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The Church of Oprah Winfrey—A New American Religion?

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Tuesday, November 29, 2005

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Marcia Z. Nelson sees Oprah as a major American religious leader. In *The Gospel According to Oprah*, Nelson presents her as the symbol and catalyst for a new American religion. “Oprah Winfrey, talk show host, film producer, and philanthropist, is not ordained. She is neither preacher nor religious professional. Yet her multimedia empire, built over two decades, has given her the scope and stature of an influential leader. Oprah has a prominent pulpit from which to preach,” Nelson insists. Oprah’s television audience of ten million (according to Nielsen ratings) and her magazine readership of 2.7 million together represent a massive media phenomenon. As Nelson explains, “Oprah’s whole enterprise, which includes many media that provide platforms for her gospel as well as sources of income, is vast.” Nelson’s book represents an effort to understand Oprah Winfrey as an exemplar and prophetess of a new form of American religion. In reality, Oprah is probably best understood as a highly-talented representative of the religion of positive thinking that has shaped American culture for at least the last two centuries. In this role, Oprah continues and extends a line of religious thought that replaces the transcendent with the temporal and looks for fulfillment and success as the goods of a satisfying life.

Marcia Z. Nelson is a writer who covers religions and spirituality. In previous works, she has considered various aspects of modern American religion, including contemporary meditation movements. In *Oprah Winfrey* she has found a figure of such influence and reach that she may well represent the mainstreaming of her own life philosophy.

Of course, Oprah’s primary audience is comprised of women. “Oprah is primarily the voice of women in the middle: middle-class middle Americans,” Nelson explains. Through her television show, magazine, and book club, Oprah reaches out to these women with a message of self-improvement, empowerment, and self-actualization.

Watching “The Oprah Show” is, Nelson insists, something like attending a worship service. “Go to this house of worship and sit down for an inspiring hour that will engage you and give you a lift,” Nelson encourages. “An hour-long show five days a week adds up to a lot more pulpit time per week than the average pastor enjoys, and Oprah commands a lot bigger congregation.”

Nelson’s book is genuinely interesting, offering credible and helpful insights into the Oprah phenomenon. At the same time, Nelson gushes over the meaning of Oprah and seems to celebrate Oprah’s redefinition of religious experience. Indeed, she goes so far as to refer to Oprah as a symbol of spiritual renewal. “In other words, it is not just talk, but talk that’s been tested in life’s fires—talk is testimony,” she asserts. “As Oprah would say, this is about getting real. This is the

language of authenticity. A preference for the freshness and vividness of experience over what can seem like the dull dryness of institutional faith is hardly new, of course. Spiritual renewal has ever been thus.”

Oprah Winfrey was born January 29, 1954 in Kosciusko, Mississippi. Originally, she lived there on a farm with her mother, Vernita, and her grandmother, Hattie Mae Lee. In later years, Vernita was unable to care for Oprah, and she went to live with her father, Vernon Winfrey, in Nashville. Interestingly, Oprah was supposed to have been named Orpah, after the daughter-in-law of Naomi as cited in Ruth 1:14. A misspelling of her name led to the name that has made her famous. She was raised in a Baptist church and developed her speaking ability in the context of the local congregation.

As an adolescent, Oprah was sexually abused by male relatives, became sexually promiscuous, and gave birth to a baby boy, who later died.

She got her big break in broadcasting at age 19 and left her college studies in order to become a TV newscaster. In 1984, she moved to WLS-TV in Chicago and began a local talk show. The show was so popular that it was eventually named for Oprah and then went into national syndication. From those roots, a vast media empire was born.

Nelson is candid in dealing with the way Oprah repackages spirituality. “She translates what religions would term transcendent into something that is inspiring but secular. She would call it a vision of possibilities. She has tried to develop her own unique language, which means talking about values in a secular and inclusive sense in a religiously pluralistic country.”

The Oprah phenomenon is based in self-disclosure, confession, testimony, and talk—lots and lots of talk. Episodes of “The Oprah Show” often deal with abuse, frustration, and the search for fulfillment. Guests are routinely encouraged to confess their wrongdoing, claim their promise, and move into a new phase of their lives, empowered and encouraged by Oprah and the experience of sharing their inner lives with millions of television viewers. In this sense, Oprah’s television show promises something like a secular catharsis—complete with Oprah’s validation of their problems, their desires, and their self-analysis. Nelson suggests that Oprah’s influence is based in her gift for listening and her knowledge that self-disclosure and personal testimony offer a means of liberation. Of course, this dependence upon disclosure and confession also makes for good ratings—and Oprah understands what interests a television audience. As Nelson explains: “On Oprah’s show, abuse may be the subject of a show, followed the next day by an entertainer. However morally laudable or pressing, unrelieved focus on abuse or mistreatment of women or AIDS in Africa or any of the world’s pressing needs doesn’t make for good ratings, either. Without good ratings, the television platform Oprah needs to ‘get people to think about things a little differently’ would vanish.”

In the course of her research, Nelson approached several scholars of American religion, asking them “whether they could think of Oprah as a teacher who advanced a kind of entry-level religion that included the same core values many religions promote.” When Oprah was criticized for offering meaning without community, Nelson counters by suggesting that Oprah’s television show and reading club offer one form of community, even as her expanding presence on the internet promises “virtual community.”

Oprah Winfrey’s approach to life centers in self-analysis and positive thinking. Of course, material abundance also plays a part. “Oprah believes in abundance, a concept not generally associated with religion,” Nelson acknowledges. “A lot of people think of religion as requiring asceticism and poverty—giving up goods, denying personal desires. And for good reason.” By offering a seemingly endless array of product recommendations and endorsements, and by filling her magazine with advertisements for expensive products and services, Oprah clearly associates the good life with material fulfillment.

In keeping with the theme of positive thinking, and with the ideology of spiritual movements of this kind, Oprah’s secularized spirituality includes few rules or moral judgments. “Oprah is famously nonjudgmental and empathetic,” Nelson explains. Even as she features programs on romance, dating, marriage, and parenting, Oprah remains unmarried. Her nonjudgmentalism extends to her own lifestyle, even as she has publicly acknowledged the fact that she lives with her longtime boyfriend, Stedman Graham.

When Oprah refers to God, she is clear to insist that this means no specific god and entails no particular theological commitments. Nelson refers to Oprah’s treatment of religion on her program as “a non-sectarian picture” in which theological content “is present but not primary.” In other words, “God is acknowledged as necessary, but the language

doesn't insist on that. It's soft sell."

As Nelson understands the Oprah phenomenon, forgiveness is at the center of Oprah's message. Nevertheless, Oprah offers forgiveness without atonement. Confession of inadequacy is presented as a sufficient remedy for sin and wrongdoing. God is effectively out of the picture as lawgiver or judge, and there is no room for the cross of Christ as atonement for sin.

"Oprah's 'New Age' talk about spirit was part of her ongoing, ever evolving attempt to find the right words for teachings she learned through religion," Nelson suggests. "Her spiritually inclusive language is also intended to be unique—the language she alone speaks that makes her inspiring and distinctly herself. For marketing reasons as well as for her own sense of mission, she's putting her own stamp on the language, on the words she uses, on the culture, where the 'Oprah effect' and 'Oprahfication' and 'She Oprah'ed it out of me' are terms that have been coined to describe her pervasive influence and style."

Oprah's faith wears no labels, Nelson insists. Oprah "talks often enough about values that her audience can see she is value driven, even if the values and beliefs don't wear a specific denominational label," Nelson observes. As she explains, "Oprah's clothes may wear labels, but her faith does not."

New York University professor Paul Vitz once observed, "Contemporary psychology is a form of secular humanism based on the rejection of God and the worship of the self." In her substitution of psychology for theology, Oprah has become a high priestess and icon of the psychologization of American society. When she features prominent New Age figures on her television show, she helps to mainstream New Age influences and philosophies among millions of Americans. Her substitution of spirituality for biblical Christianity, her promotion of forgiveness without atonement, and her references to a god "without labels" puts her at the epicenter of a seismic cultural earthquake.

At the same time, Oprah cannot be ignored. Marcia Z. Nelson's new book is intended as a celebration of Oprah's significance as a harbinger of a new gospel. In the end, the importance of this book is grounded in the fact that it draws attention to Oprah's influence and cultural impact. Oprah's newly-packaged positive-thinking spirituality is tailor-made for the empty souls of our postmodern age. She promises meaning without truth, acceptance without judgment, and fulfillment without self-denial. Marcia Z. Nelson is certainly right about one thing—Oprah Winfrey's "congregation" cannot be ignored.

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