

Response to Kathryn Lofton's *Oprah: The Gospel of an Icon*

In the introduction to *Oprah: The Gospel of an Icon*, Kathryn Lofton promises to use the phenomenon of Oprah Winfrey as a way to explore the intersection of religion with corporate and popular culture in contemporary society. This is an undertaking of which I heartily approve, since I believe that scholars of all stripes should be looking harder at popular culture than we have been for the past few decades. Lofton presents her work as a remedy for the persistent dichotomization of religious studies and cultural studies, a problem that places religion and consumption (material and mass media) in opposition to one another when in fact, she believes, they have been “collaborators” all along (13). This is her warning not to treat Oprah as simply a personal-enrichment expert, nor a marketing genius, nor a momentary celebrity obsession, nor even a worldly savior-in-the-making. She is all that and more, Lofton argues. In combining all of these aspects, Oprah sheds light on both the religious and the secular, both the “market imperative of our religious moment and the religious imperative of our market moment” (30). Lofton promises a critical examination of the intersection of these moments in the corpus of Oprah Winfrey.

Will the rest of the book deliver what is promised? It is hard to say from the introductory chapter. Oprah is a useful device through which to explore the themes that concern Lofton—but Winfrey is not the only combination of person, product and parousia to have inspired similar analytic interest. Coming first to mind, of course, is Elvis Presley. As celebrity, commodity and guru all rolled into one, the King proves that there is nothing new about this recipe; the scholars and social critics who have commented upon him have examined him in every possible combination of these and countless other roles. Elvis also has the advantage of being dead, something that Greil Marcus argues makes his persona even more susceptible to the slings and arrows of fans’, commentators’ and scholars’ myriad interpretations—including those which both sanctify and commodify him. As we have done unto Elvis, so may we do unto Oprah.

Harpo Productions, Inc. and Elvis Presley Enterprises, Inc. have much more in common than just a healthy bottom line. Yes, we buy what they are selling—because we

want to buy what they are selling. And if Elvis and Oprah weren't selling it to us, someone else would be. Indeed, many others are, if not as comprehensively as the King and O, who offer full lifestyle packages in contrast with other celebrities' smatterings of handbags, perfume, clothing, jewelry, kitchen equipment, furniture, exercise videos, inspirational poetry, and autobiographies. Something most academics fail to understand is just how much normal, mentally healthy people want this stuff, and for no other reason than that it is recommended to us by a celebrity. Another thing academics don't understand: that a desire for Oprah's preferred undergarment (Spanx!), or a picture of Elvis on your motorcycle helmet, or a bottle of Britney Spears' newest perfume, can go hand-in-hand with a critical perspective on celebrity marketing tactics. Just because we're buying, doesn't make us mindless consumers of pop culture pabulum.

Lofton acknowledges the presence of a critical, creative audience—and the importance of the audience in general—only briefly, and then only to dismiss the audience as unnecessary to an understanding of religion, from her perspective. In this book she promises to analyze Oprah's message without focusing on its "reception...in the pews" (27). Theologically, I suppose I can see how doctrine matters independent of adherents' applications of it. But when we're talking about popular and market gospels such as Oprah's, it seems odd to consider a message without also considering followers' reception of and responses to it. But of course, I am a sociologist of celebrity, so it makes sense that the most interesting thing to me about Oprah's message is what her fans/followers/adherents/devotees/believers do with it. I would be disappointed in a book-length analysis of Oprah-as-religious-phenomenon which focuses on her psalms but ignores the antiphon of the flock.

Lofton might want to check out a recent performance-art project by a Chicago woman who watched the "Oprah" show daily in 2008 and committed to implementing every piece of advice Winfrey gave during the calendar year. During her year of "Living Oprah", Robin Okrant, or "LO", as she came to be known, listened carefully and acted on all recommendations, big and small, specific and vague. She meditated daily and bought white jeans, prepared pumpkin chiffon pie and went to movies and concerts as suggested by Oprah. She expressed gratitude to friends and family members, read books on clutter and budgeting and women's health, and voted for Barack Obama. And she kept track of

how much it cost, in time, energy and cash. Thousands of hours, dollars and blog column-inches later, her year of living Oprah is over, but an appreciation of the full impact of her insights will have to wait for her forthcoming book on the subject (and if this isn't a perfect answer to the question "WWOD?", I don't know what is). We must suspect that LO's conclusions will have something to do with living Your Own Life, as opposed to living what Oprah has determined will be Your Best Life. As LO and her own legion of fans and blog commentators demonstrate, even the most dedicated of Winfrey's disciples can't help but acquire a critical consciousness of all that Oprah asks of us.

Alas, it is still *de rigueur* for academics to pooh-pooh the popular—to assert that because something is happening now, or on television, or before an audience of millions, that it can't possibly be as significant as what happened decades or centuries ago, or on stone tablets, or with only a small number of experts paying attention. Luckily, Lofton does not fall into that trap of false erudition. She knows that what Oprah says matters, and that it matters to the study of religion as well as the study of culture. But I fear that Lofton's stated goals will cause her to specifically overlook the thing that is most important about Winfrey for both academic camps: not just what she says, but how her followers respond to what she says. Like all gospels, the Gospel of Oprah must be interpreted, and has been interpreted in many different ways.

I am sure that some of Oprah's fans will read Lofton's book (though from the look of the introductory chapter its style seems dense and sesquipedalian in a way that may turn off popular readers). I will be interested to hear what they have to say about it—and since a cool, academic analysis of one's guru tends to generate strong reactions, I feel certain that Lofton will receive a flood of emails about her work. Wouldn't it be interesting if those reader responses could be entertained in a more public forum? Indeed, I am visualizing an episode of "Oprah" in which the author meets her readers, critics, and subject, and the Gospel and its interpretations can be openly discussed with the audience.

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