

RELIGION

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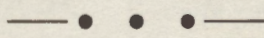
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Charles M. Sheldon's *In His Steps*: Kansas's Great Accidental Bestseller

By Tim Miller



Charles M. Sheldon was a name familiar to people all over the world for many decades. With the single exception of Dwight D. Eisenhower, he was arguably the most famous Kansan of all time. He was a bestselling author, a sometime Christian journalist, and a passionate social gospel crusader for church and social reform who gave distinguished service to the struggles for temperance and world peace. Yet, through it all he was a modest and unassuming man, a prophet with plenty of honor in his home state.

The catapult to fame (but never fortune) for Charles Sheldon was a simple but subtly insightful little novel called *In His Steps*. This inspiring tract—only one of dozens which Sheldon wrote, the rest being modest successes at best—sold millions, maybe tens of millions, of copies and was read by evangelical Christians the world over. It deeply touched millions of lives.

The story of the publication of *In His Steps* has been told many times, but rarely accurately. Many of those who marveled at the success of the book, unfortunately, never stopped to separate fact from fiction. Indeed, until Topeka historian John W. Ripley did a good deal of spadework a decade and a half ago, the story had apparently never been written accurately.¹ Ripley lays the blame for many of the misperceptions about the book squarely on Sheldon's shoulders. Sheldon for nearly 30 years after its publication refused to write about or discuss it for publication, mainly because he wanted the message of the book to stand on its own; he didn't think there was any value in looking at his own role in it all. Later Sheldon wrote two basic accounts of the history of the

novel, in 1925 and 1938, both of them loaded with errors. The reasons for his negligence are several: he was a romantic storyteller, not a researcher, and thus used his faulty memory rather than hard research as a basis for his accounts of it; he was a fast writer (during seminary he could write an original short story a day, stuff good enough to sell regularly) who clearly did no fact-checking; he probably considered details a historian would deem crucial to be unworthy of mention.

In His Steps was the seventh in a series of "sermon stories" which Sheldon had begun reading to his congregation in 1891. That sermonic form emerged from a problem familiar to more than a few pastors: low attendance, in this case at the Sunday evening services. The Central Congregational Church neighborhood on the fringes of Topeka was still thinly populated, and the stalwart souls who made up the church were often not very inspired to slog through the mud to turn out for an evening service after attending Sunday school, morning services, and the Christian Endeavor meeting. Sheldon put his finger on the problem of preaching the second sermon of the day when he said in 1935, "I told all I knew in the morning, and besides why should I preach another sermon to people who did not live up to the first one?"² Fairly quickly, in the summer of 1891, he hit upon a solution: he would write a story to be read to the congregation in place of a sermon, reading a chapter a week; and he would end each chapter at a critical point in the action so that people would want to come back the next week. Sheldon may not have known it, but he just may have been the inventor of the soap opera.

Sheldon thought he was on solid biblical ground

in writing fiction: "Christ used the short religious story in the shape of the parable, as the chief vehicle for conveying His ideas to the world. Why it has been so little used for advancing the kingdom since the dawn of Christianity, it is hard to explain."³

According to a story Sheldon told many times, he told his mother, with whom he was then living, of his scheme, and she responded, "What would the deacons say? They hired you to preach and they would not like to have you reading stories to their children." To which the budding preacher replied, "Well, I just won't ask them. I'll just start the series and see what they say."⁴

The answer came quickly. Within three weeks of the beginning of the first story, *Richard Bruce, or The Life That Now Is*, Central Church was packed every Sunday night. The deacons never had a chance to object, and Sheldon read sermon stories until he retired in 1919.

In His Steps: A Synopsis

This sermon story is set in Raymond, a small midwestern city. Its chief hero, the Rev. Henry Maxwell, is the pastor of the First Church of Raymond. Raymond is more than a little like Topeka, and Maxwell expounds ideas much like Sheldon's. First Church is a socially prominent place. The story opens on a Friday morning, when Maxwell is trying to finish his Sunday sermon, using for a text I Peter 2:21—"For hereunto were ye called; because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example that ye should follow his steps." Suddenly he is interrupted by the doorbell: a tramp has stopped, asking the minister for help in finding a job. Maxwell, irritated at the interruption, replies that jobs are tight and that he cannot help.

On Sunday morning the fashionable First Church holds its morning service and Maxwell preaches earnestly on following in the steps of Jesus. At the end of the sermon there is an interruption—a man is speaking aloud from the back of the sanctuary. Determined to have his say, the man strides to the front to address the congregation. Maxwell notices that he is the tramp who visited him on Friday. The tramp gives an eloquent speech, which we reproduce in part:

"I've tramped through this city for three days trying to find a job; and in all that time I've not had a word of sympathy or comfort except from your minister here, who said he was sorry for me and hoped I would find a job somewhere. I suppose it is because you get so imposed on by the professional tramp that you have lost your interest in any other sort. I'm not blaming anybody, am I? Just stating facts. Of course, I understand you can't all go out of your way to hunt up jobs for other people like me. I'm not asking you to; but what I feel puzzled about is what is meant by following Jesus. What do you mean when you sing 'I'll go with Him, with Him, all the way?' Do you mean that you are suffering and denying yourselves and trying to save lost, suffering

humanity just as I understand Jesus did? What do you mean by it? I see the ragged edge of things a good deal. I understand there are more than five-hundred men in this city in my case. Most of them have families. My wife died four months ago. I'm glad she is out of trouble. My little girl is staying with a printer's family until I find a job. Somehow I get puzzled when I see so many Christians living in luxury and singing, 'Jesus, I my cross have taken, all to leave and follow Thee,' and remember how my wife died in a tenement in New York City, gasping for air and asking God to take the little girl too. Of course I don't expect you people can prevent every one from dying of starvation, lack of proper nourishment and tenement air, but what does following Jesus mean? I understand that Christian people own a good many of the tenements. A member of a church was the owner of the one where my wife died, and I have wondered if following Jesus all the way was true in his case. . . . It seems to me there's an awful lot of trouble in the world that somehow wouldn't exist if all the people who sing such songs went and lived them out. . . . But what would Jesus do? . . . It seems to me sometimes as if the people in the big churches had good clothes and nice houses to live in, and money to spend for luxuries, and could go away on summer vacations and all that, while the people outside the churches, thousands of them, I mean, die in tenements, and walk the streets for jobs, and never have a piano or a picture in the house, and grow up in misery and drunkenness and sin."

"I want volunteers from the First Church who will pledge themselves, earnestly and honestly for an entire year, not to do anything without first asking the question, 'What would Jesus do?'"

Suddenly the tramp falters and collapses. A few days later he dies. The incident has been the talk of the town, and the next Sunday Maxwell's church is packed. Maxwell gives a challenging speech of his own and ends by calling church members to action: "I want volunteers from the First Church who will pledge themselves, earnestly and honestly for an entire year, not to do anything without first asking the question, 'What would Jesus do?'"

To his astonishment, 50 parishioners remain after the service to take on the commitment to live as Jesus would. The balance of *In His Steps* is the story of how they go about it.

The first case study is that of Edward Norman,

editor of the *Raymond Daily News*. His first action is to drop coverage of prizefights. Readers immediately begin to desert the paper, and the advertisers begin to cancel their contracts. Then Norman cancels liquor and tobacco advertising, saying that a paper run by Jesus wouldn't carry it. Finally he cancels the Sunday edition of the paper, since he doesn't believe that people should work on that day.

Other members of First Church also make big changes. Alexander Powers, the superintendent of the railroad office, discovers that his road is giving rebates to large shippers, in direct defiance of the interstate commerce laws. He resigns in protest. Rachel Winslow, the church's golden-voiced soloist, receives a lucrative offer from an opera company but turns it down, choosing instead to sing at revivals in the slums. Many church members get involved in social work in the slums, in fact, soon the town is a changed place. And so it goes. Eventually the work in Raymond attracts notice from outsiders, and similar programs are established in Chicago. The world doesn't become perfect overnight, but at the end of the book the committed reformers are working steadily to create the kind of world Jesus would want.

Peggy Greene of Topeka pointed out, "many church people disapproved of novels" in the 1890s, "but because In His Steps was called a 'sermon story,' they could enjoy it without feeling guilty."

Such was the story which swept the Christian world. The original reading of the tale in 1896 was relatively uneventful. But even as Sheldon was reading it from the pulpit, it was reaching a wider public. It was being published as a serial in *The Advance*, a Congregational weekly. The readers loved it and urged its publication in book form.

Thus Sheldon went to Chicago and approached at least two major publishers there, the McClurg Company and Fleming H. Revell. They both turned him down. Giving up on the big time, Sheldon asked the Advance company to issue the book, which it did in 1897. Sales were immediately strong, quickly reaching hundreds of thousands. Then, in 1899, the dam burst. Other publishers figured out that the magazine issues of *The Advance* were never copyrighted; thus the entire story was thrown into the public domain. Soon there were dozens of unauthorized editions in circulation.

The lack of a valid copyright naturally cut deeply into Sheldon's royalties. Some sensational articles about Sheldon alleged that he never made anything at all on it; that story was largely propelled by a Ripley's "Believe It or Not" syndicated cartoon on August 5, 1938, which said that the author "never received a cent in royalties!" But the Advance company had paid him \$75 for the serial originally, and Sheldon's

contract called for a 10% royalty on Advance book copies, which were sold at 10¢, 25¢, and \$1.00. By the time the copyright defect had become well known, Advance had sold between 400,000 and 600,000 copies, meaning that Sheldon should have received many thousands of dollars more. After the pirate editions began to appear, Sheldon did receive small, token payments from some of the publishers, and one of them, Grosset and Dunlap, voluntarily paid Sheldon royalties until his death, a total of about \$7,000. Thus Sheldon should have made over \$10,000—perhaps more than that, although probably not vastly more—on his novel. Given the sales of the book that isn't much, but neither is it true that he received "not a cent."

Dozens of publishers, millions of copies

Before very long millions of copies of *In His Steps* were in print, mainly in paperback editions selling for prices ranging from five cents to half a dollar. My research to date has uncovered 67 publishers in the English language, some of whom issued multiple editions. There were a number of special editions for particular purposes, such as the one issued by the Woolworth company for sale in its dime stores. In addition, the book turned up in countless millions of copies of newspapers and magazines. In 1899 and 1900 the American Press Association, which supplied feature material to more than half of the nation's 16,000 daily and weekly newspapers, offered the novel to its subscribers. Some printed it as a serial, some as a special section of a single paper.

The book fared even better in Great Britain than it did in the United States. Beginning in 1898 British editions appeared, ranging in price from six shillings downward to one penny. Some British ministers distributed copies wholesale to their parishioners. Indeed, so popular was the book in Great Britain that some observers began to speak of the new cult of "Sheldonism."⁵ A British reporter told of a visit to a bookstore thus:

"The name loomed up everywhere in the shop . . . Nothing half so wonderful has happened before in the publishing trade."⁶

How Many Copies?

No one has any idea how many copies of *In His Steps* have been printed. If one includes periodical printings in the count, the number is in the tens or hundreds of millions. Book printings may be as few as eight million or as many as 30 million. Sheldon himself once wrote, "The Editor of *Atlantic Monthly* (Edward Weeks) is my authority for stating that over eight-million copies have been published and sold in the United States and over twelve million in Great Britain and Europe. The same estimate has been given by Mr. (Gilbert) Seldes in the *Saturday Evening Post*. These figures do not include the sales of translations of which there are over twenty."⁷ But where did Weeks and Seldes get their figures? From Sheldon himself! John Ripley has described how it happened:

"In the introductory paragraphs of his *Saturday Evening Post* article about best sellers, 'Over the Tops,' (Apr. 25, 1936), Gilbert Seldes gives full credit for his sales figures to Edward Weeks' 'A Modern Estimate of American Best Sellers, 1875-1933.' . . . Only recently we learned that many years ago Mr. Weeks himself revealed the source of his statistical information about *In His Steps*. . . . Weeks states that "—Charles Sheldon himself supplied me with the American sales of *In His Steps* (8,000,000) and added that world sales of the book must come close to 24,000,000."

"Now there is a revelation that should go into the records as a rarely executed literary triple play, Sheldon to Weeks to Seldes and back to Sheldon."⁸

Sales were immediately strong, quickly reaching hundreds of thousands. Then, in 1899, the dam burst. Other publishers figured out that the magazine issues of The Advance were never copyrighted; thus the entire story was thrown into the public domain. Soon there were dozens of unauthorized editions in circulation.

The Weeks estimate has been used by many others discussing the book's sales. In 1947, however, Frank Luther Mott, the dean of the School of Journalism at the University of Missouri, questioned such totals. When Mott questioned Sheldon in 1942, Sheldon "had nothing to offer save some anecdotes of miscellaneous guesses which enthusiasts had made."⁹ Mott obtained sales estimates from five U.S. publishers, totalling 540,000 copies. He concluded, "It is an insufficient basis for a satisfactory estimate, but enough to make us fairly sure that the grand total for the United States did not greatly exceed two million." Then he added, "Six million seems a not unreasonable guess for British sales."¹⁰ Thus Mott's estimate comes to eight-million copies. However, my own guess is that Mott was too conservative. There seems to be good evidence that *Advance* along sold upwards of 600,000 American copies. The five publishers Mott surveyed reported sales averaging over 100,000 each; since there were over 60 publishers in all, sales certainly ran to several millions. Copies in two dozen foreign languages would boost that higher. But no one will ever have reliable figures.

Sales, incidentally, continue to be strong. Sales were reportedly running at about 100,000 a year in the 1960's;¹¹ at this writing nine American publishers list the book in print, in thirteen editions in English,

and another publisher markets a Spanish edition. A comic book version has also been available in recent years. One must presume there wouldn't be so many in on the action if it were not a worthwhile proposition.

Just as the number of copies cannot be determined, the number of translations seems destined to remain a mystery. Sheldon once said he believed there had been 45 of them,¹² but evidence for so many is missing. Several writers have compiled lists of translations; by collating them one can come up with a master list of 25 to 30. The major languages of Western Europe, including Welsh and Gaelic, are there, as well as several from Eastern Europe and the Middle East. There were Chinese and Japanese translations, and Sheldon claimed that the book was even translated into two constructed languages, Esperanto and Pasilaly.

The translations involve some interesting tales. The Russian version was outlawed after the revolution by the Soviets, so the translator prudently had printed on the title page, "translated by no one."¹³ When Sheldon received a Spanish copy from Argentina, he was surprised to read that the hero, Henry Maxwell, had become "the Reverendo Enrico Ford." Sheldon wrote to the translator, remonstrating over this change, and the translator replied, "I am very sorry, Mr. Sheldon, but the fact is that Henry FORD is better known down here than Henry Maxwell."¹⁴

There were several dramatizations of the book; one of the first was handled by Sheldon himself, in collaboration with Professor F. H. Lane, the head of the theater department at Washburn college. Sheldon himself played the role of Maxwell in several Topeka productions, and the dramatic version was widely used by church drama groups across the country. A radio version, in 26 half-hour installments, premiered on KTSJ in Topeka on Easter Sunday, 1947, and was subsequently carried on many other stations.¹⁵

Perhaps the best dramatic adaption was a lantern slide version which appeared in 1900. George Bond of Chicago produced a "photo play" which consisted of 150 hand-colored glass transparencies, together with a script. The pictures, posed by professional actors, were of remarkable quality. John Ripley believes that bond's version of *In His Steps* was "the very first photographic screen adaptation of an American novel, and would set the pattern for the most successful type of Hollywood movies,"¹⁶

Why the success?

Many have explained the success of *In His Steps* as deriving mainly, or entirely, from the copyright problem and consequent flood of pirate editions; but of course someone had to be waiting to buy all of those copies. As Gerald D. McDonald of the New York public Library has pointed out,

"In the publishing history of Charles Sheldon's famous book we can point to factors which normally would have impeded its sale. It was first issued (1897) in unprepossessing

format as the very first fiction title by a religious press with only limited experience in publishing tracts and collections of sermons. It did not ride to popularity on the strength of good reviews, national advertising, the sponsorship of a book club, or the fame of its author. . . .¹⁷

. . . the book appeared during an era in which religious leaders were increasingly critical of social inequity or injustice; it became the tract that really brought the social crisis home to the masses. It attacked drunkenness, by any standard a major social problem then and now, one which many Protestants were actively fighting. It advocated fair treatment for workers and the elimination of Sunday labor.

Despite such handicaps, the book did receive several useful boosts, as McDonald goes on to explain. Sheldon was a hero to millions of members of Christian Endeavor, the great ecumenical youth movement which was at the peak of its influence at the turn of the century, and the book became a popular gift for Endeavorers. Some merchants used it as a premium, and many firms distributed copies to their employees.¹⁸ And, as Peggy Green of Topeka has pointed out, "many church people disapproved of novels" in the 1890s, "but because *In His Steps* was called a 'sermon story,' they could enjoy it without feeling guilty."¹⁹ Most importantly, the book appeared during an era in which religious leaders were increasingly critical of social inequity or injustice; it became the tract that really brought the social crisis home to the masses. It attacked drunkenness, by any standard a major social problem then and now, one which many Protestants were actively fighting. It advocated fair treatment for workers and the elimination of Sunday labor. To quote McDonald again,

"It came out of an age of reform when idealists wanted to clean up politics, rid the cities of their slums, and find a personal answer to the moral confusion they knew existed in their own lives. Without reading like a sociological treatise, the book managed to touch briefly upon such topics as technological unemployment, trade unionism, monopolies, 'the new woman,' the single tax,

socialism, temperance, pure foods, settlement houses and city missions, the cooperative movement and 'the mess in city hall.' It was timely, you see, and some of it was timeless."²⁰

In short, the impact of the book was enormous. Eric F. Goldman quite properly included it on his list of thirteen books that have changed America, along with the *Federalist Papers* and *Uncle Tom's Cabin*.²¹ The writer who in 1899 asserted that Sheldon during the course of a year "preached to about ten times as many people as all the other Congregational ministers in the country put together" was not far from the mark.²²

Nowhere was there a stronger embrace of "Sheldonism" than in the pastor's own church. Before he had even finished reading the sermon story in the fall of 1896, a group was organized to try to live up to the "What would Jesus do?" motto. Many Central Church members, especially the younger ones, took the pledge. Sheldon was among them.

Sometimes Sheldon seemed bitter at his loss of royalties, as in his pamphlet entitled "The History of 'In His Steps'" (1938), where several times he pointedly mentioned that this or that publisher never paid him a cent. Sometimes the grouching was good-natured; in one article, for example, he claimed that the special edition sold in Woolworth stores had sold over 300,000 copies, and so "I feel proud every time I go by the Woolworth Tower in New York to think I helped build it."²³

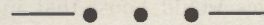
But most often Sheldon expressed satisfaction that the book was so widely read. His autobiography seems to sum up his thoughts:

"If the book had had a clear title the probability is that it would have had a small audience. The very fact that over fifty different publishers put the book out gave it a wide reading, and established its public as no one publisher could possibly have done.

"The only regret the author has perhaps felt as the years have gone on has been his helplessness to minister to the pitiful needs of those who have held up beseeching hands for help. . . .

"Aside from these reflections he is profoundly grateful for all the apparent help the story has been to many souls whose letters are too precious and sacred to show to others. These are among the riches he would not exchange for all the wealth of the richest monied princes of the earth."²⁴

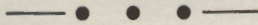
Tim Miller is lecturer in religious studies at The University of Kansas.



NOTES

1. John W. Ripley, "Last Rites for a Few Myths," *Shawnee County Historical Society Bulletin* no. 44, Winter, 1967; John W. Ripley, "The Strange Story of Charles M. Sheldon's *In His Steps*," *Kansas Historical Quarterly*, 34, 3, Autumn, 1968.
2. "Many Join in Tribute to Noted Topeka Minister-Author," *Topeka Daily Capital*, May 4, 1935.
3. George T.B. Davis, "Charles M. Sheldon, Novelist," *Our Day* (Chicago), 18, 3, March, 1899, pp. 75-76.
4. Cecil Howes, "Dr. Sheldon and Topeka Mark Half a Century 'In His Steps,'" *Kansas City Times*, December 12, 1938.
5. Gerald D. McDonald, "*In His Steps*—All Time Best Seller on Nobody's Best Seller List," *Shawnee County Historical Society Bulletin* no. 44, Winter, 1967, p. 4.
6. "The Pulpit: The Man Who Has Reached the Masses," *Century Magazine*, ca. 1900 (undated clipping in Sheldon Room, Central Church, Topeka).
7. Charles M. Sheldon, "The History of 'In His Steps,'" pamphlet (Topeka, privately printed, 1938), pp. 18-19.
8. Ripley, "Last Rites," p. 25.
9. Frank Luther Mott, *Golden Multitudes: The Story of Best Sellers in the United States* (New York: Macmillan, 1947), p. 196. See also Sheldon, "The History of 'In His Steps,'" pp. 13-14.
10. *Ibid.* (Mott), pp. 196-197.
11. Peggy Greene, "Best Sellers from the Pulpit," *Topeka Daily Capital* (Midway magazine supplement), October 29, 1967. See also Greene's apparent source, James C. Marvin, "A Lively Septuagenarian," *Shawnee County Historical Society Bulletin* no. 44, Winter, 1967, p. ii.
12. Glenn Clark, *The Man Who Walked In His Steps* (St. Paul, Minnesota: Macalester Park Publishing Company, 1946), p. 22.
13. L. H. Robbins, "Militant Pacifist," *New York Times Magazine*, December 3, 1939.
14. Sheldon, "The History of 'In His Steps,'" pp. 16-17.
15. "'In His Steps,' Dr. Sheldon's all-Time Best Selling Novel, Made Radio Drama for KTSJ," *Topeka State Journal*, March 25, 1947.
16. John W. Ripley, "George Bond Made Photo Play from Popular 'In His Steps,'" *Copper's Weekly*, February 13, 1968.
17. McDonald, "*In His Steps*—All-Time Best Seller. . . ." p. 1.
18. *Ibid.*, pp. 4-5.
19. Greene, "Best Seller from the Pulpit," p. 5M.
20. McDonald, "*In His Steps*—All-Time Best Seller. . . ." pp. 5-6.
21. Eric F. Goldman, "Books that Changed America," *Saturday Review*, 36, 27, July 4, 1953, pp. 9, 38.
22. "The Man Who Has Reached the Masses," unattributed clipping, ca. 1899, in Sheldon Room.
23. Charles M. Sheldon, "Yours Truly," *Dr. Sheldon's Scrap Book* (New York: Christian Herald Association, 1942), p. 125.
24. Sheldon, *Charles M. Sheldon: His Life Story*, pp. 110-111.

“. . . the book managed to touch briefly upon such topics as technological unemployment, trade unionism, monopolies, 'the new woman,' the single tax, socialism, temperance, pure foods, settlement houses and city missions, the cooperative movement and 'the mess in city hall.' It was timely, you see, and some of it was timeless.”



Mini-Conferences Begin February 13

This year's Mini-Conferences, open to the public without charge, are scheduled in Irma I. Smith Hall on the following Mondays:

- Feb. 13 "Religion and Film," John R. May, Professor of English, Louisiana State University.
- Mar. 19 "Story & Folk Traditions," Sam D. Gill, Professor of Religious Studies, University of Colorado.
- Apr. 9 "Story and Asian Religions," Spencer Lavan, Professor of Humanities," College of Osteopathic Medicine, New England University.
- Apr. 23 "Story, Women, & Religion." Sandra L. Zimdars-Swartz, Assistant Professor of Religious Studies, KU.

Each conference begins at 9:45 a.m.

Teachers' Workshops in April

Classroom resources about religion will be featured at parallel workshops for public school teachers in April:

April 13 at Lawrence

April 27 at Hays

The day long study sessions are open to Kansas elementary and secondary teachers who register in advance. Catalogues of the Public Education Religion Studies teaching resources will be distributed.

A grant to the Kansas School of Religion will underwrite the workshops, including an allowance for participants to hire substitute teachers to teach their classes while they attend the workshop. Leadership includes Alan Miller, education professor at Fort Hays State and Lynn Taylor, professor of religious studies at K.U.

For further information contact—

Public Education Religion Studies
Kansas School of Religion
1300 Oread
Lawrence, KS 66045

Macquarrie Lectures, April 9 and 10

The 1984 KSR Lectures will be delivered by John Macquarrie of Oxford University in England, April 9 and 10. Professor Macquarrie's principal lecture will be Tuesday, April 10, 8:00 p.m. in the Kansas Union. His subject is "In Search of Humanity," developed from his latest book. The public is invited; there is no charge.

Dr. Macquarrie's K.U. campus schedule is available upon request; phone 843-7257.

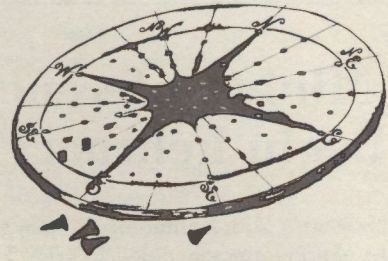
KSR Scholars 1983-84

Berris Samples
Joanne Hickey
Jean Ireland

Grants are awarded annually to religion students upon faculty selection. The scholarships come from funds generated by the donors to the Kansas School of Religion.

The Kansas School of Religion scholarships are open to all students without discrimination.

Traverse Log



The current renewal of interest in religion (also called a revival)—how sweet it is! In fact it is going so good it sometimes gives off a cotton candy ooze. A signal truth distills in the sweetness: religion never had it so good.

To a generation which has been hostage to uncertainty, religion now offers certitude. Campus behavior currently on tap illustrates this. A *Newsweek* poll reported that fifty percent of college students describe their religious beliefs as "very important," compared to 39% who so indicated four years ago. Interdenominational fundamentalist groups are booming. In some schools religion class enrollments are too. At our campus here on the banks of the raging Kaw, informal Bible study groups for residence houses and dormitory floors are the in thing.

Great—and let's grant its sincerity.

But "in" religion has a built in temptation. It likes to pipe the dance, everybody's dance. It likes to call the dos-sa-dos however it can. Maybe success makes religion nervous—something like playing first cannon in the 1812 Overture?

Since Constantine (the first Christian emperor) when Christianity got in politically, it has been tempted to claim government power to control whatever was out. Persecution of other religions, Christian dissenters and wandering unpopular movements ensued. "In" religion now is set to work up political muscle, such as civil definition of religion and the effort for legal suppression of cults. From our colonial day of the *eglise dominant* on, a slow-motion adoption party over the Cabbage Patch Doll of government clout has intrigued religion. The contemporary Texas Servants of God Association right off spawned a Political Action Committee to work for the election of like-minded candidates for office. And, of course, other better financed and smoother oiled religious groups such as Christian Voice and Moral Majority, have long done this very well on a larger field.

This kind of terminal self-righteousness leads away from the function of religion itself. For instance, congregations, black or white, who do not go along with the kind of racialism reported in Bob Jones University have a truer lever on the problem than quick-fix government treatment. It is called *free exercise* of religion—their own.

Our great United States constitution provides freedom of religious practice. Let's practice it. As we fear misuse of state power in religion (some one's else) we might get on with practicing religious liberty—ours.

We have room for the free Jed Smock evangelists, and for sister Cindy, the disco queen turned preacher. Agree with them or not, their methods suggest the tools natural to religion. How much better to be approached by an evangelist with a tract in his hand than by an officer with a warrant in his.

The real thing can hold its own. Religious freedom is not a concession of the state to a believer. It is a piece of religion itself; it cries out to be used.

In a European city one day, I was thrilled to watch the impressive street parade on the Festival of Corpus Christi. It was punctuated by canon fire up in the Alps. The hundreds of marchers included brass bands, fraternities, orders of robed nuns and of brothers, chanting priests, sparkling little confirmands dressed in starched white, assorted parishioners, all proceeding reverently to the cathedral. Bringing up the end of this solemn procession was a bishop carrying the sacred host. Preceded by a crucifer and a censor, he walked under a canopy.

The impressive sight, however, was that this bearer of the host was accompanied on each side by a squad of soldiers with rifles at the ready and bayonets fixed.

I respect this as a symbol of honor for the sacred in that culture. But really the military aids were not necessary. The watching throngs genuflected in turn any way as the bishop passed.

Religion does not need nor does it function well with other power. The real thing can do all right on its own. Try it.

RELIGION

(USPS 460-280)

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