Sanctified Passion or Carnal Pleasure?
A Review Essay


Picture to yourself, if your imagination has the strength, a meeting of the Holy Rollers, where men and women shout frenziedly, draw themselves into contortions and roll about the floor as if they were wild beasts or humans possessed of demons.

Intensify the picture by giving it as a companion one in which the Holy Rollers are offering a sacrifice. See a great fire surrounded by women and children who hold loved things in their hands and cast them forth into the flames as they are moved by the words of a leader.

See, also, mistily, however, the same flames blazing as if they waited for more and think of the little children that are to be their human fuel, if the reports of Pacific coast papers correctly forecast the future intentions of this curious sect.1

Word pictures such as these published in 1906 were designed to sell papers. They would do the same today. “Holy Rollers,” they were called, a moniker used indiscriminately to describe any number of groups that did not conform to commonly accepted standards of religious practice. And a coffee-klatch of recent German émigrés in St. Louis, Missouri, good Lutheran women, decided the “Holy Rollers” needed help.

Mrs. Bertha von Porten was hosting a coffee-klatch when her husband returned from work, newspaper in hand. The women asked Mr. von Porten to summarize the headlines for them. He repeated the story of alleged events

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concerning the “Holy Rollers” in Monrovia, California. The women were immediately shaken as they imagined these people who would sacrifice their children. “Why doesn’t the government intervene?” they asked. “What can be done to help these people?” “Have they never heard of Christ that they can believe the stories made up by Creffield?” And they decided to send a Christian missionary to the west coast to explain the Gospel to the “Holy Rollers.”

Readers were misled when the reporter confused the “Holy Rollers” of Franz Edmund Creffield of Corvallis, Oregon, with a completely unrelated group of “Holy Rollers” in Monrovia, California. The “Holy Rollers” in Monrovia, California, were a direct outgrowth of the Azusa Street Revival. Glenn Cook went from Azusa Street to the nearby Holiness Church in Monrovia, where he preached on the subject of Abraham’s willingness to sacrifice Isaac as described in Genesis 22. Neighbors heard enough shouted snippets from the sermon to conjure up a rumor that the “Holy Rollers” in Monrovia were planning, quite literally, to sacrifice their children.

Eight hundred miles to the north of Los Angeles, Franz Creffield had held his own “Holy Roller” meetings. In 1902 he cried, “God, save us from compromising preachers!” in an article published by Martin Wells Knapp, among whose disciples he worshipped in Oregon. He had been a successful church planter in The Dalles, Oregon, where he organized a Holiness mission. Creffield went on to serve as a Salvation Army officer. He also participated in services led by M. L. Ryan. In short, he was well known in Oregon’s Holiness circles. A diminutive, charismatic German immigrant, Creffield was successful in attracting a small but extremely loyal following of men and women (mostly women) that formed a Radical Holiness sect in Corvallis, Oregon. The press quickly dubbed them “Holy Rollers.”

It was not a sect that spoke in tongues but, rather, one that held a radical position on sanctification. The names of those who joined the sect were entered into a “Holy Roll” and they were expected to follow Creffield’s directions, since he allegedly received them directly from God. That meant lying prostrate or rolling on the floor while praying in highly demonstrative ways. It meant casting possessions that stood between them and perfection into a literal bonfire. It meant

2  “Send A Missionary West,” 4.