

Some Thoughts on Celebrity

Oprah is nothing more than a celebrity. There, I said it. She is everything Lofton describes and alludes to in this analysis yet, as Lofton will surely admit, she is more than the analysis suggests. Words, sentences, concepts, commentary, articles, books—many will try but who can define the indefinable, explain the unexplainable, or express the inexpressible? The Oprah is a complex phenomena to be sure, difficult to pin down in any one vector of society and irreducible in the cultural production of spectacle and moral community. Two points we can all agree on, however: Oprah is a celebrity, and celebrity culture can be religious culture.

Oprah would be nothing if she did not get the role of Sofia in *The Color Purple*. Starring in Steven Spielberg's film adaptation of Alice Walker's novel in 1985, Winfrey was catapulted to fame and fortune, and only as a celebrity did she evolve into an icon, a brand, a sacred site for the production and reproduction of religious meaning and practice. Without celebrity, she would be nothing; or rather she would be nothing that interesting, just another corporate ghost like Sam Walton haunting the aisles of our economic imaginations.

Celebrities rule our lives. Dead ones, living ones; fat ones, skinny ones; rich ones, poor ones...well maybe just rich ones. What does this devotion to the lives of celebrities say about American culture? Why do celebrities have such power in the everyday lives of millions of Americans?

The literature is decidedly mixed on these questions. Sociologists look squarely at the numbers and are dumbfounded when they see Americans spending billions of their hard-earned, and increasingly harder to keep, dollars to keep certain figures in the public eye, and in their private worlds; psychologists look probingly "inside the minds of stargazers," to borrow a subtitle from a recent book, to chart the borders between healthy encounters with stars and less rational attachments, if not pathological addictions, to celebrity; and theologians look disapprovingly at the attention given to a Brad Pitt, a Paris Hilton, or a Puff Daddy, and lament the clear and unmistakable downward turn in cultural values, a decline signaling moral confusion, ethical relativism, and Godless hedonism—idol worship in all its depraved glory.

But one point shared by all commentators is that the fame surrounding celebrity is a pervasive and powerful force in modern society, magnetizing and tempting millions of people who make significant investments, not exclusively financial, in what is often seen as a historically unique, curious cultural phenomenon.

Celebrity culture, the cult of celebrity, celebrity worship—these and other phrases are regularly used to capture the elusive, irreducible power of celebrity in the present and recent past. From the early twentieth century, when celebrities primarily emanated from the Hollywood film industry, to the start of the twenty-first century, when celebrity status is available to any one at a moment's notice, the public hunger for stardom marks a

distinctive cultural trait that has evolved into a confounding, omnipresent source of capital, consumption, and community across the globe.

It is also an unmistakable source for sacred action and meaning to fans who are devoted to stars and who secretly yearn to be intimate with them—if not desire to actually become one of them, which in these days of *American Idol* and other so-called reality shows is not so difficult to imagine. In the most personal, inaccessibly private forms of worship or in the most communal, spectacularly public displays of love and admiration, Americans look to the stars for guidance and inspiration, intimacy and ecstasy—powerful motives that bear on the sacred, and can transform entertainment into revelation, escapism into liberation, and mortals into gods.

Whether this power is tied to special charismatic qualities that mesmerize and attract others, or to compelling cosmic forces tied to fate and destiny, or to fundamental human desires for sex and companionship, one point is clear: it is a power that is not shared equally among all societal members, and those that do not have it will search for ways to get access to it.

Whether or not components of contemporary celebrity worship can be scientifically grounded in evolutionary theory and psychological predispositions, a brief glance through human history offers up ample evidence of communities being riveted by certain figures who are subject to imitation and become objects of devotion. Perhaps not celebrities in the modern sense of the term, Greek heroes, Jewish prophets, Christian saints, military leaders, and other figures enter a mythological terrain that inspires devotional practices, models cultural values, and frames the contours of what constitutes a truly meaningful life, as well as, in some circumstances, vast industries with commercial power in the material world.

Russell Crowe is certainly no Hercules, Charlton Heston is not quite Moses, Princess Diana is far removed from Saint Teresa of Avila, Oprah is not the Pope (as famously stated in *Vanity Fair*); but these and other contemporary celebrities—whether living, aged and close to death, or long dead—share some things in common with their historical counterparts: they move people to action as well as contemplation, they bear on the emotional lives of large numbers of people, they embody power that far exceeds the material riches that can accompany fame, and their personal life stories become public morality tales instructing larger communities about right and wrong, success and failure, fulfillment and tragedy.

Celebrities do more than simply capture the public's attention, whether for fifteen minutes or fifty years. Celebrityhood has become a fact of life, embedded in everyday experiences from supermarket checkout lines to E! Entertainment, from water cooler discussions to incessant award shows. Could such a pervasive, profound, and personally compelling cultural phenomenon have within it the potential for religious substance in everyday lives?

In the face of the overwhelming data—how people relate to celebrities, how they talk about them, how they dream about them, how they live with and for strangers, how they invest vast amounts of money and energy in them—it is equally possible that celebrities are not empty receptacles but fulfilling models who can give life purpose and embody a different set of strongly held, though less clearly articulated, ideals that many in society disagree with, if not find utterly disgraceful: the pursuit of physical beauty, the attainment of fame and wealth, the desire to be loved by adoring fans.

The culture of celebrity is a form of idol worship, to be sure, but it is also a well-spring for religious living in contemporary society that is satisfying and meaningful to millions who are intimately familiar with the biblical story of the Golden Calf and experience no tensions or conflicts when they venerate a singer or movie star, a sports legend or a talk show host. God is not relevant to this religious culture, scripture unnecessary for the sacred bonds between communities of fans and stars. The ease with which commerce and entertainment can intersect with devotion and reverence is a striking feature of celebrity culture, a spiritual-secular mixture that for many just does not make any sense at all. As Lofton remarks, “Oprah is not a religion,” a category too confining and narrow to capture what is sacred in America (in the same way one might say, for example, “science is not a religion—but it can be religious).

Celebrity religious culture does pose a real threat to traditional religions. The worship of dead cultural icons, as well as living successful stars from a range of cultural fields, such as sports or films, television or politics, is tempting to adherents of any number of religious traditions. Sometimes religious resources—myths, symbols, rituals, ethics, and so on—are found in the usual places, such as the bible or Koran, the Book of Mormon or the teachings of Buddha. But at other times many Americans find religious resources—myths, symbols, rituals, ethics, and so on—in less conventional places, like Oprah’s dynasty, or John Wayne’s legend, or Bruce Springsteen concerts.

I thought I had my fill of Oprah, but Lofton makes me thirst for more. More Oprah, not less, for a new generation of American religious historians who no longer see “the” secular, no longer believe the fictions about secularization, no longer see religion as separate from culture. Scholars of religion no longer need be imprisoned by the regime of the secular, suffocated by the “Protestant, Catholic, Jew” paradigm, and bored by the new pluralism celebrating multiple religious traditions. Hello Oprah and to the new religious landscape being excavated by Lofton and others who know where to find and analyze the religious, now.

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