

Kathryn Lofton's Guided Tour of the Swamp

I saw Oprah before she was The Oprah, when she hosted a local talk show in Chicago. Over twenty five years ago she did a live broadcast from my college campus, with her special guest Leo Buscaglia—the doctor of love and evangelist of hugging. You can imagine the scene.

Now, however, Oprah has transcended morning television and entered the realm of the mythological. By some accounts she is one of the wealthiest and possibly most powerful people in the country, a world-spanning entrepreneur and a girlfriend to millions. She has become an icon. That icon, Kathryn Lofton argues, tells us a great deal about the complex intersection (she aptly prefers swamp) of market, media, and religion. More importantly, Lofton says, Oprah as icon reveals a great deal about the meaning(s) of religion in our time. This introductory chapter gives us just a taste of the insights to come.

The mixture of celebrity and religion is not particularly new. George Whitefield, an itinerant evangelist who traveled from colony to colony in the 1740s, was North America's first major celebrity. Movements like Moral Re-Armament and Scientology have used celebrities—from Mae West to Tom Cruise—to draw popular attention. Many religious figures have become celebrities in the own right, such as Jim Bakker or Creflo Dollar, although their fame has generally been confined to a particular subculture. Cynical observers of the political scene have suggested that the current president is located at this same junction.

The intersection of religion and commerce is also common. Christian book stores from coast to coast sell a wide variety of Jesus-themed objects. Stores from the corner bodega to Wal-Mart have gotten in on the act, offering religious materials for a variety of traditions. In a variation on the theme, Amway uses broadly religious languages and practices to encourage its army of sales entrepreneurs.

Oprah, it seems, has given these intersections a new twist, in at least two ways. First, in most of these cases religious groups have used celebrity and commerce for their purposes. Oprah, on the other hand, appears to use religious models—changing lives through texts and preaching—for commercial purposes. Second, many of these examples are limited to subcultures—evangelical Christianity, for instance—while Oprah has made the intersection of religion, commerce, and celebrity a mainstream phenomenon.

Lofton's discussion of the Oprah phenomenon raises a few questions that I hope the rest of her text will answer. First, why now? Given the long history of this swamp, how have Winfrey and her handlers channeled it to make her a mass market success? I suspect that it is a mixture of factors, including a rapidly growing and fragmenting media environment and a neoliberalism which focuses on personal change over political change.

Second, is this swamp distinctively American? If so, why? Oprah is a global figure, but does she have the same religious role in other cultures? In some parts of the Global South local Pentecostal preachers have become enormously famous, founding churches and businesses that attract hundreds of thousands of followers. Are these preachers following American models, or do other cultures have their own distinctive swamp of commerce, religion, and celebrity?

Third, is Oprah a prophet of "spiritual but not religious"? I'm not sure of its genealogy, but I'm sure it is not a new phenomenon. Nonetheless, more and more people have claimed this identity, a way of shunning institutions while engaging in spiritual practices. It seems appropriate for much of Oprah's gospel, which offers principles and practices for a richer and more fulfilling life unconnected to any institution (beyond perhaps Oprah herself). Lofton's narrative suggests that Winfrey has roots in the church; does she have a connection anymore? Does Oprah as person or Oprah as icon shed light on this theoretically rich but complex category?

The most obvious questions about this project are about Oprah, but Lofton is after bigger game. At almost every session of the American Academy of Religion, presenters or respondents say that a particular project questions the definition of religion. Here Lofton blows that definition out of the water, along with definitions of secular and culture as well. With justifiable glee she messes with our categories and assumptions, drawing on readings of theory both broad and deep. To paraphrase many a movie review, this is a cultural studies thrill ride, and it is an impressive piece of work.

That said, I do have two questions about Lofton's theoretical approach. First, she makes a strong case for the link between religion and consumption in our cultural context, as exemplified by The Oprah. Religion, for good or ill, can be heavily gendered. Can consumption be gendered as well? In American Christianity, church membership has been historically female, even as its leadership has been male. Similarly, Oprah's audience is generally seen as more heavily female—it is not by accident that viewers call her girlfriend—and much of the related

merchandising (the magazine, the book club selections) seems targeted at women. Is there something—at least in Oprah’s world—female about consumption?

Second, I’m wondering where Lofton as a person and a scholar is in this project. She argues that when scholars define religion, “we demonstrate just how enfolded we’ve become in the supposition that we are (as moderns, as products of a secular) somehow, without it; that we are, somehow, apart from it; that we can, somehow, separate ourselves from it. This is a trick of the secular: to believe we can purify categories into which we ourselves are not contained.” (page 19) This is a fascinating and chastening argument. Scholars are indeed not separate from their categories. Given that, where does Lofton stand relative to religion, or to Oprah for that matter?

These questions are not meant to detract from Lofton’s whirlwind tour of multiple swamps. She warns readers about the complex interactions of commerce, celebrity, and religion, while casting us into a theoretical bog of provisional categories and shifting agents. Studying—let alone understanding—religion is not easy, she rightly argues. That’s a useful reminder as we pursue our icons.

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