

Oprah: The Gospel of an Icon
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INTRODUCTION

Winfrey, Oprah. Born January 29, 1954, Kosciusko, Mississippi, U.S. American television personality, actress, and entrepreneur whose syndicated daily talk show was among the most popular of the genre. She became one of the richest and most influential women in the United States.

Encyclopædia Britannica (2009)

“The false messiah is as old as the hope for the true Messiah.
He is the changing form of this changeless hope.”

Franz Rosenzweig (1925)

What is an Oprah? A noun. A name. A misspelling. An Oprah is a person we know because of her publicity, a pioneer we recognize because of her accolade, and a personage we respect because of her embodied endurance, her passionate care, her industrious production. First and foremost, though, an Oprah is a woman. An African American woman, with a story broadcasted by her own engines, with ideas inspired by her unceasing consumption, and with a self magnified by the media mechanics that make tabloid her every gesture. Before that broadcast, before that spectacle, she did possess particularity: a place of birth, a date of origin, a story of parentage, abuse, and utter destitution. The terms of her subsequent uplift are so ritually inspirational as to be mythic; the results of her rise are so idiosyncratic as to be impossible. What is an Oprah? An Oprah is an instance of American astonishment at what can be.

For the purposes of this work, the materiality of Oprah—her body, her biography, and her singularity—are only interesting insofar as they contribute and create *an* Oprah.¹ Because whatever an Oprah is, it will be, in perpetuity, a product. Inverted to Harpo, it is a corporation, an employer of nearly 1,000 people, a distributor of a brand.²

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These are not just trademarks. These titles, insignias, and imprints are cultures of expression, a supply chain of self unmatched in the history of industry, celebrity, or charismatic authority. The kernel was a studio of televised rhetoric: *The Oprah Winfrey Show*. Not an object you could hold in your hands, but a process of conversation, a display of verbal exchange, a didactic community.⁴ This is what started it all, spiraling quickly into brand compulsion: *The Oprah Winfrey Show* entered national syndication in 1986, becoming the highest-rated talk show in television history. In 1988, she established Harpo Studios, a production facility in Chicago. *The Oprah Winfrey Show* remained the number one talk show for 22 consecutive seasons. Produced by her own production company, Harpo Productions, Inc., the show is, as of 2008, seen by an estimated 44 million viewers a week in the United States and is broadcast internationally in 141 countries.

The spinoffs were inevitable, as the republic of the daily show became the empire of a transnational O.⁵ Not surprisingly, change happened because she changed, and she changed because the market changed. Or is it the other way? Did the market change because of her? Did her Spirit shape the world, or does she manifest the world in her Spirit? The answer will be (in her voice, on her terms) conflated, always.⁶ “You become what you believe.”⁷ What we know is that by the mid-1990s, her genre was changing. The talk show television market was flooded with hosts offering carnivals of absurdity: encounters between incestuous relations and criminals consorting with their victims. Violence and mayhem seemed to be the visual intent, a blending of professional wrestling and soap opera, dressed as therapy in drag.⁸ Just as her expressive medium seemed bent upon new extremes of exhibitionism, Winfrey found herself in the midst of multiple personal transitions.⁹ As with everything in her, as with everything of her, as with everything (eaten, read, thought, felt, bought, met, seen) by her, these plot points were publicized as open-door national psychological exorcisms.¹⁰ Yet this time, with a product tie-in, a print culture twist.¹¹ An Oprah is someone who makes her mistakes into object, who casts the commodification of those objects as seemly despite their confessional graft. Harpo, Inc. doesn’t intake “sellout” as an epithet. It just sells more, more ardently, under the banner of self-love.

As such, an Oprah is an effect and an affect, something symptom made (in this rendering) symptomatic. In 1996, Winfrey was sued for \$12 million by a group of Texas cattleman after she proclaimed that she would never eat another burger. Cattle prices

plummeted and kept falling for two weeks in what beef traders called the “Oprah Crash.” Winfrey found herself in Amarillo, Texas, fighting a defamation suit.¹² Her experience in Amarillo, the sharp shift in talk show tastes, her own psychological awakening, and a midlife professional restlessness deduced to a metamorphosis of her own programming. “I really am tired of the crud,” proclaimed Winfrey in 1994:

The time has come for this genre of talk shows to move on from dysfunctional whining and complaining and blaming. I have had enough of people’s dysfunction. I don’t want to spend an hour listening to somebody blaming their mother. So to say that I am tired—yes, I am. I’m tired of it. I think it’s completely unnecessary. We’re all aware that we do have some problems and we need to work on them. What are you willing to do about it? And that is what our shows are going to be about.¹³

The despair is reflexive, as Winfrey repudiates herself as much as the medium, and she calls upon herself, and her viewers, to invent practices of reply, to do something about the problems that pervade. “I dream about finding a new way of doing television that elevates us all.”¹⁴ She can’t bear to hear another disgruntled daughter or beleaguered wife, nor can she stand to be associated by genre with the fistfights and sexual extremities of her déclassé subphylum. “I started this because I believe people are ultimately good,” she said, “I think television is a good way of opening people’s hearts.”¹⁵ To claim the good, to silk the sow’s ear, she recanted: “I’ve been guilty of doing trash TV and not thinking it was trash.”¹⁶ She confessed to come clean, creating over a four-year period (1994-1998) a makeover worthy of the converting rites she herself would come to master. Programming would now, late in the neoliberal heyday, focus, finally, on the heart, on the soul, on the reformation of the world in her own image: “Change Your Life TV.”¹⁷

“Originally our goal was to uplift, enlighten, encourage, and entertain through the medium of television,” Winfrey explained, “Now our mission...is to use television to transform people’s lives, to make viewers see themselves differently, and to bring happiness and a sense of fulfillment into every home.”¹⁸ To transform, to bring happiness, to create a ‘sense’ of fulfillment: these are callings of a higher order. “I am talking about each individual having her or his own inner revolution,” Winfrey explained “I am talking about each individual coming to the awareness that, ‘I am Creation’s son. I am Creation’s daughter. I am more than my physical self. I am more than this job that I do. I am more than the external definitions I have given myself... Those roles are all extensions of who I define myself to be, but ultimately I am Spirit come from the greatest Spirit. I am Spirit.”¹⁹ Much of the content for her show stayed the same, as celebrities continued to sell their films, mothers continued to weep about their wayward daughters, and “amazing pets” still strutted their special stuff. Now, though, it was enchanted with a straight-backed righteousness of the spiritually assured. “This season has proved that there are endless possibilities to entertain and empower people’s lives through television,” Winfrey explained in 1994. “As long as we carry out that mission...I will continue to do *The Oprah Winfrey Show*.”²⁰ What matters here, what matters to understanding what makes *an* Oprah, is that this explicitly missionary maneuver was her empire’s ascent: her spiritualization enhanced her incorporation.²¹ *This* is how Oprah Winfrey became an Oprah, how she became an idiom recognizable and distributed, programmed and propagated beyond her (the ‘I’ who decides whether or not to do one thing or another) and into an ‘an.’ An Oprah can’t be canceled. Syndication is first order immortality; horizontal multimedia diversification presses you into the Olympian beyond.

An Oprah is quickly everywhere. On September 17, 1996, “Oprah’s Book Club” began with the announcement of Jacquelyn Mitchard’s *The Deep End of the Ocean* (1996) as the first pick. Within its inaugural year, Oprah’s Book Club was the largest book club in the world, attracting approximately 2 million members. In April 2000, Oprah and Hearst Magazines introduced *O, The Oprah Magazine*, a monthly magazine credited as being the most successful magazine launch in recent history; it has a circulation of 2.3 million readers each month. In April 2002, Oprah launched the first international edition of *O, The Oprah Magazine* in South Africa, extending her “live your best life” message to another broad audience. In 1997, her Angel Network encouraged others to become involved in volunteer work (“Build An Oprah House”) and charitable giving (“The World’s Largest Piggy Bank”). With “Change Your Life Television,” Winfrey found a way to make the message of her life the substance of the show, and, simultaneously, a way to make the message of her life the impetus for further market development. No longer merely an idiom, Oprah became a stylized economy, supplying multiple print cultures (magazine, literary, cookbook, self-help, medical, and inspirational), multimedia programming (podcasts, weekly and daily electronic updates, weekly and daily television programs, radio shows, television networks, movies, movies of the week, stage productions), educational philosophies, international philanthropies, interpersonal counseling, self-care workshops, and product plugs.²²

An Oprah cannot be replicated, but she does reproduce. In September 2002, Harpo Productions, Inc. created *Dr. Phil*, a syndicated daytime talk show produced by

Paramount Domestic Television. *Dr. Phil* had the highest-rated talk show launch since *The Oprah Winfrey Show* and ranks second among all U.S. talk shows. Oprah.com, the website of her amalgamated productions, averages 96 million page views and more than 6.7 million users per month and has more than 1.8 million newsletter subscribers. In 2003, Oprah.com launched Live Your Best Life, an interactive multimedia workshop based on Winfrey's sold-out national speaking tour that featured Oprah's personal life stories and life lessons along with a workbook of thought-provoking exercises. Through a joint venture, Oprah launched *Oprah & Friends* satellite radio channel in September 2006. *Oprah & Friends* features a range of original daily programming from Harpo Radio, Inc., including regular segments hosted by popular personalities from *The Oprah Winfrey Show* and *O, The Oprah Magazine* and her exclusive 30-minute weekly radio show, *Oprah's Soul Series*. *Oprah's Big Give*, the first primetime series created by Harpo Productions, Inc.'s television development group, premiered in March 2008 on the ABC Television Network. And finally, in 2008, Oprah and Discovery Communications announced plans to create "OWN: The Oprah Winfrey Network." The new multi-platform media venture will be designed to entertain, inform and inspire people to "live their best lives." (All rights reserved.) OWN will debut in the second half of 2009 in more than 70 million homes.²³

Tracking an Oprah amidst all this making and re-casting is hard. What has she become? "Look, I know that to you guys the Oprah name is a brand. But for me, it is my life, it's the way I live my life, and the way I behave and everything I stand for."²⁴ She is, of course, more than her life.²⁵ The brand supersedes her biography, inventing from

“everything I stand for” an Oprah that can stand in for something. An Oprah is that which stands in, filling a space where before there was something missing, something needed, something silent. J. Heath Atchley has described the secular as something like this, as a “kind of silence—the inability to speak, the lack of a promise of revelation.” He defines secular in this way so as to move “the secular from merely a condition to a concept that produces thought, that is, becomes part of a philosophical practice...imagine a philosophical sense of the secular as neither a triumph (we have overcome the irrationality of religion) nor a lament (we have lost the meaningfulness the religion once gave) but an opportunity.”²⁶ Is an Oprah that opportunity? Is an Oprah the silence of the secular? Or does an Oprah merely fill that silence? She hints at her answer:

When you get me, you are not getting an image, you are not getting a figurehead. You’re not getting a theme song. You’re getting all of me. And I bring all my stuff with me. My history, my past. Mississippi, Nashville. I’m coming with the sistahs in the church, I’m bringing Sojourner Truth with me. And then there we all are, sitting up in your meeting, at your table, with the marketing directors.²⁷

The subject makes herself here more than one thing, more than one woman or one history. Rather, she casts herself as a spiritual gathering, a collection at the table of iconography. She eschews branding (herself as brand) even as she gathers in her presumptive pervasiveness a history and present that can be only described as ubiquitous, insistent, and secular.²⁸ After all, the products of Harpo, Inc., supply that which people want to hear and to know; they create an opportunity to be heard and to learn; and it seats her audience at her long table of memory and market might. An Oprah replies to this want with voluminous convenience, seeping into every nook and cranny, becoming common sense.²⁹ Such sense is needed (urgently, daily, now), it is wanted (podcasted,

downloaded, papered) to rectify their silences, to offer assurance to an unnamed restlessness (for the missing, for the needed, for the silenced).³⁰ An Oprah supplies the way to survive the secular. “Something like a transnational public sphere has certainly rendered any strictly bounded sense of community or locality obsolete,” Akhil Gupta and James Ferguson have written, “In the pulverized space of postmodernity, space has not become irrelevant: it has been reterritorialized.”³¹ Transforming pulverized space into a produced, consumer caress, an Oprah defines a territory where sense may be found. Sense in a style, a therapy, an irresistible first-person; sense in the form of soothing trademarked adages: “Make The Connection,” “Use Your Life,” and “Live Your Best Life.” An Oprah names the life to which you seek connection; in so doing, she frames the nature of a public sphere in which the subject is *you* in a counterpublic she defined.³²

Do not be deceived: this is no discursive ephemera. An Oprah is the product that sells a self in order to surpass its singularity and enter, repetitiously, the marketplace of products. Harpo, Inc. fills airspace with her body, with the sense of her sense, well beyond her time. Iconic comparisons (Elvis, Jackie, Marilyn, Jesus) limit as much as they encourage.³³ What we know is that (as with Elvis, as with Jackie) we don’t need any more of her; we don’t need any more than what we already have, to make of her the pieces we need. But of course: we’ll keep taking. An Oprah is an instant of overflowing iconography. Even as she is utterly herself, she is also very much a production of taste cultures, race cultures, gender cultures, and economic cultures which append and assist her existence.³⁴ She is in a moment that she made and that made her. Before this moment, she could not be. After her death, nothing will be quite the same.³⁵ This is

another way of saying that *the* Oprah is not forever. Her death (the death of the founder) will be the end of the body, but perhaps not her.³⁶ There is no public plan of apostolic succession and no institutionalization of her charisma, since her charisma is the institution.³⁷ While she is franchised and globalized, she remains limited by the very materiality we dismissed at the outset (“whatever an Oprah is, it will be, in perpetuity, a product”). Oprah makes Harpo, Harpo makes Oprah, and Oprah will die. Is she so pervasive as to transcend that end? This transience of the subject is not unheralded in the history of industry; charisma and corporations have always had a codependency, with the generations following the founder struggling to keep, for example, Wal-Mart without Sam Walton, Kentucky Fried Chicken without the epicurean approval of Colonel Sanders, or the Church of Scientology afloat without the steering hand of L. Ron Hubbard.³⁸ But here we introduce a new image, one seemingly far-flung from the company. Imagining the necessity of the founder, and her problematic continuance, requires reaching for other metaphors. I speak, of course, of the religious.

An Oprah is not a religion.³⁹ And yet Oprah tempts study by scholars of religion because her materiality overflows the imagined bounds of “economy” and “popular culture.” Her success, and the modes of her branding, cannot be easily cordoned by macroeconomics, nor can the “culture” of her occupation be understood outside some interactive conception of “religion.” “My show is really a ministry,” she tells us, “a ministry that doesn’t ask for money. I can’t tell you how many lives we’ve changed—or inspired to change.”⁴⁰ Her religious aspects are literal (episodes of her shows addressing “everyday miracles,” her satellite radio “Soul Series,” her issuing of “Spirit Newsletters”)

and emblematic. An Oprah, the Oprah, is always telling you what to do, always telling you how to do it, always telling you to buy, and always telling you to save. Even if you want to avoid her, even if you have avoided her, you have not (you cannot). She looms. She haunts the supermarket (endorsing food, hawking magazines, bloated on tabloids), she helms national initiatives, she endorses presidential candidates. So even if your consumption resists her recommendations, even if you have only laughed at her caricature on late-night satire, you do so on the premise of her prescriptive, commanding cultural suffusion. This domination transfixes *Oprah: The Gospel of an Icon*. Because she does so in modes recognizable, analogical, resonating: she preaches prosperity gospel, she advocates books as scripture, she offers exegesis, she conducts exculpatory rites, she supplies a bazaar of faithful practices, she propagates missions, both home and foreign. She postulates repeatedly on the meaning of existence, the seat of the soul, the purpose of your life, and the place of a higher calling.⁴¹ An Oprah plays religious even as she is, most adamantly (by scholarly classification, and by her own) *not* a religion.

For some, the religious idiom deployed by Harpo, Inc. may be seen as clever coating to hawk a profitable product. It's a product packaged rightly to serve the needs of its audience, using spiritual discourse to smooth the solipsistic swallow.⁴² These critics might believe that any study of Oprah should be a study of scheming financial genius in which (by some fluke of capitalistic dispensation) one woman was given the instinctual gifts of ninety Wharton graduates. This is a tempting reduction, allowing cultured despisers to admire that genius, to sneer wickedly at the duped consumers, and, most disturbingly, such a plot line casts the producing agents (Oprah, Harpo, Hearst) to

function neatly as motivated by one ambition. Yet, to describe any endeavor (legal or governmental, business or religious) as sourced so singularly is to refuse the human creation, human occupation, and human hubris of cultural experiences, artifacts, and products. Even the “smartest guys in the room,” were, by all accounts, in pursuit of more than money when they overpriced stock, swindled investors, and forced California blackouts on behalf of the Enron Corporation. The competitive performance of masculinity and the glamour of American dreaming have compelled many a financier to choices neither obviously moral nor assuredly profitable. There were many ways Enron could have made money, as there are many ways Oprah Winfrey could make money. That they did (that she does) as they did tells us more about what was human about them, then what was perfected from their microeconomics coursework.⁴³

More importantly, to name Winfrey’s spirituality as a financial scheme is also to evade critical engagement with the process of consumption itself, with the why of purchase, the seductions of sale, and the sorts of beliefs that compel American women to watch, and watch again. In other words, reducing Winfrey to a profit grab misses an opportunity to observe the symphonic way in which consumption and religion are not categories in opposition to one another, but have been collaborators. That scholars in cultural studies and religious studies have for so long resisted this impression says a lot more about what we think is sacred, and what we think is profane, than what believers (and consumers) consider sacred and profane.⁴⁴ Revealing from a scholarly vantage is that most studies of religion and popular culture establish three basic relationships between those two terms: religion appearing in popular culture (like a crucifix in a pop

music video); popular culture appearing in religion (the use of blogs by believers); or popular culture as religion (fandom as religion).⁴⁵ This neat troika ultimately only serves to continue the sense that religion and culture (popular and otherwise) are categories that can be untangled from one another, that “religion” and “popular culture” are separable components of a recipe for “culture.” Furthermore, by imagining that popular culture is an ingredient to religion (or religion an accessory to popular culture), one encourages estimation of the interaction, such as an estimation of the tastefulness of Passover action figures or graphic novels depicting Muhammad.⁴⁶ This is why, for many, “religion in popular culture” can be seen as a profanity (the furor over Madonna videos) and, likewise, popular culture in a religion (malls at a megachurch, for example) may be estimated as crass commercialization.⁴⁷ No matter what one’s ethical instincts on such deployments might be, to imagine that there could be a moral verdict on that interaction is as much a categorical problem as it is an ideological one. If only we didn’t imagine culture and religion as neatly divided, we may be less surprised by their ceaseless commingling.⁴⁸ There have, as it turns out, always been pigeon sellers, in every temple.⁴⁹

Religion was never exiled from capital expression, despite several early twentieth century attempts to eradicate religion as an anti-modern ignorance (and, conversely, to demolish industry as a social and ethical immorality). These largely academic battles accomplished little in their efforts to diminish religious practice or reform consumer practice, although those debates did construct much of the classificatory unease scholars have about these terms. In the moment in which the “modern” was defined throughout the arts, universities, and social life; when creating an irreligious “secular” world seemed,

briefly, to be a possible intellectual ambition: it was at that chronologic juncture when the myth of a separable religion and a separable secular (industrial, market, consumer, and popular) colluded. This was an intellectual invention, not a practiced affect. “In American life,” R. Laurence Moore has observed, “religion had to become a commodity, but that did not make it peanut butter.”⁵⁰

This rendition of the relationship between religion and commodity is far too abbreviated to acknowledge how vexatious components of that coexistence have been.⁵¹ Yet to study the contemporary era is to study a marketplace (of religions, of the religious; of markets, of the marketable) largely reconciled to its processes. The methods of capitalism are not there for the religious to overcome. Rather, market behavior is complicit in religious behavior.⁵² To study a modern subject is to study one dancing amidst tropes messily occupying economic and spiritual metaphor, even as the regulations managing each may be separated by legal code and stock portfolio. Using the label “corporate religion” thus describes simultaneously the ways corporations deploy practices and worldviews well beyond the applied scope of their product and the ways religions have imbibed and possessed corporate strategy. In the first instance, advertising is a prime example. “When a consumer purchases an object, he or she is often referencing the meaning or image that has been created by the culture of advertising,” comments Tricia Sheffield. “Through a manipulation of symbols and cultural forms, advertising fills an object with a meaning that ‘speaks’ to the consumer and provides a cultural context for the consumer.”⁵³ Consider the MasterCard “priceless” campaign, which connected the purchase of objects (“rubber ball: \$6, softball: \$5, football: \$35) with the preparation for

something intangible (“being ready for whatever parenthood throws at you: priceless”).⁵⁴

In a roundtable on the MasterCard campaign, John Kottman, co-director of the agency that produced the series of advertisements, offered an explanation of the market research which led to its creation.

MasterCard was, at the time, a bit undefined. So we did a lot of consumer research...and we found that MasterCard was really lacking a sense of aspirational cachet as a brand...we needed to look at where consumers were at the time. Consumers were beginning to shift in what was most important to them, why they were consuming things. And kind of what materialism was changing to. What we found...was that there was a shift away from that conspicuous consumption where those two brands were living. There was a movement toward doing things that satisfied you intrinsically and to experiences such as having control of your life, having a good marriage, having a great job in terms of being satisfied at work. These were becoming ever more important—and even, in a way, becoming more important than the amount of money you made or the signs of clothes, watches, credit cards, all those sorts of things...That was a sea change in terms of what values were important to consumers and where they were going. So they were replacing the watch and the designer clothing with these other types of things. Now the question is, did designer clothing and watch sales go off? Of course not. You still bought that watch. But the meaning behind the purchase was beginning to change. And the positioning of the brands marketing watches was beginning to change, too. In other words, the value of the consumption of even luxury items was beginning to be sold very differently...This allowed us to get down to a strategic idea: MasterCard is the best way to pay for everything that matters. It means it's really not about the money, it's about the experiences in life.⁵⁵

“You still bought that watch.” But it's the ‘meaning’ that was transfigured, the coding of the virtue that would inspire purchase with the recommended card and, in a teleology millennial believers would admire, result in a climactic, exhilarating experience.

Advertising has long been interpreted as such an encoder of aspirational value (not to mention glamorous ‘cachet’). Whatever one wants to assign to advertising and its power, it is impossible, especially in its current omnipresent permeations (slathered on every

surface, framing every click of the cursor) to avoid its iconic sway in the determination of value, religious and otherwise. Moreover, avoiding it at all (every surface, every click) has become, even for the most radical resistance, impossible. We live in landscapes, virtual and visual, smothered in sale.

Religions, too, have corporate and industrial aspects (think of international mission boards, or fundraising efforts for Hindu shrines).⁵⁶ Of course, not all contemporary religion is corporate, nor do all corporations work hard to harmonize their sales with religious sentiment. There is no neat equation of expenditure and commodity that would explain all religions or all consumer behavior. Oprah, however, emerges as the exemplar of their fusion, of the combined categorical freight of religion, spirituality, commodity, and corporatism. To study modern religion—to study the modern American economy—requires thinking of these categories as conjoined, and not distinct. Writing this resists Winfrey's own desire: Oprah does not see herself as a product of calculation, but of inspiration: "I never took a business course. I run this company based on instinct. I'm an instinct player, an instinct actor—and I use it to guide me in the business."⁵⁷ Oprah dominates tabloid culture more than business reports; there are more magazine covers addressing her weight and clothing than there are those breathless accounting for her stock portfolio. This is precisely as she wants it, away from products and into people: "I've been successful all these years because I do my show with the people in mind, not for the corporations or the money."⁵⁸ Claiming that she operates with no strategy, no bureaucracy, and no spreadsheets, the Oprah controls over one of the most successful conglomerates in modern America.⁵⁹ As we will see, this anti-institutionalism and anti-

creedal aspect of her business acumen echoes in her critiques of subjects religious, as she resists the category of religion, always, as representing hierarchy, rules, and masculine hierarchies of command. An Oprah reigns by souls and hearts, well-intentioned spirits and authentic humans. “To me, one of the most important things about being a good manager is to rule with a heart,” she remarked in her mid-1990s transition to Change Your Life TV, “You have to know the business, but you also have to know what’s at the heart of the business, and that’s the people.”⁶⁰ Eva Illouz notes that this demystification of the business (describing Harpo through images of corporeal people, not abstract numbers) is itself a part of her celebrity mystique. “Thus an astonishing aspect of Oprah’s celebrity is that the *construction* of her self as a star is closely intertwined with the *deconstruction* of her self as a star.”⁶¹ She isn’t Warren Buffet, she’s the lemonade stand gone global.

An Oprah won’t let the chroniclers press her into one category or another, slinking sweetly between corporation and religion, celebrity and common gal. You cannot box her because, she claims, she has not boxed herself: “People would be stunned to know how little calculation has gone into the creation of my life.”⁶² This is the ambiguity seeking precision in *Oprah: The Gospel of an Icon*. In this book, categories will not be stilled into something cooked at the outset (e.g., “religion refers to the ways in which people link up with, or even feel touched by, a meta-empirical sphere that may be glossed as supernatural, sacred, divine, or transcendental”).⁶³ Instead, this volume seeks play with the category “religion,” relying largely upon its adjectival cousin, “religious,” to show how any cauterization of the category of the “secular” drags upon our

conceptions of what religion is and is not.⁶⁴ I do this not to avoid the tedium of definition itself.⁶⁵ Rather, it is to acknowledge the delicate persistence of categories as instantiating unto themselves. “‘Religion,’ in its very ‘concept’ ...still eludes classificatory regimes,” Hent de Vries writes, “no shift in definitional, methodological, or institutional demarcations might by itself suffice to *undo* and *recast* our investment—historically, systematically, and practically—in the most rigid, dogmatic, or reified fixations of the concept, let alone *distance* and eventually *free* us from our fateful complicity in the most violent among its cultic and/or cultural expressions.”⁶⁶ As scholars fret about how to best define “real religion,” we not only miss the ambiguities of cultural enactment (the Priceless campaign or Winfrey’s shifting saleswoman identity), but also to participate in a narrative performance of secularism.⁶⁷ Whatever definitions of religion we develop must speak to the dynamism of the invention of religion as category (invented by scholars, by believers cognizant of their own categorization) without reifying a checklist of classifications premised on a scientific posture complicit with religion’s eradication. When we define religion through a list of attributes (creed, code, ritual, community) or aspects (mediated, transcendent, sacred), 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.

Understanding the magic of such secular disenchantments has become a cottage academic industry. Stories of religion in the twentieth century plot mainly around the

surprise of “secularization.” Secularization didn’t happen, the observers say, because fundamentalisms did.⁶⁸ Such an outsized counter-example (fundamentalism) shunts aside what might have been the virtues of secularization theory, namely that it encouraged us to think about the grand sweep of cultural transformation, particularly cultures of religiosity recognizable yet radically re-cast in media unseen in other epoch. Studying Oprah supplies move toward one such sweep, toward the alternative structure of imperative consumption supplied. There are and have been and will be in the wake of industrialization, the Enlightenment(s), and modern sciences the development of new fundamentalisms, new religious movements, as well as ongoing machinations by existent denominations and their gadfly charismatic insurgents. But this book addresses imperatives applied outside the realm of the sect, into the imperatives of comfort nestling modern women in a language of self-service. That language (“I just like to feel good, I just want to feel safe, I just deserve to be whole”) is the secular an Oprah creates.⁶⁹ And, as Tomoko Masuzawa has argued, in order to retell the story of secularization, we must dismantle the very apparatus of this story-telling.⁷⁰

If secularization is a schematic, then the secular is a (chronologic, national, epistemic, ontological) state. The secular has been defined as a way of conveying a condition in which theism is an option, rationalism is the logic, and total (physical, mental, transcendent) liberation is the (universal) ambition.⁷¹ This is no slick steam engine: the secular, in such cataloguing, is possessed by its own plurality. To be secular (to occupy secularism, to cede secularity) is to be rife with difference over and against the assimilating forces of doctrinal religious identity. The United States has always posed a

problem to secular studies precisely because it has never commanded an assembled singular religious identity (under, say, a state mandate or denominational majority); the patchwork self had free reign in the religious marketplace of a disestablished United States.⁷² And this pastiche was blended persistently with practices commodity *and* fetish. American believers bought theology and they rotated ritually around objects of trade.

Winfrey's media empire is an exposition on this context, an exposition in an allegedly irreligious society. Scholars of American religious history have brilliantly mapped the polyglot expressions of this society, showing the gregarious religiosity within the disestablished absence of a common faith. Individuals may march to prayer meetings, politicians may use religion to contest their competitors' morality, and pundits may invoke virtuous language to court a constituency. Even within the expression of these religious aspects, the postulated social world of contemporary America is a de-centered religious plurality. Historians, sociologists, and theorists of religion have filled many books with explanations for this passionate personal pluralism and public secularity, but none of them has adequately acknowledged the new forms of discourse (consumer, religious, celebrity, market) that have emerged in this unfocused sectarian landscape.⁷³ These forms are unfamiliar to students of history and religion, as they are without bounds, without permanent structure, and without imprinted creed. These are religions without religion, faith without bounded social structure and clear membership rules. These are religions for an age where markets make custom, consumption is the universal aspect, and celebrities are ostensible gods.

Oprah offers to us a way to see a mechanism, up close, strings purposefully (demonstratively) exposed, of how contemporary culture convinces us of its conveyances.⁷⁴ Is it a religious culture? A consumer culture? Simmering beneath the particulars of this study is that to force a difference between the two is to compel a false distillation from a quagmire of commingling processes. These processes are partly what make the display of Oprah so instructive to students of late modernity. Oprah is a climax of multiple intersecting histories, as well as an exemplar of many modes and manifestations of modern religion.⁷⁵ To point to these histories is not to argue them as neat antecedents, nor is it to identify a pattern to point to specific correlation. Oprah is nothing if not a rebuttal to simple historical causality and a revision to many dominant trends. Still her exceptional way is predicated, and her success would become predictive: Oprah's pronouncement would be prophecy. And so from whence she came, she became; whatever she liked, dominated; whatever she sold, would sell.⁷⁶ Therefore her pre-history becomes a *herstory*, even in its inaccuracies. Even if her understanding of, say, the history of Black Power or the meaning of feminism were wrong, those interpretations did, in a sense, become history by the sheer will of her narrations, by the hegemony of her sway.

There is a history of American religions here, one upon which I rely even as I question its checkmate.⁷⁷ This story is a reasonable, documented one, one which celebrates multiculturalism, feminist awakening, and the mainstreaming of the self-help books, "whiteshamanism," Asian religions, and the occult. Historians point to these pieces as the ingredients contributing to the storied panoply of religious practices

available to the religious shopper.⁷⁸ The overarching patterns of U.S. religion that fed the concoction of this so-called religious “buffet” have been distinguished by the plurality of option and the individual’s move towards a nonsectarian identity.⁷⁹ To turn to Oprah as a figure in that history is not to dismiss the triumph of pluralism; rather, it is to emphasize the holism in which that pluralism was, and can be, folded. As the culture wars came and went (then came and went, again), questions of ethnic, racial, or gendered identity became muddied. In the economies of popular culture to which Oprah contributed (talk shows, women’s magazines, televisions specials, musicals and Monday night melodramas) claims of ethnic and sexual identity were not grounds for ideological formation, but rather accessories to a proposed assimilation of the postmodern self, a phenomenon Stanley Fish has labeled “boutique multiculturalism.” “Boutique multiculturalists will always stop short of approving other cultures at a point where some value at their center generates an act that offends against the canons of civilized decency as they have been either declared or assumed.”⁸⁰ This “civilized decency” is not a production inured of recognizable religion. “Far from being a neutral matrix,” Tracy Fessenden has written, “the secular sphere as constituted in American politics, culture, and jurisprudence has long been more permeable to some religious interventions than others.” A presumptive Protestantism guides this American secularity, Fessenden concludes.⁸¹ In this, Winfrey again serves as a secular exemplar, Winfrey advocating ceaselessly upon biographical past drenched with Protestant idiom and Christian coherence:

By the time I was three, I was reciting speeches in the church. And they’d put me up on the program, and they would say, “and Little Mistress Winfrey will render a

recitation,” and I would do “Jesus rose on Easter Day, Hallelujah, Hallelujah, all the angels did proclaim.” And all the sisters sitting in the front row would fan themselves and turn to my grandmother and say, “Hattie Mae, this child is gifted.” ...In the fourth grade was when I first, I think, began to believe in myself...I felt I was the queen bee. I felt I could control the world. I was going to be a missionary. I was going to Costa Rica. I used to collect money on the playground to take to church on Sundays from all the other kids. At the time, in school we had devotions, and I would sit and I would listen to everything the preacher said on Sunday and go back to school on Monday morning and beg Mrs. Duncan to please let me do devotions, just sort of repeat the sermon. So, in the fourth grade, I was called “preacher.”⁸²

Of the many cultures that comprise Oprah’s personae, her Christian preamble bronzes the naming of her secular. She is the ideal subject for her moment: palatably diverse, commensurably civilized, folksy populist, and previously Protestant.

It is perhaps not mere coincidence that such an era—the era of Oprah’s ascent—includes not only processes of corporate internationalization and governmental privatization but also the ascent of the celebrity as an exchange value, and of the public confession as a necessary exfoliation of their charismatic might.⁸³ Oprah is all of it and none of it: celebrity and everywoman, corporate chairwoman and smart shopper, black woman and white woman, straight and queer, religious and spiritual, megachurch and shopping mall, seminarian and psychologist.⁸⁴ She was and is the amalgamation of her epoch’s exposition, reducing enormous global change to one woman, with one weight problem, in one Midwestern talk show studio. In order to understand contemporary American women and their discontents, in order to access the ways public religion has melded to consumer compulsion, Oprah is our necessary guide.

How, then, do we approach an Oprah? To begin, we must see what she has rendered, and read what she has made. Focusing solely on the last twelve seasons of *Change Your Life Television*, there are 1,560 transcripts of original episodes; 105 issues of *O, The Oprah Magazine*, seventeen issues of (the recently-defunct) *O at Home*; 68 Book Club selections; 52 Spirit Newsletters; and literally hundreds of books hawked by her spiritual advisers, domestic organizers, and body therapists. In addition, there is her series of reprints (Oprah aphorisms, “What Oprah Knows For Sure” compendiums, anthologies of magazine highlights), her endorsed products, her advertising TV specials, and her films produced and endorsed. Finally, there are the thousands of newspaper clippings, magazine mentions, journal profiles, blog entries, and amateur online archives; the secondary material weighs the primary. Reading, watching, comparing, and collating this material with an eye toward categories like religion, secular, celebrity, and consumption was the documentary effort of this study. “In the dreams of those in charge of mummifying the world,” Adorno wrote, “mass culture represents a priestly hieroglyphic script which addresses its images to those who have been subjugated not in order that they might be enjoyed but only that they might be read.”⁸⁵ This is a process of removing the mummy’s wraps, seeking instances of discursive production, the production of power, and the propagation of knowledge.⁸⁶ The researcher, then, does the triplicate process of reading the scripts, of pressing to the ways they are marked as (in Adorno’s terms) tauntingly ‘enjoyed.’ Marjorie Garber presses the point: “I do not propose to diagnose culture as if it were an illness of which we could be cured, but to read culture as if it were structured like a dream, a network of representation...all of whose elements are overdetermined and contingent.”⁸⁷ The pile to be tackled poses itself with determined

contingency and incurable excess. It is a weighty stack, and a stunningly habitual one. Oprah hasn't just been consistent; she's been repetitive. Oprah is the total incorporation of her totalized self. This should not be shocking, the nature of the corporate entity requires product control. If brands were not reliable, they would not be brands; when brands evidence inconsistency (which, as we will see, Oprah has) the audience parries, complains, or even abandons. The success of the product relies upon its predictability. It is worth noting that this is the definition not only of mass culture, but also of its worrisome goober cousin, kitsch.⁸⁸

By establishing a catechism from Oprah that is codified and corporate, I diminish two aspects of her enterprise. First, Winfrey (*the Oprah*) opines more diversely than her empire. Many students of cultural history will rightly inquire about Oprah's intention and her editorial process, wondering what might be discerned from interviewing her, knowing her, inquiring about her producer's objective. Such an inquiry is understandable considering the subject herself: Oprah believes such questions are what matters. When we ask whether we can know Oprah's actuality or what she meant when she did whatever she did we are falling into her (secular) trap: that the only evidence of merit is that which pursues a ceaseless revelation of authenticity. Second, by focusing on the products of her enterprise, one might also suggest that individual viewers (consumers, practitioners) are impugned. Her audience undoubtedly consumes more creatively than she produces. Ethnographic pursuit of Oprah's viewers would demonstrate the wide variety of experiences gleaned from her prescriptive hegemony, showing how people fit into their

lives some of her counsel, redact other parts of her counsel, and dismiss altogether whole swaths of her enterprise.

Oprah: The Gospel of an Icon does not seek to reckon with Winfrey's biographic density nor does it focus on the reception of her message in the pews. I do not do so because I worry, quite a bit, that we, religionists, have become sycophants to our subjects, re-framing the religious act as an inevitably creative act. In this, we are not to blame: the combinatory discourse of secularism and consumerism is infectious, persuading us modern observers to believe the relentless agency of that shower curtain or this one, that prayer shawl or this one, that worship or this one. It is to define agency in a very practical, Western way, one which presumes that "all human beings have an innate desire for freedom, that we all somehow seek to assert autonomy when allowed to do so, that human agency primarily consists of acts that challenge social norms."⁸⁹ Yes, Oprah viewers make of her what they will. But we do a disservice to patterns in production, and the pervading influence of those structures, when we fail to account for the mass mediation of religious life, of the ways it prescribes against improvisation. My gaze is arrested by that omnipotence more than by that idiosyncrasy, by the consistency of their consumption (and the stunning consistency of the product) rather than the agency of their application.

This is, therefore, not an exposé of Oprah, telling why she does what she does or whom she loves and how she loves him (or her). Instead, this is the definition of a performance ecology, one which has transformed from ribald stage show into a lacquered

international distribution operation.⁹⁰ The burden of this project is not to prove her weight in the world, but to pursue the tactics of her production, and postulate some of its consequences to the study of modern religion. As Thomas Tweed has explained, religion can no longer be seen as some static set of objects and ideas, but as mobile reconfigurations by individuals also migratory in places also transient.⁹¹ Thus, the task of the book before you is to climb through the material of Oprah's world and convey its contents despite the obvious categorical conundrums. It seems when it comes to the secular we are silenced on the modes of religion. *Oprah: The Gospel of an Icon* seeks to find religious studies stride again, within and through studies of the secular that made it its object. How, now, in these ways (monograph, media, maven), and in this time (postmodern, post-secular, post-colonial) can we speak? Two scholars, writing on secularism, offer an answer: "One alternative means of thinking about the contemporary relation of religion and secularism is to consider not just how secularism remains intertwined with religion, but also how religion is being remade in relation to secular phenomena."⁹² Such a climb will not prove its intransigence, but encourage its multiple consequences, real and imagined, virtual and lived, political and domestic. "Instead of focusing one's interest on the relationship between the diminishing domain of the religious (that of its institutions and that of the 'historical' religions) and other social domains (the political, the therapeutic, the aesthetic, etc.)," Danièle Hervieu-Léger writes, "one is led to an investigation of the diverse surreptitious manifestations of religion in all profane and reputedly nonreligious zones of human activity."⁹³

And so, to the reputedly profane we go. In each chapter, material from Oprah's corporate production (her media corporeality) will be pursued with reference to possibly "religious" structures of expression (rites, conversions, ministries, missions, sermons, and spirits) as well as analogies to precedents from "religions" (prosperity gospel, New Thought, evangelical megachurches, Bible study, the "Black Church," and pastoral counseling). This is not to call Oprah "an evangelical" or to suggest that she leads a "Bible study" through her Book Club, or even to propose that Harpo is a "missionary" agent. As we will find, these categories are representative of Winfrey's Christian preamble, as well as her nation's suffused Protestantism. Yet it is the distance from her practices and those categories that is an important space of analysis. Thus use of these categories is, as all categorical applications ought to be, provisional. One of the consequences of the invented secular upon which so much twentieth-century thought proceeded was that there has come to be an impoverished vocabulary about human creativity, production, ideation, and care. *Oprah: The Gospel of an Icon* turns to analogies from denominated religions (e.g., Aimee Semple McPherson and the Foursquare Church) to highlight the services and capacities of those contexts as much as Winfrey's. Likewise, it posits structures of religious rites (the "anxious bench" as a nineteenth-century site of confession and conversion) to encourage a sense of that location as much as Harpo studios in Chicago. To join together analogical object (the Bible study) and the present subject (the Book Club) is not to make precise the comparison, but to encourage viewing the religious enchantment of capital as much as the enchanting capital of religion. This is not posing historical precedents for Winfrey, nor is it a recasting of Winfrey as a secular messiah. It is to comment upon modes (styles,

social groupings, conversational idioms, theological imperatives) that surpass classificatory purity as soon as they may satisfy them. Winfrey's success is not a craven remark on spirituality's successful sale, nor is it a woeful statement about the female complaint. In her narcissistic production of the inspirational moment, Winfrey posits nothing more, and nothing less, than a culmination of the religious now. At a local Trader Joe's food store, there are tiny shopping carts for use by children. The flags attached to the carts do not read "revolutionary in training," "believer in training," or "political actor in training," "woman in training," or "human in training." They read "customer in training." This is the market imperative of our religious moment, and the religious imperative of our market moment. It is an Oprah world. We're just buying in it, buying into it, and believing it.

¹ "Doing the television show is easy. I just go on and be Oprah." Oprah Winfrey, quoted in Terry Lawson, "The Long Road to 'Beloved'," *Detroit Free Press* (11 October 1998), 1E. "There [is] no authentic Winfrey; there [is] the image of Winfrey's authenticity," Jane Shattuc, *The Talking Cure: TV Talk Shows and Women* (Routledge, 1997), 57.

² "She's a very important brand in our culture. Her presence as a brand is embodied by trust, human-to-human connections and realness. Her audience has come to believe Oprah is real and she is telling the truth." Marketing expert John Grace, director of Interbrand, quoted in Barbara Laker, "Cattle Ranchers Should've Known: Oprah Just Doesn't Lose," *San Diego Union Tribune* (6 March 1998): E-3. Mara Einstein, "Oprah—talk show as televangelism," *Brands of Faith: Marketing Religion in a Commercial Age* (Oxford: Routledge, 2008), 137-146.

³ "Listing of Full Trademarks," <http://www.oprah.com/article/oprahdotcom/trademark>.

⁴ This "megatextual structure" of the show is the focus of Eva Illouz's *Oprah Winfrey and the Glamour of Misery* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003). Like *The Glamour of Misery*, *Oprah: The Gospel of an Icon* focuses on the textual productions of Winfrey's empire to discern "cultural forms" from her televised processes of recovery. Illouz emphasizes psychological transactions and audience reception to incisive effect in the analysis of viewer identity formation: "Oprah addresses those arenas that are most ridden with uncertainties and offers powerful symbolic tools and rituals to alleviate those uncertainties. She stages in an unsurpassed way the profound disarray in which the late modern self is caught and offers

resources to cope with it.” (115) Illouz’s culling of Oprah’s “sources and resources,” as well as her perception of Winfrey’s “commercial ubiquity” have influenced this research. (178-205; 221)

⁵ If globalization refers to a process of economic distribution, “transnational” lends itself to a more ambiguous set of negotiations reaching beyond or transcending national boundaries. “We want to suggest that, even if we stipulate that transnationalism is a notion underpinned by the goals of the U.S. state or multinational corporations, its possibilities are multiple, and so are its histories. Rather than argue for...an elusive linguistic clarity about the relationship of transnationalism, globalization, neoliberalism, colonialism, and internationalism, we will argue here...that “transnationalism” can do to the nation what gender did for sexed bodies: provide the conceptual acid that denaturalizes all their deployments, compelling us to acknowledge that the nation, like sex, is a thing contested, interrupted, and always shot through with contradiction,” Laura Briggs, Gladys McCormick, and J. T. Way, “Transnationalism: A Category of Analysis,” *American Quarterly* 60:3 (September 2008), 627.

⁶ The relationship between Oprah and the late-twentieth century market has been mapped by Janice Peck, *The Age of Oprah: Cultural Icon for the Neoliberal Era* (Boulder: Paradigm Publishers, 2008). “Winfrey’s journey to a position of singular cultural authority has to do with the fit between the neoliberal strategy of governing and her configuration of self, illness, and technology of healing.” (39) Peck’s excoriation of the particulars of Winfrey’s deployment of suffering and racial politics devastate any liberationist image of the Oprah project: “Her enterprise can be understood as an ensemble of ideological practices that help legitimize a world of growing inequality and shrinking possibilities by promoting and embodying a configuration of self compatible with that world.” (217) Speaking to the broader phenomenon in which Peck situates Winfrey, Dion Dennis writes, “We now traverse ambiguous and conflicted sites shaped by vectors of converging and diverging economies. We are hailed by intersecting and paradoxical constructions of meaning and identities. And, in a world that is simultaneously more totalizing and chaotic (the future seems unpredictable but Coca-Cola and Disney motifs are everywhere), alienation mixes with anxiety, resentment resonates with resignation and hope bonds with nostalgia on a mostly downward socio-economic escalator.” Dennis, “Evocations of Empire in A Transnational Corporate Age: Tracking the Sign of Saturn,” *Postmodern Culture* 5:2 (January 1995), 7.

⁷ Oprah Winfrey, quoted in Barb Galbincea, “Oprah’s surprise At Tri-C fund-raiser, Winfrey stuns crowd with pledge to match about \$600,000,” *Plain Dealer Reporter* (9 November 2002), 1A.

⁸ For characterizations of this moment in talk show television see Vicki Abt and Leonard Mustazza, *Coming After Oprah: Cultural Fallout in the Age of the TV Talk Show* (Bowling Green, OH: Bowling Green State University Popular Press, 1997); Linda Grindstaff, *The Money Shot: Trash, Class and the Making of TV Talk Shows* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), 21-24; Horace Newcomb, ed., “Talk Shows in the United States,” *Encyclopedia of Television* (CRC Press, 2004), 2260-2262. For Oprah’s particular position within this context, see Jane Shattuc, “The ‘Oprahfication’ of America?: Identity Politics and Public Sphere Debate,” *The Talking Cure: TV Talk Shows and Women* (Routledge, 1997), 85-110.

⁹ For renditions of this transitional moment, see Cecilia Konchar Farr, *Reading Oprah: How Oprah’s Book Club Changed the Way America Reads* (New York: State University of New York Press, 2005), 29-30; Illouz, *The Glamour of Misery*, 125; Peck, *The Age of Oprah*, 4-6, 39; Trysh Travis, “‘It Will Change the World If Everybody Reads This Book’: New Thought Religion in Oprah’s Book Club,” *American Quarterly* 59:3 (September 2007), 1024-1026.

¹⁰ On the overarching therapeutic bent of the talk show genre, see Kathleen S. Lowney, *Baring Our Souls: TV Talk Shows and the Religion of Recovery* (New York: Aldine de Gruyter, 1999); Julie Engel Manga, *Talking Trash: The Cultural Politics of Daytime TV Talk Shows* (New York: New York University Press, 2003); Joanna Thornborrow, “‘Has It Ever Happened to You?’: Talk Show Stories as Mediated Performance,” *Television Talk Shows: Discourse, Performance, Spectacle*, ed. Andrew Tolson (Mahwah, New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Publishers, 2001).

¹¹ The early 1990s introduced Oprah to her first two lifestyle counselors, trainer Bob Greene and cook Rosie Daley. As would become her model over the subsequent years, after successfully enjoying their assistance in her kitchen and her gym, she invited them on the show. Quickly the private hire became the public counsel, through a co-authored work with Greene, *Make the Connection: Ten Steps to a Better Body—and a Better Life* (Hyperion, 1996), and Rosie Daley’s *The Kitchen With Rosie: Oprah’s Favorite Recipes* (Random House, 1994) which included an Introduction by Oprah. Both texts became nonfiction bestsellers, marking Winfrey’s inaugural foray into literary influence.

¹² Kathryn Straach, "Oprah Can Play in Amarillo Until the Cows Come Home," *Dallas Morning News* (18 January 1998), 6G; Paul Katel, "Winfrey Wins Burger War in Texas," *USA Today* (27 February 1998), 3A; "Oprah Says Amarillo Experience 'a Blessing,'" Associated Press, Amarillo, Texas (2 March 1998).

"Rarely mentioned is the fact that the lawsuit was essentially one megacorporation suing another megacorporation, a war between corporate business giants each attempting to protect their bottom lines," writes Jennifer Richardson, "Phenomenon on Trial: Reading Rhetoric at *Texas Beef v. Oprah Winfrey*," from *The Oprah Phenomenon*, ed. Jennifer Harris and Elwood Watson (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 2007), 181.

¹³ Bill Adler, *The Uncommon Wisdom of Oprah Winfrey: A Portrait in Her Own Words* (Carol Publishing Group, 1996), 76.

¹⁴ J. Randy Taraborrelli, "The Change That Has Made Oprah So Happy," *Redbook* 189:1 (May 1997), 94.

¹⁵ Caroline Jeffs, "Oprah Comes To Greencastle." *DePauw University Wire* (19 September 1997).

¹⁶ Dana Kennedy, "Oprah: Act Two," *Entertainment Weekly* (9 September 1994), 20.

¹⁷ Wendy Parkins, "Oprah Winfrey's Change Your Life TV and the Spiritual Everyday," *Continuum: Journal of Media and Cultural Studies* 15.2 (July 2001), 145-157. On the naming of this neoliberal moment, see Lisa Duggan, *The Twilight of Equality?: Neoliberalism, Cultural Politics, and the Attack on Democracy* (Beacon, 2004).

¹⁸ Jessica Madore Fitch, "The Rich List: Oprah Winfrey, 46," *Chicago Sun-Times* (29 October 2000), 6.

¹⁹ Welborn, Amy. "The feel-good spirituality of Oprah." *Our Sunday Visitor* (13 January 2001).

<http://www.osv.com>. For more on the religious structures of talk show transformation, see Lowney, *Baring Our Souls*, 1999.

²⁰ "Oprah Winfrey extends deal with King World for her no. 1 TV talk show," *Jet* 85:22 (4 April 1994), 52.

²¹ "Perhaps no other corporate entity was better positioned than Winfrey to capitalize on this spiritualization of the brand...Winfrey's image makeover in the 1990s was not simply a personal endeavor but a financial one; her ascent to the position of 'prophet' paralleled a meteoric rise in her profits during the same period." Peck, *The Age of Oprah*, 190. "The spiritual concerns that began to shape *The Oprah Winfrey Show* in 1994 not only enhanced Brand Oprah, but also served to unify the proliferating extensions of the brand," Trysh Travis, "'It Will Change the World If Everybody Reads This Book': New Thought Religion in Oprah's Book Club," *Religion and Politics in the Contemporary United States*, R. Marie Griffith and Melani McAlister (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2008), 502.

²² The sweeping process of contemporary mass-marketing has been explored by George Ritzer, *The McDonaldization of Society* (1996). See also Mark Alfino, John S. Caputo, and Robin Wynyard, eds., *McDonaldization Revisited: Critical Essays on Consumer Culture* (Praeger, 1998). David Chidester has studied the religious aspects of this globalized marketing, "The Church of Baseball, the Fetish of Coca-Cola, and the Potlatch of Rock 'n' Roll: Theoretical Models for the Study of Religion in American Popular Culture," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 64:4 (Winter 1996), 743-765. See also David Chidester, Introduction, Chapter 1, and Chapter 2, *Authentic Fakes: Religion and American Popular Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 1-51.

²³ Since the interest of this project is at the level of her production, the data and details supplied by her website are tolerable initial sources for vitae and company description. "Through the power of media," her web authors describe, "Oprah Winfrey has created an unparalleled connection with people around the world. As supervising producer and host of the top-rated, award-winning *The Oprah Winfrey Show*, she has entertained, enlightened and uplifted millions of viewers for the past two decades. Her accomplishments as a global media leader and philanthropist have established her as one of the most respected and admired public figures today." Much of the work of *Oprah: The Gospel of an Icon* is to categorize these intonations for their "sincerity" (their empirical reliability, their authentic expressions of her true excellence, their regimented presentation of corporate clarity) even as we know that this sincerity is a magic of its own mode. In the case of her celebrated work, the reader can continue to track just how "unparalleled" is Oprah by scrolling "through photos and videos in Oprah's interactive biography," supplying as it does thumbnail sketches of Oprah as (their categories) Television Pioneer, Magazine Founder & Editorial Director, Producer/Actress, Online Leader, Philanthropist, Television Programming Creator, and Satellite Radio Programmer. Accessed on 4 February 2009:

http://www.oprah.com/article/pressroom/oprahbio/20080602_orig_oprahbio There is also a section devoted to "Honorary Achievements" where one is reminded that she was named (for instance) one of the 100 Most Influential People in the World by *Time* magazine in 1998, 2004, 2005, 2006, and 2007; received

the 2007 Elie Wiesel Foundation for Humanity Humanitarian Award and the 2004 Global Humanitarian Action Award from the United Nations Association; received the 50th Anniversary Gold Medal from the National Book Foundation (1999), the Association of American Publishers Honors Award (2003), and was named a Library Lion by the New York Public Library (2006); garnered the National Freedom Award from the National Civil Rights Museum and earned a spot in the Hall of Fame for the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, both in 2005; from her media origins, she has achieved recognition through the International Emmy Founders Award (2005), the Distinguished Service Award from the National Association of Broadcasters (2004), the Bob Hope Humanitarian Award at the 54th Annual Primetime Emmy Awards® (2002), and the National Academy of Television Arts & Sciences® Lifetime Achievement Award (1998), the latter leading her to remove herself from Emmy® consideration after winging more than forty Daytime Emmy Awards®. This isn't to speak of the minor annual accolades from *TV Guide*, *Forbes*, *Newsweek*, *Ebony*, *Essence*, etc., naming her the most significant person in the multiple hues (television personality, philanthropic donor, celebrity, African American, woman, working woman, greatest human being alive) by which she made her acclaim.

http://www.oprah.com/article/pressroom/oprahsbio/20080602_orig_oprahsbio/9

²⁴ Alex Kuczynski, "Winfrey Breaks New Ground With Magazine," *New York Times* (3 April 2000), C15. Says one Harpo insider: "She owns the show; she owns the production company; she owns the studio; and now she owns a major part of the distributor." Quoted in Paul Noglows, "Oprah: The Year of Living Dangerously," *Working Woman* (May 1994), 52. When Oprah negotiated the contract for 1999-2000, she was granted options to purchase 500,000 shares of King World stock at an exercise price of \$39.31. Winfrey already had options to buy 1.55 million shares. The deal made Winfrey the largest holder of King Worldshares, owning as much as 5 percent of the company. Martin Peers, "Update: Oprah Speculation Dents King World Stock," *Daily Variety* (3 September 1997), 1.

²⁵ To say that she is more than her biography, to note this 'of course' this may seem to surpass the bounds of knowledge as delineated by this text. However, Winfrey makes public her lessons, even if her public face does not always cohere around them. In an episode titled, "Memorable Thinkers" (2 January 2002) Winfrey showed a clip from a conversation she had in an earlier show with Maya Angelou. Important is the fact that she excerpted it (alongside excerpts from conversations with Sidney Poitier, Mattie Stepanek, and Elie Wiesel) as a particular moment of understanding for her. Of course, in addition to serving specific psychological ends here, "you're not in it" is the differential between self and image, biography and brand.

WINFREY: I think the best lesson I ever learned -- when people ask the question 'What is the thing you learned most out of life?' -- is a lesson -- Do you know which -- which one it is?

Ms. ANGELOU: That you're not in it.

WINFREY: You're not in it.

Ms. ANGELOU: Yes. Exactly. Good.

WINFREY: You're not in it.

Ms. ANGELOU: I remember it. And I remember also telling you that a number of times.

WINFREY: Yes.

Ms. ANGELOU: Because no lesson is learned immediately.

WINFREY: Right. It took me a long time to get it, didn't it?

Ms. ANGELOU: Yeah. Well, you got it, but you get it on so many levels. You see, there's a phrase they used in West Africa, deep talk, meaning that you -- anybody will understand on a certain level. People who are interested in really understanding more, take that statement or that lesson a little deeper. Somebody else will take it even deeper. And the West Africans suggest you can never understand completely. Even at 80, as far down as you take that -- that aphorism or as

far down as you take that adage or the advice, you could still go deeper if you live long enough. So when I told you the first time, you were -- you called, and you -- some newspaper...

WINFREY: Tabloid.

Ms. ANGELOU: ...tabloid, had just vilified you, or -- or Stedman, or both, and -- and you were really as close to -- to losing it -- you were so hurt by the -- by the erroneous and -- and ridiculous and cruel accusations that you were just hardly getting your breath.

WINFREY: Mm-hmm.

Ms. ANGELOU: And I said, 'You're not in that.' And you said, 'Yes, but, you see, this is what they said, and I -- I said, 'Yes, but you are not in it.' 'Yes, but' -- and then I heard you start to realize what I was saying, that that has nothing to do with you. That has all and everything to do with the perpetrator.

²⁶ J. Heath Atchley, "The Silence of the Secular," *Literature & Theology* 21:1 (March 2007): 67.

²⁷ Lynette Clemetson, "Women of the New Century: It Is Constant Work," *Newsweek* (8 January 2001), 44.

²⁸ "Leave it to Winfrey to have a trademark on the letter that's the symbol for the element of oxygen; it's as if she owned the very air we breathe," Nancy Franklin, "Oprah's World," *New Yorker* 84:6 (24 March 2008).

²⁹ John Lardas Modern has named secularism as a form of common sense: "I use the analytical category of secularism to encompass a field of tropes, styles, and sensibilities that not only generated a particular distinction between the religious and the secular but also made this distinction a matter of common sense." "Evangelical Secularism and the Measure of Leviathan," *Church History* 77:4 (December 2008), 806 cf. 21. He attributes this to particular processes of religious media: "evangelical media practices have instantiated secularism as a matter of common sense" (870) "The religious perspective differs from the common-sensical in that, as already pointed out, it move beyond the realities of everyday life to wider ones which correct and complete them...It is this sense of the 'really real' upon which the religious perspective rests and which the symbolic activities of religion as a cultural system are devoted to producing, intensifying, and, so far as possible, rendering inviolable by the discordant revelations of secular experience." Clifford Geertz, "Religion as a Cultural System," *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays* (Basic Books, 1973), 112. See also Clifford Geertz, "Common Sense as a Cultural System," *Local Knowledge* (New York, Basic Books, 1983), 73-93.

³⁰ "The world we live in now seems rhizomic even schizophrenic, calling for theories of rootlessness, alienation, and psychological distance between individuals and groups on the one hand, and fantasies (or nightmares) of electronic propinquity on the other." Arjun Appadurai, "Disjuncture and Difference in the Global Cultural Economy," *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 29.

³¹ Akhil Gupta and James Ferguson, "Beyond 'Culture': Space, Identity, and the Politics of Difference," *Culture Power, Place: Explorations in Critical Anthropology*, eds. Akhil Gupta and James Ferguson (Durham: Duke University Press, 1997), 37.

³² For an overview of the "counterpublic," see Robert Asen, "Seeking the 'Counter' in Counterpublics," *Communication Theory* 10:4 (November 2000): "Counterpublics signal that some publics develop not simply as one among a constellation of discursive entities, but as explicitly articulated alternatives to wider publics that exclude the interests of potential participants. Counterpublics in turn reconnect with the communicative flows of a multiple public sphere." (425)

³³ S. Paige Baty, *American Monroe: The Making of a Body Politic* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995); Erika Lee Doss, *Elvis Culture: Fans, Faith, and Image* (University Press of Kansas, 2004); Wayne Koestenbaum, *Jackie Under My Skin: Interpreting an Icon* (Plume, 1996); Robert Miklitsch, *From Hegel to Madonna: Towards a General Economy of 'Commodity Fetishism'* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1998); Stephen Prothero, *American Jesus: How the Son of God Became a National Icon* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2004); Gilbert B. Rodman, *Elvis After Elvis: The Posthumous Career of a Living Legend* (New York: Routledge, 1996).

³⁴ Chapters in *Oprah: The Gospel of an Icon* will address these cultures in detail. One arena less explored here is that of a therapeutic culture, because this aspect of talk show television and religion has been well addressed in the historiography: see Frank Furedi, *Therapy Culture: Cultivating Vulnerability in an Uncertain Age* (London: Routledge, 2004); Wendy Kaminer, *I'm Dysfunctional, Your Dysfunctional: The Recovery Movement and Other Self Help Fashions* (New York: Madison Wesley Press, 1992); T.J. Jackson Lears, "From Salvation to Self-Realization: Advertising and the Therapeutic Roots of the Consumer Culture, 1880-1930," *The Culture of Consumption*, edited by Richard Wightman Fox and T.J. Jackson Lears (New York: Pantheon Books, 1983); Chana Ullman, *The Transformed Self: The Psychology of Religious Conversion* (New York: Plenum Press, 1989); Mimi White, *Tele-Advising: Therapeutic Discourse in American Television* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1992).

³⁵ Indicative of the cultural awareness of Oprah's mortality is an online movie released by Team Tiger Awesome, a guerilla filmmaking operation. The short, "Oprah Is Dead," flashes a newspaper that reads, "DOOM! OPRAH IS DEAD. HELL TO FOLLOW." Later, a radio DJ is heard reporting, "It's been one month since 'O' day, and literacy rates continue to plummet as no viable replacement for Oprah's Book Club has yet been found. Reports from beyond the vanishing lands show the resistance continuing to fight against Dr. Phil's private army. Stay tuned for more lock-watch at the top of the hour."

http://www.atom.com/funny_videos/oprah_dead/

³⁶ Timothy Miller, *When Prophets Die: The Postcharismatic Fate of New Religious Movements* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1991).

³⁷ Debates over who could be Oprah's inheritor only serve to show how particular is her position. "Replacing Oprah," *Showbiz Tonight*, CNN (19 November 2008). The strongest nominee is Tyra Banks, a candidate who shares some of Oprah's business savvy and down-home sauce, but none of Winfrey's epic public suffering. Lynn Hirschberg, "Banksable," *New York Times Magazine* (1 June 2008); Adrienne P. Samuels, "Tyra Banks: The Frugal Stylista," *Ebony* 64:2 (December 2008), 76. Other options have emerged, including most recently a profile that nominated actress Gwyneth Paltrow as a successor, due to her nascent interest in 'lifestyle' advocacy: Bob Morris, "Martha, Oprah...Gwyneth?" *New York Times* (21 February 2009), <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/02/22/fashion/22gwyneth.html?scp=1&sq=&st=nyt>

³⁸ Famous industrial founders (Andrew Carnegie, J. Pierpont Morgan, Leland Stanford, John D. Rockefeller) dominated the nineteenth century economic landscape and the twentieth (Michael Eisner, Steve Forbes, Bill Gates, Rupert Murdoch, Sumner Redstone). By the late twentieth, the pursuit of starry outside management was typical practice, if heavily criticized within academic business circles: Rakesh Khurana, *Searching for a Corporate Savior: The Irrational Quest for Charismatic CEOs* (Princeton University Press, 2004).

³⁹ "Whatever religion 'is,' its definition seems to be thought to lie with others—with courts and practitioners—and not with the academic field charged with its study." Jonathan Z. Smith, "God Save This Honourable Court: Religion and Civic Discourse," *Relating Religion: Essays in the Study of Religion* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 375. Thus, Oprah is not a "religion" because she does not pass the 14-point test supplied by the U.S. Internal Revenue Service, which seeks to identify groups that exist (in their words) "exclusively" for "religious" purposes. This is the line demarcating between those bodies that earn 501(c)(3) status and those which are considered "for profit." This book will show some parallels between that 14-point test and Winfrey's labors (including her possession of "a recognized creed and form of worship," "formal code of doctrine and discipline," "membership not associated with any other church or denomination," "ordained ministers selected after completing prescribed studies," "a literature of its own," and "regular religious services") to demonstrate how the legal definition of a "church" is not a description exclusive to a non-profit institution.

⁴⁰ Ken Lawrence, *The World According to Oprah: An Unauthorized Portrait in Her Own Words* (Kansas City: Andrews McMeel Publishing, 2005), 16.

⁴¹ For previous reflections on the spiritual content of Oprah's empire, see Illouz, *The Glamour of Misery*, 43-46, 149-152, 230-235; Lowney, *Baring Our Souls*, 19-21, 89-107; Denise Martin, "Oprah Winfrey and Spirituality," *The Oprah Phenomenon*, 147-164; Maria McGrath, "Spiritual Talk: The Oprah Winfrey Show and the Popularization of the New Age," *The Oprah Phenomenon*, 125-146; Peck, *The Age of Oprah*, 104-111, 208-210.

⁴² For a lucid defense of spirituality against its condemnatory conflation with the market, see Leigh Eric Schmidt, *Restless Souls: The Making of American Spirituality* (New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 2005), 282-290.

⁴³ Bethany McLean and Peter Elkind, *Smartest Guys in the Room: The Amazing Rise and Scandalous Fall of Enron* (Portfolio, 2003).

⁴⁴ “There is nothing,” Jonathan Z. Smith writes, “that is inherently sacred or profane. These are not substantive categories, but rather situational or relational categories, mobile boundaries which shift according to the map being employed.” *Imagining Religion: From Babylon to Jonestown* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), 55.

⁴⁵ Works which organize by this trio in their tables of contents include *God in the Details: American Religion in Popular Culture*, eds. Eric Michael Mazur and Kate McCarthy (New York: Routledge, 2001); *Religion and Popular Culture in America*, eds. Bruce David Forbes and Jeffrey H. Mahan (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000); *Religion as Entertainment*, ed. C.K. Robertson (New York: Peter Lang, 2002). To note the persistence of this drab categorical trio in these volumes is not to besmirch their contents; rather, it is to prod a shared intellectual concern about the “religion in” and “religion as” formulations, posing as they do some idea about religion as an ingredient, rather than pervasive contributory aspect, to any cultural interpretation. Moreover, it is to disassemble the unifying clarity of the category of “religion” in an effort to reduce its bounded framing in analysis of pop cultural objects. David Chidester has led the way in naming this trio as an academic habit, and has supplied significant scholarship addressing the messiness of the third, namely on the religious aspects of popular cultural production: “What counts as religion is the focus of the problem of authenticity in religion and American popular culture.” *Authentic Fakes: Religion and American Popular Culture*, 9. For a model of the sort of cultural studies I encourage, see *Religion and Cultural Studies*, ed. Susan L. Mizruchi (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001).

⁴⁶ For an excellent evaluation of an instance of this last example, see Webb Keane, “Freedom and Blasphemy: On Indonesian Press Bans and Danish Cartoons,” *Public Culture* 21:1 (Winter 2009).

⁴⁷ Scholars have struggled to render this relationship without valuation to mixed ends. For example, in his *Touchdown Jesus: The Mixing of Sacred and Secular in American History* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2003), Moore, a sensitive and brilliant historian of American religions, cannot resist the temptations of a secular vantage to express concern with certain churchly weaknesses: “A better complaint to make about American religion than its shallowness is its very failure to try to maintain a sharp distinction between the sacred and the secular, a distinction that might give churches a vista from which to criticize the world around them.” (8)

⁴⁸ “Commercial aspects of religion are traceable in any century,” writes R. Laurence Moore, *Selling God: American Religion in the Marketplace of Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 7.

⁴⁹ Matthew 21:12 is the source of much Christian anxiety about popular culture and its detrimental effects to the clarity of “Christian” spaces over and against worldly (popular, cultural) spaces.

⁵⁰ Moore, *Selling God*, 145.

⁵¹ In addition to Moore’s *Selling God* (1994), Leigh Eric Schmidt’s *Consumer Rites: The Buying & Selling of American Holidays* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995) supplies a stunning cultural appraisal of one calendrical genre of contestation between ideas about religion and practices of consumption.

⁵² To see a particularly strong example of the ways economic and religious practices have cohabited, see Katherine Carte Engel, *Religion and Profit: Moravians in Early America* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009), which tracks the intimate supervision of eighteenth-century Moravians overseeing their own international trade and nascent manufacturing.

⁵³ Tricia Sheffield, “Advertising,” *Religion and American Cultures: An Encyclopedia of Traditions, Diversity, and Popular Expressions*, Volume Two, eds. Gary Laderman and Luis Leon (Santa Barbara, Calif.: ABC-CLIO, 2003), 445 & 446. For more on the religious aspects of advertising, see Sut Jhally, “Advertising as Religion: The Dialectic and Technology of Magic,” *Cultural Politics in Contemporary America*, ed. Ian Angus and Sut Jhally (New York: Routledge, 1989); Grant McCracken, *Culture and Consumption: New Approaches to the Symbolic Character of Consumer Goods and Activities* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988); Tricia Sheffield, *The Religious Dimensions of Advertising* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006).

⁵⁴ The MasterCard website encourages the posting of “priceless picks” which allow for the average consumer to participate in the priceless campaign. “A Pick can be a favorite place, a treasured thing, or an uncommon experience,” the website instructs, “You can submit a Pick about almost anything that matters to you, but the best Priceless Picks can be shared and experienced by other people, too.” <http://www.priceless.com/us/personal/en/pricelesstv/>

⁵⁵ “MasterCard Roundtable: The ‘Priceless’ Campaign,” *Advertising & Society Review* 7:1 (2006).

⁵⁶ For an examination of the latter instance, see Joanne Punzo Waghorne, “The Hindu Gods in a Split-level World: The Sri Siva-Vishnu Temple in Suburban Washington, D.C.,” *Religion and American Culture: A Reader*, ed. David G. Hackett (New York: Routledge, 2003).

⁵⁷ Fred Goodman, “Madonna and Oprah,” *Working Woman* (December 1991), 53.

⁵⁸ Tom Gliatto et al, “So, where’s the beef?” *People* 49:6 (16 February 1998), 170.

⁵⁹ “Control” is operative, since Winfrey indicates at every turn that women should not give up control of their money, that she signed every check and knew every penny spent at her home and office. Control, too, of the managerial elements of her business: “Employees at Oprah’s Harpo Inc. are required to sign a confidentiality contract that prohibits them from talking or writing about the talk-show host’s personal or business life and the affairs of her company—for the rest of their lives,” reported E! Entertainment News in 2000. One frustrated former senior associate producer at Harpo remarked on that workplace, “There’s no sense of justice inside, which is so ironic in light of the public image of someone who touts herself as an advocate for business ethics and spirituality.” Emily Farache, “Oprah to Underlings: Shut Your Mouths!,” *E! Online* (17 April 2000), posted at

http://www3.eonline.com/uberblog/b39718_oprah_underlings_shut_your_mouths.html

⁶⁰ Gretchen Reynolds, “A Year to Remember: Oprah Grows Up,” *TV Guide* (7 January 1995), 15.

⁶¹ Illouz, *The Glamour of Misery*, 32.

⁶² Lynette Clemetson, “Women of the New Century: It Is Constant Work,” *Newsweek* (8 January 2001), 44.

⁶³ Birgit Meyer, “Religious Sensations: Why Media, Aesthetics, and Power Matter in the Study of Contemporary Religion,” from *Religion: Beyond a Concept*, ed. Hent de Vries (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008), 705. Definitions are easy enough to conjure, and pleasurable to plug, if only because of the wildcat profligacy of the term under consideration: “There are countless phenomena observable in the world, past and present, that can be adequately denoted by the term ‘religion’: temples here, beads, incense, and prayer books there, rites and ceremonies performed and watched with solemnity, fear, or jubilation, adepts and aspirants speculating on the meaning of it all in a monastic cell or on TV. These phenomena are not something ‘we’ suddenly discovered.” Tomoko Masuzawa, “The Burden of the Great Divide,” posted on 30 January 2008 at http://www.ssrc.org/blogs/immanent_frame/2008/01/30/the-burden-of-the-great-divide/

⁶⁴ “If historians of American religion do not integrate, *into the stories they are telling*, a robust integration of their own criteria for inclusion, collaboration, and illumination, they will be hard-pressed to gain any leverage on the making of religion as a category of analysis,” John Lardas Modern cajoles, “Evangelical Secularism and the Measure of Leviathan,” 874. Russell McCutcheon concurs: “Should not scholarship constitute something other than dogmatic assertion? Rather than studying the spread of religions, perhaps we ought to consider studying why naming part of the social world *as* religion has caught on so widely among diverse human communities, each with their own prior systems of self-designation, in just the past few hundred years.” McCutcheon, “Words, Words, Words,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 75:4 (December 2007): 974, 976.

⁶⁵ In most intellectual efforts to define it, “religion” seems to “die the death of a thousand qualifications,” to quote Anthony Flew, “Theology and Falsification,” in *The Philosophy of Religion*, ed. Basil Mitchell (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971), 13-15; Hent de Vries, “Introduction: Why Still ‘Religion’?” from *Religion: Beyond a Concept* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008), 9.

⁶⁶ Hent de Vries, “Introduction,” 97-98. Earlier, de Vries poignantly inquires: “Is ‘religion’s’ past a *virtual* shadow that looms over every single instance (instant and instantiation) that punctuates our individual and collective lives, dooming it in advance to transience, contingency, fallibility? Or is such a past an enabling horizon that makes life and its moments possible and meaningful, for example, by elevating it to a level of sublimity (or normalcy) of which we no longer believed our everydayness to be capable?” (69)

⁶⁷ Modern, “Evangelical Secularism and the Measure of Leviathan,” 868.

⁶⁸ Theories of secularization posited “an originally sacralized cosmos which (in its dystopic form) falls victim to, or (in its utopic form) is released from superstition by, an enlightenment of reason, particularly that marked by technological scientific.” What many scholars of religion have asked recently, however, is whether the “the ongoing religious life of humanity actually demonstrate the process of renouncing religion which secularization theory asserts?” Randi R. Warne, “Gender,” *Guide to the Study of Religion*, ed. Willi Braun and Russell T. McCutcheon (London: Cassell, 2000), 151.

⁶⁹ Here I am suggesting that an Oprah is a formation of the secular in the vein described by Talal Asad, *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2003).

⁷⁰ Tomoko Masuzawa, "The Burden of the Great Divide," posted on 30 January 2008 at http://www.ssrc.org/blogs/immanent_frame/2008/01/30/the-burden-of-the-great-divide/

⁷¹ Gil Anidjar, "Secularism," *Critical Inquiry* 31:1 (Autumn 2006): 52-77; John Lardas Modern, "Ghosts of Sing Sing, or the Metaphysics of Secularism," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 75:3 (September 2007): 615-650.

⁷² "The prevailing question is not how did the United States become irretrievably secular, but why has the country been so religiously vital?" Leigh Eric Schmidt, "That Weird Strange Thing," posted on 29 November 2007 at http://www.ssrc.org/blogs/immanent_frame/2007/11/29/that-weird-strange-thing/ For more on the exceptional nature of the American case, see Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007), 448-472; R. Stephen Warner, *A Church of Our Own: Disestablishment and Diversity in American Religion* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2005).

⁷³ "The future of our increasingly diverse societies will call on all our skills at critical translation; all our abilities to occupy contested space between the near and the far; all our capacities for the dual project of making familiar what, at first encounter, seems strange, and making strange what we have come to think of as all-too-familiar." Smith, "God Save This Honourable Court," 389.

⁷⁴ I should be clear that any time "culture" is used in the singular it is intended with bracketed enthusiasm. The holistic fallacy nips at the heels of a subject as consuming as Oprah. So, in the face of presuming her total significance within a totalized idea of a culture, it is worth saying that some kinds of piety never cross her threshold, and that her threshold is a conflicting sight within a mass culture not easily presumed by any singular icon. On the trouble with statements of a unitary culture, see Bruce Kucklick, "Myth and Symbol in American Studies," *American Quarterly* 24 (October 1972): 435-450. On the influence of Clifford Geertz's definition of "culture" upon cultural historians and anthropologists of culture, see William H. Sewell Jr., "Geertz, Cultural Systems, and History: From Synchrony to Transformation," *Representations* 59 (Summer 1997), 35-55. On the relationship between such concepts of "culture" and the neoliberal present, see John Frow, who has written, "The neoliberal imagination, by contrast, locating its vision of freedom in an expanded realm of economic transactions rather than in a separate realm of culture, has less of a problem in this respect in coming to terms with a form of citizenship grounded in consumption rather than in the sphere of political judgment... Consumption, that is to say, offers something like an alternative (and "neoliberal") form of citizenship, one that can recognize and valorize difference in a way that an abstract belonging to a commonwealth cannot do. From this moment the political public sphere and mass consumption are at once alternatives and yet increasingly resemble and shape each other." In "Cultural Studies and the Neoliberal Imagination," *The Yale Journal of Criticism* 12:2 (1999), 425 & 428.

⁷⁵ Aspects of the broader society (like the socialization of women's labor, the professionalization of amateur sports and services, the corporatization of organizations) were enacted as well within denominated structures of religion. See Wade Clark Roof and William McKinney, *American Mainline Religion: Its Changing Shape and Future* (Rutgers University Press, 1987); Amanda Porterfield, *The Transformation of American Religion: The Story of a Late-Twentieth Century Awakening* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001); Robert Wuthnow, *The Restructuring of American Religion: Society and Faith Since World War II* (Princeton University Press, 1989).

⁷⁶ In a *Chicago Sun-Times* article, cultural critic Richard Roeper writes of this phenomenon: "A front-page article in USA Today this week detailed Oprah's effect on the marketplace. Just a few examples: After Bill Cosby's Little Bill children's books were featured on the show in December, 1.5 million copies were sold in just three weeks. Sales of a particular line of pajama soared 200 percent after getting the Oprah seal of approval. Michael Bolton sold 250,000 copies of his latest CD after appearing on 'Oprah', and Yanni sold 200,000 copies of his CD, 'Reflections of Passion', after performing two songs on the show." Richard Roeper, "Oprah's Sheep Ready to Follow Every Whim," *Chicago Sun-Times* (22 January 1998), 11.

⁷⁷ Scholars contributing to Oprah studies have pointed us to the ideal date of her origins, sitting as she did squat within the economic expansions and service retractions of the Reagan Revolution. (See Peck, Chapter 4, *The Age of Oprah*.) From that mid-1980s moment, we can see backward, to recent memories of the civil right's movement, the women's liberation movement, the gay liberation movement, and the palette of countercultures which comprised the liberal styles of religious experimentation and domestic deconstruction of the imagined, advertised, and lived 1960s. The stories and histories here rendered are

canonical: women in the workforce in droves, nuclear families reframing by the year, African Americans seeking de facto desegregation: the sociology of the Seventies was, by any tally, transforming. Transforming into what remains indeterminate: Is the radicalism replete? Or is it tragic, unfulfilled, littered solely with martyrs and commercialization? Among scholars of religion, the last twenty-five years of the twentieth century are seen through largely optimistic kaleidoscopic lenses. Every aspect of post-1965 American religious history has thus far sought to commend its diversity and contradictions. For example, in the 1970s wake of Woodstock abandon, antifeminist factions within the evangelical subculture gained power as women sought to (and were encouraged to) return to “full-time homemaking.” This, coupled with new restrictions on church leadership roles for women, were in part reactions against the (imagined, advertised, lived) success of women in mainline Protestant denominations seeking clerical outfit, and the increasing role of women within the reigning economies (law, medicine, academic) of power. [See Margaret Lamberts Bendroth and Virginia Lieson Brereton, ed., *Women and Twentieth-Century Protestantism* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2002); R. Marie Griffith, *God’s Daughters: Evangelical Women and the Power of Submission* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000); Julie Ingersoll, *Evangelical Christian Women: War Stories in the Gender Battles* (New York: New York University Press, 2003).] Women, only nascent in their leaving of the domestic nest, were being told to return to it, even as many forged frontier spaces as leaders of communities that still worried over their newly unbound status.

Canonized too have been plot points for black believers subsequent to civil rights sagas. African American religious traditions experienced the same vein of culture wars that conjured the vexed religious woman, as many denominations fell under the sway of Black or Black Womanist theologies which sought to reconstitute respect for black culture within a race-based interpretation of Christianity. Other majority-black religious outfits, however, incorporated with white denominations that seemed to coordinate better with their aspired ecumenism or worship practices. Non-Christian groups contested Protestantism’s majority among African Americans, and the ongoing reality of a socioeconomic underclass in the black community caused many to turn to nondenominational prosperity gospels and televangelists rather than historic traditions or nationalist theological inclinations. Any definition of a controlling “Black Church” collapsed as the critical political agency of that rhetorical entity was replaced by atomizing sectarianism and economic realignments. Finally, religious seekers across the racial and gender divide found their practical options only multiplying. The so-called “New Age religion” which took shape in the late 1960s and 1970s introduced to the mass culture an eclectic mix of world religious traditions, pop psychology, quantum physics, and occult practices. Practices which had been before either solely seen in other parts of the globe, or on the far margins of U.S. religious creativity, found paperback covers and print cultural success. Channeling, visualization, meditation, and alternative healing methods became available at the local bookstore and community college. [See Wade Clark Roof, *Spiritual Marketplace: Baby Boomers and the Remaking of American Religion* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001).] Longstanding religious denominations discovered that talk of angels, miracles, and psychic phenomena had mainstream appeal. This success of the New Age palette is the product of multiple histories and cultures, including the popularization of Native American rituals, the incursion of Southeast Asian immigrants, and the slow medical approval of some holistic healing practices. [See Catherine L. Albanese, *Nature Religion in America: From the Algonkian Indians to the New Age*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991); Wouter J. Hanegraaff, *New Age Religion and Western Culture: Esotericism in the Mirror of Secular Thought* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1998); Paul Heelas, *The New Age Movement: The Celebration of the Self and the Sacralization of Modernity* (Blackwell Publishing, 1996); Sarah M. Pike, *New Age and Neopagan Religions in America* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006).]

⁷⁸ Turning to such market metaphor, however, should not dilute the very real sway of church institutions and religious communities, which in many parts of America remained powerful and totemic.

⁷⁹ Schmidt, *Restless Souls*, 19-23. For a narrative of this Boomer spiritual seeking, see Robert Wuthnow, *After Heaven: Spirituality in America since the 1950s* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998). For a strong portrait of this plurality more denominational form, see Stephen Prothero, ed., *A Nation of Religions: The Politics of Pluralism in Multireligious America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006).

⁸⁰ Stanley Fish, “Boutique Multiculturalism, or Why Liberals Are Incapable of Thinking about Hate Speech,” *Critical Inquiry* 23 (Winter 1997), 378.

⁸¹ Tracy Fessenden, *Culture and Redemption: Religion, the Secular, and American Literature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007), 4.

⁸² “Interview: Oprah Winfrey,” Academy of Achievement (21 February 1991), <http://www.achievement.org/autodoc/page/win0int-1>

⁸³ Chris Rojek supplies an intriguing, if overwrought, image of this new exchange value: “Celebrities are part of the culture of distraction today. Society requires distraction so as to deflect consciousness from both the fact of structured inequality and the meaninglessness of existence following the death of God. Religion provides a solution to the problem of structured inequality in this life by promising eternal salvation to true believers. With the death of God, and the decline of the Church, the sacramental props in the quest for salvation have been undermined. Celebrity and spectacle fill the vacuum.” *Celebrity* (London: Reaktion, 2001), 90. For more on the deification of celebrity in the late twentieth century, see Ellis Cashmore, *Celebrity Culture* (Routledge, 2006); Daniel Horwitz, *The Star Is Born: Celebrity in the Age of Mass Consumption* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008); John Langer, “TV’s Personality System,” *Media, Culture and Society* 4 (1981): 351-65; Graeme Turner, *Understanding Celebrity* (Sage Publications Ltd., 2004).

⁸⁴ An early *Los Angeles Times* story about Winfrey’s book club referred to her as “the nation’s girlfriend,” then quoted a fan whose perception of Winfrey exemplifies this relationship:

She’s like the friend you always connect with, the one who catches you up on her life; you know, the one you can confide in. She’s down to earth, a real natural. When she talks, you don’t just listen. You want to listen...She’s like the one friend you trust, the one you know has good taste. You stick with a girlfriend like that, you know.

Braun, “The Oprah Seal of Approval,” *Los Angeles Times* (9 March 1997), 8. Quoted in Peck, *The Age of Oprah*, 184.

⁸⁵ Theodor Adorno, *The Culture Industry* (London: Routledge, 1991), 93.

⁸⁶ “In short, I would like...to search instead for instances of discursive production (which also administer silences, to be sure), of the production of power (which sometimes have the function of prohibiting), of the propagation of knowledge (which often cause mistaken beliefs or systematic misconceptions to circulate),” Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: Volume 1: An Introduction* (Vintage Books, 1990), 12.

⁸⁷ Marjorie Garber, *Symptoms of Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1998), 9.

⁸⁸ On the religious presumptions of “kitsch,” see Colleen McDannell, “Christian Kitsch and the Rhetoric of Bad Taste,” *Material Christianity: Religion and Popular Culture in America* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), 163-197.

⁸⁹ Saba Mahmood, *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject* (Princeton University Press, 2004), 5. On agency and its relationship to the history of Protestantism, see Webb Keane, *Christian Moderns: Freedom and Fetish in the Mission Encounter* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007), 51-58, 193-196.

⁹⁰ “From her first talk-show gig in Baltimore hosting ‘People Are Talking’ in which an overweight, awkward Oprah brought equally important people in front of cameras to speak with her, she has always thrusted life in the face of imperial television. Think of it like this: The media is Caesar. Having mastered then revolutionized its idiom, Oprah is Christ. Like changing water into wine, she has managed—through her elevation of hidden, obscure, or neglected experience into spectacle—to make the television set watch you,” Lee Siegel, “Thank You for Sharing: The Strange Genius of Oprah,” *The New Republic* 234:21/22 (15 & 12 June 2006), 21.

⁹¹ Thomas A. Tweed, *Crossing and Dwelling: A Theory of Religion* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2006).

⁹² Janet R. Jakobsen and Ann Pellegrini, *Secularisms* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008), 13.

⁹³ Danièle Hervieu-Léger, “Religion As Memory,” from *Religion: Beyond a Concept*, ed. Hent de Vries (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008), 247. Or, as Leigh Eric Schmidt has remarked, “we must pair our narratives of modern secularization with narratives of modern sanctification.” Schmidt, “That Weird Strange Thing,” posted on 29 November 2007 at

http://www.ssrc.org/blogs/immanent_frame/2007/11/29/that-weird-strange-thing/