CHAPTER 6

Producing Change: Kathryn Kuhlman and Modern Media

Amy Collier Artman

Introduction

Never before had a religious leader hosted a television talk show like *I Believe in Miracles*. Between 1965 and 1975, during the height of the Charismatic Renewal Movement, healing evangelist and renewal superstar Kathryn Kuhlman hosted a syndicated television show that broke new ground and transformed the practice of Christianity in America. On September 12, 1973, Kathryn Kuhlman welcomed her guest Arlene Strackbein to *I Believe in Miracles* with these words: “My guest today has never seen one of our telecasts. That seems almost impossible when you consider the millions who have.” Kuhlman had a propensity for hyperbole, but by 1973 it was safe to say that millions had indeed been exposed to her syndicated television show. During its ten-year run, Kuhlman recorded over 500 episodes of *I Believe in Miracles*, which were broadcast throughout the United States and Canada. *I Believe in Miracles* worked in concert with Kuhlman’s best-selling books, popular radio shows, and sold-out Miracle Services to provide the viewing public access to charismatic Christianity on a scale not seen before. As Kuhlman noted in a conversation with her *Miracles* guest Edna Wilder, “You had never read *I Believe in Miracles*, never seen a telecast, never heard a radio program?” Wilder said no. Kuhlman then exclaimed, “Where in the world have ya been?”

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1 “Arlene Strackbein,” *I Believe in Miracles*, September 12, 1973, vhs, V31, Collection 212, the Kathryn Kuhlman Collection, Archives of the Billy Graham Center, Wheaton, IL.
2 *Miracles* was not produced by CBS, but rather was a production of the Kathryn Kuhlman Foundation. Ray Faiola, Director, CBS Audience Services, explains, “While *I Believe in Miracles* was taped at CBS in Hollywood, it was done so merely on the basis of rented space. The program was neither broadcast by CBS nor syndicated by CBS or its subsidiaries.” Ray Faiola, email message to author, June 22, 2006.
I Believe in Miracles

Kuhlman’s use of the talk show format was part of a larger, deeper change in American Christianity influenced by television itself. Televising Christianity did more than simply offer a new field for revival and evangelism; it changed the way the Christian message was presented and received. At the forefront, *I Believe in Miracles* contributed to the transformation of charismatic Christianity and American Christianity overall, a transformation produced through the medium of television. *I Believe in Miracles* presented charismatic Christianity through a collection of narratives told by those who had experienced it. The great majority of the shows featured common people telling uncommon stories that contained within them the markers of charismatic Christianity as it developed in the Charismatic Renewal Movement of the mid-1960s to 1970s. People curious about charismatic Christianity were able to watch others who looked remarkably average speak about dramatically exceptional manifestations of the Spirit. If someone wanted to know about divine healing, Kuhlman’s show was there to watch. It was a non-threatening format, easily available due to Kuhlman’s broad syndication, and possessed the powerful option for the viewer of choice. If you didn’t like it, you could switch it off, and no one need ever know you ‘experimented’ with charismatic Christianity.

The new accessibility of charismatic Christianity, with the accompanying anonymity provided by television, significantly benefited what had been considered by many mainstream Christians a suspect form of religiosity on the fringes of American Christianity. Television viewers could now experiment with new forms of Christianity in the privacy of their own homes without the risk of public exposure. This was an important component in the transformation of the image of charismatic Christianity, since many in the popular culture, the press, and mainstream Christianity historically regarded charismatics as freakish. Pentecostal evangelist Oral Roberts, a contemporary of Kuhlman, became a lightning rod for national discomfort with the charismatic emphasis on faith healing. In 1955, *The Christian Century* cautioned against “this Oral Roberts sort of thing” and declared that charismatic forms of Christianity “can do the cause of vital religion ... harm.” A year later, proponents of divine healing were dubbed “racketeers” and “practitioners of religious quackery” by the National

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4 Oral Roberts (1918–2009) was the first American Pentecostal evangelist to lead large televised revivals in which worshipers claimed to be miraculously healed. Early in his ministry career he held revivals in tents seating as many as 18,000 that he began filming for television. He was known for inviting viewers to put their hands on their TV sets for his closing prayer in order to receive healing power. In 1965 he launched Oral Roberts University in Tulsa, Oklahoma.