

**Review of Thomas A. Robinson and Lanette D. Ruff,
*Out of the Mouths of Babes: Girl Evangelists in the
Flapper Era* (Religion in America Series), Oxford:
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Out of the Mouths of Babes is the joint project of religious studies scholar, Thomas Robinson, and sociologist, Lanette Ruff. Robinson's academic focus is the history of North American Pentecostalism while Ruff specialises in the fields of family, violence, and women's studies. The book uniformly incorporates these two perspectives into a coherent and compelling whole, focusing on young girl evangelists of the American interwar period who literally embodied the ideological tensions of the era in the ways they publicly presented themselves, dressed, and spoke. These children, or rather, the controversies surrounding their ministries, were a site of social, cultural, religious, and gender tensions (2012: 12).

In the opening chapters, the authors introduce the Roaring Twenties and Dirty Thirties, set the temporal and cultural context of the child phenomenon (Chapter 1), and describe the competing ideological and religious currents of the times (Chapters 2 and 3). The book considers the gendered aspects of revivalist evangelicalism (Chapter 4) and details the points in which the flapper phenomenon and girl evangelist coincide and diverge (Chapters 5 through 7). The mid-portion of *Out of the Mouths of Babes* shifts to the girl preachers themselves, and investigates their identities as children (Chapter 9) along with their awkward transition to adulthood (Chapter 10) before turning to evangelistic methodology – including the ritual of preaching and the use of radio and print advertising in promotion of revivalist endeavours (Chapters 11 through 13). The last section of the book follows the abrupt decline of the child preachers (Chapters 14 and 15) and in a final chapter situates the phenomenon as a product of four contributing factors: 1) burgeoning Pentecostalism, which confirmed, to

some degree, the role of women in public ministry; 2) Hollywood's celebration of child prodigies; 3) the flapper phenomenon; and, most influentially, 4) the press (Chapter 16).

The book's primary argument is that in these two decades the clash between cultural experimentation and rooted traditions 'provided a stage for everyone and an audience for almost anyone', including, therefore, girl revivalists (2012: 157). The role that children played in this tumultuous period of history is telling. Focusing on these girls 'actually puts a spotlight on the pulse of this raucous time', the authors write, 'where a clash of cultures seems to mark every debate' (2012: 12). Whether flappers – groups of 'sexually provocative' young women who in the 1920s rejected traditional moral standards and embraced the 'novel' or 'experimental' in terms of fashion and entertainment (2012: 9, 45–46) – or on the other hand, child preachers, these young people 'captured the extremes and carried the flag in this volatile period, each champions of opposite sides in the conflict of values' (2012: 12). Conservative and liberal religiosity, here described as fundamentalism versus modernism, met in this debate (2012: 131). In other words, these child preachers served as symbols of evangelical Protestantism in that the controversial discourse surrounding their ministries negotiated the moral and ethical concerns of the day. One might dismiss these young preachers as a short-lived fad – as a religious novelty, of sorts – but during these two decades the practice was common and survivals of the sort exist still today. Perhaps as many as thousands of young preachers, nearly all girls, took to pulpits around the nation and itinerated across the continent, some multiple times, to spread their evangelistic gospels. The phenomenon also reflected cultural trends of the time. In the 1920s, for instance, the US developed what can only be described as an obsession with prepubescent children, an infatuation with child prodigies. This was a 'cult of personality' that had 'wonder-child' competitions in search of young celebrities, nothing less than precursors to contemporary American Idol trials. Part of the reason for the children's rise to fame has to do with the dawn of the child movie star; think of Jackie Coogan, Baby Peggy, Jackie Cooper, and Shirley Temple. 'In many ways', the authors note, 'the child evangelist on a revivalist platform and the child actor on a Hollywood stage were part of the same performance' (2012: 6–7).

While the book presents sound research on a subject that has heretofore managed to elude sustained historical study, some questions remain. The first has to do with the nature of the book's primary data source itself: media or press accounts. The press has historically thrived, as the authors make clear, on sensationalism, novelty, and the so-called 'new' in its reporting. Robinson and Ruff rightly argue that knowledge of the phenomenon is limited almost entirely to its depictions by reporters in newspapers. The information about the girl preachers, then, derives from op-eds submitted to newspapers or articles written by journalists themselves, all pre-screened and approved by editors. One wonders how representative this information is of the thoughts and opinions of everyday people. Even the cover photo of the book demonstrates this ambiguity; a stern-faced child evangelist, one Mary Agnes Vitchestain, points a condemning finger at a couple nestled together on a sandy beach. The young man's arm drapes around the girl; he whispers in her ear. The girl's legs are bare in her swim suit. Mary, to the contrary, while donning similar beach apparel, has stockings pulled up to her thighs. Robinson and Ruff note the ironies having to do with the behind-the-scenes construction of the photograph. 'The photo is

clearly staged by the press', the blurb details, 'illustrating the role of the press in shaping and giving public spotlight to the girls' (2012: 127). One is left to wonder what information did not make it into reporters' accounts, or how much media strategies (to draw readers) shaped the information that was present. Analysis of newspaper coverage shows an explosion of boy and girl evangelists in these two decades, but only in terms of the number of newsprint reports. Is it possible that the phenomenon continued in the following decades but without the media coverage it had previously? (2012: 11). To the credit of the authors, however, they are fully aware of this situation and successfully demonstrate the values and limits of newsprint as a data source. 'The important point here', they argue at one point, 'is not whether the press and public were "accurate" in their perception, for in matters such as these that inform and shape the public consciousness, perception is, in many ways, the reality' (2012: 53). A full chapter, in fact, addresses the relationship of the girls to the media (Chapter 13) and an appendix underscores the value of the study of the newspaper record (2012: 161–163).

A second minor concern is that *Out of the Mouths of Babes* deals somewhat unsatisfactorily with a theme endemic to North American Pentecostalism and revivalism: mimicry, memorisation, or mimesis. The authors present a particularly urgent question along these lines in the middle of the book: 'Were these girls *really* evangelists in the way that adult evangelists were, or were they mere mimics, blessed with a good memory and a love for the spotlight, encouraged by their parents and their local church?' Further, the authors summarise that there existed two primary types of child preachers, 1) those innovatively creative and 2) those that possessed exceptionally absorptive memories (2012: 91). This situation is no minor issue, though, as Pentecostals often judged the authenticity of their preachers' anointing by the Holy Spirit based on whether or not signs of rote memorisation – taken as the antithesis of 'Spirit-inspired', improvisational preaching – present themselves in the performance (2012: 92, emphasis added). The problem, however, is not manifest until the end of the book, where the authors appear to make an evaluation of some of the children's preaching skills and methods. 'Not every little girl evangelist was a parrot, learning sermons that could be recited crusade after crusade', they argue. 'Many were bright and competent, and some of these girl evangelists, as adults, could compete at centre stage with the most competent men in their denomination' (2012: 145). One wonders if such an evaluation fails to realise the rehearsed, learned nature of Pentecostal rhetorical rituals, the ways even seasoned adult circuit revivalists improved with months and years of practice and repetition. Ultimately, an informed reader is left wondering by which criteria the authors judge preaching 'bright and competent' (or not), and why practiced recitations of sermons did not fit the bill.

Lastly, while the book offers a detailed historical account, it is theoretically light in terms of the critical study of gender. In other words, the authors offer much data on the relationship between religion and the construction of gender, but provide very little secondary theorisation on how, for instance, Protestantism prescribed and enforced certain gendered types (for example, 'masculine' or 'feminine'). A consideration of Judith Becker's writings on the enactment of gendered forms might have enlightened a reader's understanding of the ways child preachers both challenged and adhered to traditional practices in terms of public image, dress, hairstyle, and so on, yet her name is curiously missing from

the bibliography. Regardless of these issues, however, Robinson and Ruff's narrative advances a number of fascinating arguments and the above issues hardly detract from the quality of its elucidation of a phenomenon on which most history books of the era mention little or nothing. The book joins the ranks of a growing number of studies on religion and the body, especially as the authors situate the gendered, visual, public bodies of these charismatic children as a lens through which to view the development of evangelicalism in the United States at that time. As such, *Out of the Mouths of Babes* is an important foray into the developments of evangelicals of interwar America. Beyond themes of gender, body, embodiment, and children's studies, this book will benefit scholars broadly interested in the history of 20th-century American religion, and it is required reading for scholars of revivalism, Pentecostalism, and evangelicalism.