

Rev. M. Maree

DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.18820/23099089/actat.v38i2.13>

ISSN 1015-8758 (Print)  
ISSN 2309-9089 (Online)

Acta Theologica 2018  
38(2):184-186



# PREACHER GIRL – ULDINE UTLEY AND THE INDUSTRY OF REVIVAL

ROBINSON, T.A. (Waco, Texas: Baylor University Press, 2016). ISBN: 978-4813-0510-5 (Kindle)

Thomas A. Robinson's *Preacher girl* offers a gripping and well researched biography of the childhood career of Pentecostal preacher and revivalist Uldine Utley. An admirer and protégé of the evangelist Aimee Semple McPherson, Utley is revealed in Robinson's book as a theologian and preacher in her own right. *Preacher girl* stands out among other biographies of Utley in that it does not dwell on her ultimate decline due to mental sickness, but on the active years of her life as an itinerant female preacher, ministering throughout America.

Perhaps the most exciting contribution of Robinson's work is his placement of Utley, a "holy roller farm girl" born in Oklahoma in 1912, into a marketplace of American revivalism in the 1920s and 1930s (56). Woven throughout the text, which spans the courtship of Utley's parents, her rise and fame as child preacher and evangelist and her retirement from the pulpit at the age of 24, the "industry" of revival is closely considered in Robinson's chapter "Utley Inc".

From personality cults to marketing, trademarking and merchandising, Utley is shown at once as an archetype and unique player in the competitive industry of mass evangelism. Robinson shows how she, like other child evangelists of the era, first gained popularity as a "wunderkind": pious, virginal, angelic and

spiritually wise beyond her years. She grew along with her popularity during the following decade, and Robinson uses this history to raise questions about the sexualization of adult female preachers (McPherson included), who often employed Hollywood glamour to appeal to converts. Robinson rightly contends that these women were expected to be attractively relevant, while at the same time serving as “allies against modernism” (60) – a tall order for the young Utley who seems to have lived up to these expectations with grace.

In the second part of the book, Robinson ponders the cost associated with the demanding and exhausting itinerant lives of revivalists such as Utley. Due to the fact that Utley promoted herself as non-denominational, she lacked the support that other popular revivalists of the time enjoyed. For Utley, this meant a gruelling and demanding schedule in order to support not only her ministry, but also her family and a staff of musicians, secretaries, tutors and managers who relied on her preaching for their own livelihoods. Robinson offers a detailed account of the financial and physical toll that this took on the adult Utley, who felt compelled to sustain her business and reputation for this reason, even through the Great Depression.

The author also crafts an inspiring biography of Utley’s ministry. For over 20 years, the “preacher girl” travelled to the centres of America (for example, Chicago at the height of its gangster culture) to preach to crowds sometimes exceeding 10,000. With messages of healing through the power of the Spirit, the immanent Second Coming of Christ and a charge by God for America to be “a city on a hill”, Robinson shows that Utley’s sermons are not unlike those of revivalists of the time. Yet, her “simple and direct” approach to preaching makes her unique and special. On many occasions, in addition to preaching, Utley would also sing as well as put her hand to writing a few songs (172).

Possibly seeking more stability in her life or perhaps an opportunity for an alternative way of serving God, Utley studied to become an ordained Methodist minister. This is quite a surprising twist in her story, as itinerant American revivalists had long relied on the success of their self-training and direct experiences of the divine. At the time of her ordination in 1925, Utley seemed to realize the trending decline in the popularity of twentieth-century revivalism and in her own work, as one adult preacher among many.

Robinson leaves us on a sad note in Utley’s story. She suffered decades of mental illness following a physical and emotional breakdown. Though Robinson does not dwell on Utley’s decline, he raises important questions about what led to her retirement from preaching and the impact of the industry of revivalism on child and adult revivalists.

Like David fighting Goliath, the author shows how a “Joan of Arc of the modern world” such as Utley would have to face her own demons until her halo was too heavy to bear (60).