make good copy. They sell news stories. They keep personality attention levels high. The charismatics' actions, if not their very beings, grease the modern media system, both domestic and international, one that thrives on the unusual and entertaining. Sister Aimee was not just a sensation at home, but across the Atlantic as well.

Charisma is made for the media and vice-versa. One feeds off the other, yet, this reality does nothing to resolve the hidden, repressed issues of broken families or unhappy childhoods that stand at the center of the charismatic's soul, but instead does the opposite: exaggerates the adulation and turns it into a drug. Sister lived off that stimulant because it was necessary and soothing at the same time. From the time she decided to strike out on her own missionary trail after the tragic death of her first and most beloved husband, Sister entered into history as a determined fisher of human souls, except, of course, her very own. The hard-scrabble life that she endured on the trail—the living in a traveling car, the “Gospel Auto,” with no guarantee of food or shelter along the then-difficult American country roads—became a foundational story and mythologized by media accounts, particularly because she was a single mother with two young children in tow.

She was bound to find her way to Los Angeles. All aspiring stars made their way to Hollywoodland, as the famous sign then proclaimed, the gateway to fame and success.⁸ There her name spread far and wide, as the movie industry, reliant as it is on publicity to maintain its business, had already laid the groundwork for operational ties to news channels, particularly newspapers that dominated the era. Sister simply built and stood on top of these informational efforts, in fact, it was no small wonder that in time she came to imitate movie stars (even losing weight to do so) in her presentation to the media, bathed and familiar as she was to the ways of the publicity machines of the period. The media, in turn, loved her. She sold newspapers. She made headlines. She attracted and kept the fickle public's attention. Shuler did too, but because he was constantly on the warpath, a missile looking for a target, not for the warmth and curiosity he generated. Sister used other means—healing sessions that drew tens of thousands, visits to nightclubs and drinking joints, even to a boxing arena—that whetted news editors' attention. That publicity, a two-edged sword, only revealed its negative face later after her kidnapping saga. Meanwhile, she glowed in the fame handed to her on a silver platter by LA's scandal-fueled newspaper industry.

There was an underbelly to the city, to which she became familiar. The knowledge of it helped her escape prosecution from the disappearance caper. Once more, her interactions with others were in marked contrast to Shuler's. She had a soft spot for underworld characters, she regarded them as ripe fruit for conversion, following Christ's admonition to his disciples to work with the underbelly of society. Shuler wanted nothing less than to rid such shady characters, persecute them, jail them, then bury the keys. Aimee had the more expansive heart (and the forgiveness that went with

it), and the downtrodden loved her for it. It went a long way to increasing her popularity, a fact that even Shuler acknowledged decades later when he recalled the period and recounted how her generosity was more decisive than his threats of damnation. The city's underbelly saved Aimee's career, while it confounded Shuler's. Once more, we must ask how this happened and why.

There's danger this study spills into psychohistory rather than historiography. Because this work deals with psychic imbalances that arise from unstable upbringings, it's easy to fall into the trap of psychological profiling. The issue is not merely that I lack expertise in this field, but that more will be read into the such accounts than warranted or held up to scrutiny. McPherson's attempt to reconcile opposite worlds, for example, is offered to make sense of her life choices and her ministry. Certainly, there are psychological elements behind her options she took, but by focusing on her charisma, I offer an explanation for her chosen pathways. Neither her life choices nor the pull towards preaching are separate events, but spawn from the same internal river. Similarly, regarding her desire to unite with Christ, this too has elements of the charismatic's wounded appeal to be at one with the universe. If we explore how this bonding desire touches on her complex relationships with her parents, there is certainly psychology involved here but also historical fact that begs for some type of explanation. The psychology comes second; it is not the primary reason for the analysis taking place here.

Both Aimee and Fighting Bob can be regarded as rebels with distinct purposes and causes. They fought their respective church sects, and certainly they went against the grain of mainstream Protestantism at times in their careers. Aimee would end up being the more consistent non-conformist, while Shuler ended his life being a political reactionary more interested in maintaining white supremacy. This contrast serves best to explain their lives' ministries and for which they rose out of bed every morning. Sister supported people and their needs, from spiritual to malnutrition, while Shuler favored institutional control and mass obedience. Theirs was an ideology that took on explosive implications in the 1930s as the United States faced severe economic meltdown. By then, Shuler's thunderbolts had lost their power and efficacy while Sister put her commitment to the less fortunate into action by singlehandedly feeding more out of luck, unemployed, and homeless folks in Los Angeles than the very city government itself, and with more ingenuity, wit and determination. She revealed how powerful could be the imagination when it was put to allay people's most pressing needs; Shuler was content to let the engines of powerful institutional forces and their representatives