

Introduction: Celebrity Worship

Perhaps fame is the new religion, and celebrities our gods.

Erica Harrison¹
journalist

Are Hollywood news/gossip shows like *Entertainment Tonight*, *Extra*, *The Insider*, and *Access Hollywood* among the TV programs you regularly watch? Have you ever felt almost giddy with anticipation while standing in line for tickets to the newest movie featuring your favorite actor or actress? Do you enjoy the parade of A-Listers walking down the red carpet prior to the Oscar, Emmy, or Tony award ceremonies?

If you answered yes to any of these questions, then you share with most Americans—including this author—an appreciation for (if not a fascination with) celebrities. *We love* our stars! Who can blame us? They're talented, successful, famous, often beautiful/handsome, and on occasion, even inspirational. And the lives they lead are exciting, to say the least. As one commentator noted, when we focus on such individuals, it "makes for a great getaway from the normal world known as everyday life."²

Today's Internet, predictably, is rife with fan Web sites dedicated to various stars and message boards filled with innumerable discussion

threads about celebrities. At *celebhoo.com*, for instance, are eight main categories—*Actors & Actresses; Authors & Directors; Bands & Music Artists; Celebrity Resources; Sports Stars; Super Models; TV Shows & Presenters; Celebrity Webmasters*—plus these additional links: *The Latest Gossip; Hot Celebrity Posters; Write to Celebrities; and The Latest Movie News.*

“There is no question that all-things-celebrity have captured—and are keeping—our attention like never before,” noted a 2006 CBS News story.³ In other words, our culture is awash in celebrity buzz; drowning in it. For example, while newspaper circulation has dropped, subscriptions for celebrity-news magazines have increased.⁴ It’s also become the latest rage to have celebrity-brand products: clothing, cosmetics, luggage, toiletries, fragrances . . . you name it. And the nightly TV lineup is chock-full of “News Updates,” “Special Reports,” and “Inside Exclusives” about the wild antics (or good deeds), tragic downfalls (or rising popularity), ongoing crackups (or latest “recovery”), and newest loves (or dying romances) of our beloved stars.

Interestingly, some people are so taken with celebrities that psychologists have diagnosed a new psychological malady—Celebrity Worship Syndrome (CWS). Those with mild CWS might exhibit symptoms as harmless as copying a hairstyle, repeatedly watching a particular movie, creating a fan Web site, collecting memorabilia, or getting a tattoo similar to the one adorning their most preferred celebrity. But others, more seriously afflicted, might find themselves trapped in a world of destructive behavior: stalking, obsessive letter-writing, delusions of having a relationship with their favorite star, or a desire to be just like the person on whom they’ve centered their attentions.

For most of us, however, setting our TiVo to record an interview with Brad Pitt, reading a juicy tabloid story about Tom Cruise, or collecting autographs of various celebrities can not only be an enjoyable pastime, but can also create some good topics of conversation to bring up with co-workers, family, friends, or online pals.

THE POWER OF POPULARITY

Given our culture's passion for all things celebrity, it shouldn't come as a surprise that many people are actually being affected on a personal level by celebrities—for better *and* for worse. According to one study published in the journal *Lancet*, “adolescents who viewed smoking in movies were more likely to begin the habit themselves.” And “the same may be true for drug and alcohol use, as well as eating disorders such as anorexia, which can develop when fans try to emulate the unrealistic low weights of their favorite stars.”⁵

Another survey in *USA Weekend* revealed that teens absolutely “want to look and act like famous people.” Moreover, nearly 60 percent of teens said they wanted to “pierce a body part or get a tattoo because a celebrity has. Roughly half agree that their own peers drink or smoke cigarettes because they see their idols doing it. And 77 percent believe that when a star loses weight, teenagers are prone to do the same.”⁶

On a more uplifting note, it's also been shown that celebrity power can turn the hearts and minds of teens *and* adults in some beneficial directions:

[H]ero worship can yield even more positive results when celebrities take to the streets with campaigns that encourage good health—and ultimately help convince us to personally make changes in our own lives. . . . “They can be very helpful in terms of increasing awareness and decreasing stigma about many problems, including health problems, that might otherwise not get the attention they need.” . . . Such was the case when Katie Couric launched her awareness campaign about colon cancer, when Brooke Shields gave postpartum depression some much-needed attention, or even when Michael J. Fox helped increase our own—and our politicians'—interest in stem cell research. “In this respect, a celebrity can act almost like a support group—helping us to see that life is OK, that I can do this, you can do this.”⁷

Like Fox and Couric, many celebrities have given time and energy to helping raise awareness about medical conditions: e.g., NBA star Magic Johnson (AIDS); NFL quarterback John Elway (osteoarthritis); actress Sally Field (osteoporosis); supermodel Lauren Hutton (women's

health); actor Rob Lowe (cancer); actress Lynda Carter (irritable bowel syndrome); and actress Jamie Lee Curtis (teen alcohol abuse).

Actor/director/producer Ron Silver has neatly summed up the Hollywood effect: “[C]elebrities are realizing their potential to effect change. In our media-dominated culture, saturated with sound bites and nanosecond attention spans, stars’ ability to galvanize public opinion is second to none.”⁸ Similarly, Professor Ziauddin Sardar (City University, London) has observed: “The urge to acquire celebrity status is the ethic on which everything in our world now depends. Nothing moves in our universe without the imprint of celebrity. There is no boundary that celebrity has not transcended.”⁹

Global politics, fashion trends, recreational activities, health issues—for untold millions, these facets of life are daily influenced by celebrities whose personal choices in such areas are being scrutinized. And now, as never before, another intimate aspect of twenty-first-century life is being affected by celebrities: religion/spirituality.



*As never before,
another intimate
aspect of twenty-first-
century life is being
affected by celebrities:
religion/spirituality.*



GODLESS HOLLYWOOD?

The myth of an irreligious entertainment industry can be traced to the Vaudeville, Burlesque, and Broadway of the 1800s, which gradually gave rise and gave way to Hollywood. The performers who worked these venues—notorious for their transient lifestyles and willingness to perform in some fairly sleazy forums—were seen as the epitome of godless sinners pursuing self-indulgence, worldly goals, casual sex, and loose morals/ethics. And such an assessment, more often than not, was accurate.

As time marched into the twentieth century and new forms of entertainment developed, the unsavory reputation of actors, dancers, singers, directors, choreographers, and producers stuck—whether they

were working in New York or the ever-growing Tinseltown. But even during these early years of “the biz,” there was a growing body of performers who weren’t as faithless as one might expect. An undercurrent of religion/spirituality ran deep and wide all the way from Hollywood/Vine to Beverly Hills.

As far back as devout Christian Scientist Mary Pickford (1892–1979)—the silent screen starlet who was affectionately known as “America’s Sweetheart”—spirituality had a foothold in Hollywood. Many famous actors, directors, and producers in movieland were believers in some religion: Roman Catholic Gary Cooper (1901–1961), Baha’i actress Carole Lombard (1908–1942), Presbyterian Jimmy Stewart (1908–1997), Jewish singer Al Jolson (1886–1950), and legendary Christian director Cecil B. DeMille (1881–1959).

And contrary to the popular misconception that Hollywood has only produced anti-religious films, a great number of movies have positively featured a wide variety of religious belief systems: *The Road to Glory* (1926, Christian Science); *Going My Way* (1944, Roman Catholicism); *The Ten Commandments* (1956, Judaism), *Lion of the Desert* (1981, Islam); *Chariots of Fire* (1981, Protestantism); *Little Buddha* (1993, Buddhism); *Practical Magic* (1998, Wicca); and *Handcart* (2002, Mormonism), to name a few. Some of these films were not only nominated for an Oscar, but won the coveted award.

IN VOGUE

More stars are getting *hooked* on religion every day in Hollywood, where finding religion has actually become fashionable—especially for celebrities in less-than-ideal circumstances with either the law or personal vices.

For instance, after getting arrested for DUI and drug possession, *The O.C.* star Mischa Barton was spied exiting the Good Shepherd Catholic Church in Beverly Hills, “head bowed, virginal white dress flowing, church brochure in hand.”¹⁰

Consider, too, actress Juliette Lewis and singer Lisa Marie Presley,

who credit Scientology for their well-being. As Lewis has explained, Scientology saved her from the “bottomless pit of despair and apathy.”¹¹ Presley pressed the point even further, saying, “Were it not for Scientology, I would either be completely insane or dead by now.”¹²

And let’s not forget party-girl Paris Hilton who, while in the midst of multiple legal troubles that ended with her spending three days in jail, was seen toting around not only a Bible but also a copy of the *New York Times* bestseller *The Power of Now* by New Age spiritual teacher Eckhart Tolle (Oprah Winfrey’s guru of choice).

The sincerity of these and other stars might vary. But it’s certain that many celebrities do hold a heartfelt faith. For instance, Stephen Colbert (host of the comedy faux-news program *The Colbert Report*), is a devout Roman Catholic (RC) who teaches catechism (the RC equivalent of Protestant Sunday school). “‘What is worthy of satire is the misuse of religion for destructive or political gains,’ he said. ‘That’s totally different from the Word, the blood, the body and the Christ. His kingdom is not of this earth.’”¹³

Clearly, embracing religion has become acceptable among entertainers. In fact, those who do *not* have any faith are beginning to look like the odd ones out. This is significant, given what we know about celebrity influence. It’s not that farfetched to suggest that *some* people might end up choosing their spirituality based on the spirituality of their favorite Hollywood icon. It is here that we arrive at several pointed questions:

- Which religious belief systems are the most in vogue among the stars?
- What are the teachings associated with the various religions of Hollywood?
- Who are the most elite proponents of Hollywood’s most popular spiritualities?
- Why are certain celebrities attracted to their preferred religion?

- Where does Christianity fit into the Hollywood mix of faith-based worldviews?

These are just a few of the many questions I'll be answering in *Religions of the Stars*, which takes an in-depth look at six of the most popular faiths to be found throughout the entertainment world (and the stars who embrace them). My purpose isn't to tear down any religion or spirituality, nor is it my desire to mock, belittle, or degrade anyone's views. I have no doubt that all the celebrities I mention are as sincere about their beliefs as I am about mine. My approach, therefore, will not be negative, *per se*, but informational—i.e., based on clear explanations of each belief system, coupled with thoughtful observations of those systems from an evangelical Christian perspective.

My hope will be to lead you through the fascinating world of Hollywood religions, and in so doing, allow you to perhaps discover what your favorite star or starlet holds most sacred and meaningful.

Oprah's New Spirituality

Twelve days after terrorists crashed into the World Trade Center . . . New York mayor Rudolph Giuliani organized a service in Yankee Stadium. The service drew together ministers, rabbis, imams, priests, and an audience of upwards of 20,000. This public memorial expression, intended to provide a sense of national unity and social consolation, featured as master of ceremonies Oprah Winfrey.

Marcia Z. Nelson

The Gospel According to Oprah¹

Chris and Marcy Corvin suspected nothing when, toward the end of 2004, their nine-year-old daughter, Skylar, came home from school complaining of pain in her right shoulder. It started just after she'd finished doing a few pull-ups in gym class, so neither mom nor dad thought it unusual. But after numerous tests, Chris and Marcy received devastating news. Skylar had Ewing's Sarcoma—a cancerous tumor in her right scapula.

She started chemotherapy on December 28 “for 4 cycles of 3 days . . . and 3 weeks later it was for 5 days.”² These treatments continued for fourteen cycles, in the midst of which Skylar underwent surgery to have her “shoulder blade and the surrounding muscles that encased it removed.”³ The agony was so intense that she had to take morphine to get through each day. The little girl also had to cope

with the discomfort of fifty-two stitches that ran across her shoulder and down her back.

The medical bills were extreme. Fortunately, people in Skylar's hometown of Roanoke, Virginia, were willing to help the third-grader's family and responded to their situation by holding a benefit concert to raise some financial aid for the Corvins. More good news came a few months later—Skylar's tests indicated that she was in remission. She couldn't have been happier as life began calming down for her:

I had a really good year. I learned how to ride my bike again and how to swim and be normal. I got to go to school and make new friends and be out there and free, finally. . . . I could finally say that I had beaten this nasty disease. . . . [T]he Make A Wish Foundation sent me and my family to San Diego for my wish. We went to the San Diego Zoo, Sea World, and Wild Animal Park. It was amazing.⁴

But Skylar's joy was temporary. In October 2006 doctors discovered that her cancer had returned, this time in her right leg, where it had erupted out of the bone. Then, additional testing revealed that she also had cancerous lesions in her left leg. "[I]t made me sad to know I beat it once and now I have to fight this battle all over again," she said.⁵

The fight to save Skylar began, and with it came added medical expenses. Moreover, because the youngster couldn't attend school, Marcy had to stop working to stay home and care for Skylar during the days, which in turn exacerbated the financial strain. With their debts mounting and no end of Skylar's treatment in sight, Chris and Marcy were beginning to seriously worry about the future care of their precious child.

Then out of the blue—a miracle. Scores of loving strangers swooped into their home and whisked them all away for a nice dinner and a movie (*Spider-Man 3*). But that was only the beginning.

The family wasn't allowed back home for three days, but when they finally did return, gifts and donations were waiting for them. The first floor of their house had also been made over, complete with

new furniture, a new DVD player, and cable TV. And Skylar's room had been remodeled in pink, her favorite color. She was even given a laptop loaded with everything she needed to log into a newly designed Web site just for her (*www.skylarsvoice.com*)—so she could chronicle her life to the world. The other treasures the Corvins received in front of hundreds of well-wishers included a 2007 Ford Fusion to replace their aging car, \$5,000 to cover the rent for the remaining year, and \$10,000 in cash to pay their bills!

Skylar later blogged about her experience: “The money for my treatments, the doctors and nurses, my friends, and my family have all helped me be who I am and at the top is God. He knows what I need and he’ll help me—he always has.”⁶

But *exactly* how was it made possible? Credit goes to none other than Oprah Winfrey and her *Oprah's Big Give* TV show, wherein contestants are sent out into the streets to see how they can use hundreds of thousands of dollars to “change the lives of complete strangers in the most creative and dramatic ways.”⁷ One of its contestants, Cameron Johnson, had picked the Corvin family as his “project.”

The Corvins will forever be grateful to Oprah. And so will everyone who watched the miracle unfold on TV. As one viewer shared, “I cried. I’ll admit it.”⁸

THE HEART OF O

Those closest to Oprah know and respect her most for her generosity of spirit, kindness, and sympathy for others. Since day one of her meteoric rise to wealth and fame, the “Queen of the Talk Show” has made a career out of treating others as she would want to be treated (Matt. 7:12) and loving “thy neighbor” (Matt. 22:39 KJV). As she’s explained, “My mission is to use this position, power and money to create opportunities for other people.”⁹

Oprah has contributed millions of dollars to charities and organizations, going so far as to offer her own services—e.g., special appearances, guest lectures, and personal work—to help those less fortunate.¹⁰

For example, in the 1990s she set up a “Little Sisters” program for young girls in Chicago’s Cabrini Green projects, using her own money to treat the girls to new clothes, nights/days out, and fine meals. But instead of sending someone else, Winfrey took the girls herself as time permitted.¹¹

Not surprisingly, Winfrey was presented in 1988 with the Humanitarian Award from the National Conference of Christians and Jews. Then, in 2002, she received the Bob Hope Humanitarian Award. And in 2007 the Elie Wiesel Foundation gave Oprah their Humanitarian Award for “outstanding individuals who dedicate their time to fighting indifference, intolerance and injustice.”¹² Wiesel offered this observation:

Oprah the public figure and Oprah the friend are one and the same person, never violating the covenant she made with society: to help the helpless and give a voice to the voiceless.¹³

Former U.S. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, who is one of Oprah’s biggest fans, put it most succinctly: “[S]he has purpose—an abiding commitment to the principles of goodness and generosity that transcend any one individual. . . . I have felt her warmth, and I am always moved by her deep love for others. She makes you want to invite her into your life—and she invites you into hers.”¹⁴

SOUTHERN ROOTS

Oprah Winfrey¹⁵ was born in 1954 in central Mississippi on a rural pig farm, just a stone’s throw from downtown Kosciusko (population 7,372, as of 2000). Her eighteen-year-old mother, Vernita Lee, was a housemaid; her father, Vernon Winfrey, a twenty-year-old soldier in the army. According to Oprah, her conception was the result of little more than “a one-time fling under an oak tree.”¹⁶

Her parents were hardly prepared to raise a child. In fact, by the time Oprah was born, Vernon was already back at Fort Rucker, Alabama, unaware of his daughter’s existence, until he received a

letter from her mother, pleading: "Send clothes!"¹⁷ As for Vernita, she departed shortly after Oprah's birth as part of "that great migration to the North in the late 1950s."¹⁸ So Oprah ended up in the care of her grandfather, Earless Lee, and grandmother, Hattie Mae, with whom she lived until the age of six.

It wasn't an easy life, says Winfrey, who recalls how her grandmother had to wash their clothes by hand in a big pot of boiling water on the back porch of their humble abode—"an old, dilapidated, three-bedroom house with no indoor plumbing."¹⁹ They were so impoverished, in fact, that Oprah was often made to wear "hessian overalls made from potato sacks that earned her the cruel nickname 'Sack Girl.'"²⁰

Poverty, however, wasn't the only hardship little Oprah faced. She endured a solitary existence, isolated from other kids, almost completely unsocialized—trapped in a sunup-to-sundown grind of feeding the hogs, taking the cows to pasture, emptying the slop jar, and drawing water from the well.²¹ She had no friends, no toys, no store-bought dresses. "It was very lonely out there in the country," she remembers.²²

Oprah's young life was also filled with physical and psychological abuse, usually in the form of old-style, down-home *whuppins* with a switch wielded by Hattie Mae. "She could whip me for days and never get tired," Winfrey has shared. "In the middle of the whipping you hear, 'Now shut up, shut up.' You couldn't even cry! You get whipped till you had welts on your back. Unbelievable."²³

Despite her circumstances, Oprah remained positive, believing that a brighter future lay ahead. While watching her grandmother labor over that hot cauldron of dirty clothes, she'd think: "My life won't be like this, it will be better."²⁴

Foreshadowings of the career into which Oprah would mature began to appear while still in Mississippi, as early as age three, when she started reciting speeches at churches for rapt congregations. People were amazed at how "Little Mistress Winfrey" could speak with such eloquence and confidence. "Jesus rose on Easter Day," she'd

declare enthusiastically. “Hallelujah, Hallelujah, all the angels did proclaim!”²⁵

She was precocious, to be sure, which gave Hattie Mae ample reason for allowing little Oprah to think of herself as “somewhat special.”²⁶ And truth be told, she *was* special—insightful, mature, thoughtful, articulate beyond her years, and always ready to give a recitation. That was the beginning, noted Oprah during a 1991 interview with the Academy of Achievement—“how this whole broadcasting career started for me.”²⁷

TOUGH TIMES, TOUGH LESSONS

After turning six, Oprah left the relative safety of her aging grandparents’ farm to live in Milwaukee with her mother, who had been drifting from one low-rent apartment to the next. Oprah caught up with Vernita in the inner-city projects. Her mother—on welfare and still a housemaid—was rarely home, which often left Oprah alone, except for the family and friends who tramped in and out of the apartment at all hours.

While living under these conditions, at the age of nine, Winfrey was raped by a nineteen-year-old cousin. Apparently, whenever Oprah spent the night at this relative’s home, she was actually made to sleep with him.²⁸ As she stated: “I know what it is like to lie in bed and know that other person is there, and you are pretending you are asleep, hoping he won’t touch you.”²⁹ Oprah was also molested by a family friend; then, by an uncle. She never told anyone about the sexual abuse, even though it didn’t stop until she was fourteen. “It was just an ongoing, continuous thing,” she admitted during one interview. “So much so, that I started to think, you know, ‘This is the way life is.’”³⁰

Such experiences contributed in no small way to Oprah’s transformation from an idealistic child into a troubled teen, who vented her anguish in many ways, including a promiscuous lifestyle, which led to a pregnancy at fourteen years old. In a 2007 article, Winfrey revealed that in shame she hid her condition for as long as possible,

until her “swollen ankles and belly” made it obvious. The baby, born premature, died.³¹

But there was little time to grieve. Oprah was immediately sent off to live with her father, who by then was leading a stable life in Nashville with his wife, Zelma. The move, as it turned out, was exactly what Winfrey needed. She explained, “When my father took me,

it changed the course of my life. He saved me.”³²

She wanted to be a missionary. . . . But Oprah would ultimately go in a radically different direction—professionally, as well as spiritually.

In Nashville, Oprah was given everything she'd been missing for too many years: love, discipline, structure, guidance, and proper schooling. Her father made her read a book every week and submit a report. She was also given a midnight curfew, instructed to no longer dress or act in an alluring manner, and treat adults with respect. Basing his child-rearing skills on what he'd learned in the military, Mr. Win-

frey ran a tight ship, which was fine with his daughter. “I was always a child who was in need of discipline.”³³

Thanks to Vernon, Oprah gradually overcame her inner turmoil to become a high school honors student.³⁴ She remained active at church too, giving recitations as a teen, just as she'd done as a child. In fact, as early as the fourth grade, she had wanted to be a missionary: “I was going to be a missionary. . . . I used to collect money on the playground to take to church.”³⁵

But Oprah would ultimately go in a radically different direction—professionally, as well as spiritually.

NEWSCASTER, TALK-SHOW HOST, ACTRESS

Oprah's career began at seventeen years old, after a chance meeting with John Heidelberg, a WVOL disc jockey. Overwhelmed by Winfrey's

down-to-earth manner, poise, and charm, Heidelberg thought she'd do well as a part-time newscaster—despite her being only a high school junior. “I was impressed with her,” Heidelberg recalls, “and recognized that she had an abundance of talent for her young age.”³⁶

Winfrey became an instant hit in the local black community. She loved the job so much that she continued working the airwaves even after entering nearby Tennessee State University (TSU), where she majored in Speech Communications and Performing Arts. It was also at TSU that Oprah first dabbled in drama.³⁷ She then received her first big break—a news anchorwoman position at WTVF television.³⁸

This eventually led, in 1976, to her becoming “the first African American woman co-anchor and reporter in the country” at WJZ-TV (Baltimore).³⁹ It was a difficult transition until management asked her to co-host a new early morning show called *People Are Talking*. She was a hit. “I came off the air, and I knew that was what I was supposed to do. It just felt like breathing.”⁴⁰

After eight years in Baltimore, her next break was the biggest of all—she was asked by WLS-TV executives in Chicago to host a half-hour morning talk show: *AM Chicago*. Her four-year contract included a \$200,000 annual salary and all the perks that go along with being a rising superstar. Predictably, Oprah hit a home run. Six months later, the show was expanded to one hour. And after a year, she'd received so much attention and praise for her affable, yet thought-provoking style, that she was featured in *Newsweek*.⁴¹


By September 1985, *AM Chicago* had been renamed *The Oprah Winfrey Show*. Little Mistress Oprah had become a true celebrity. But her star quality and potential were just beginning to emerge. Hollywood also took notice of Winfrey and handed her the role of Sofia in the critically acclaimed film *The Color Purple* (1985), which received eleven Oscar nominations—including one for Winfrey as Best Supporting Actress.

Winfrey didn't win, but the exposure greatly increased her popularity. This enabled her show to go national. Less than six months later, it was the highest-ranked talk show in syndication, which in turn led to


three Emmy Awards: Outstanding Talk/Service Program; Outstanding Direction; Outstanding Host. And the rest, as they say, is history.

A “JEALOUS” GOD

According to *Forbes*, Oprah Winfrey is the most powerful of all celebrities. She's well-connected throughout the entertainment industry, holds the respect/admiration of her peers, appeals to a huge fan base, hauls down \$275 million annually, publishes a magazine (*O: The Oprah Magazine*), runs a production company (Harpo Productions), has launched a TV network (OWN: The Oprah Winfrey Network, reaching 70 million homes), and owns a satellite radio station.⁴²



Oprah has almost single-handedly given a new face to the New Age.



She's the ultimate golden girl. And everything, along with everyone, she touches usually turns a similar shade of Fort Knox yellow. Her Midas touch, for instance, has been particularly effective in either launching or solidifying the careers of New Age spirituality teachers Deepak Chopra, Marianne Williamson, Betty Eadie,

Rhonda Byrne, James Van Praagh, Kevin Ryerson, Eckhart Tolle, and many others.

The result has been a global resurgence of the New Age Movement, *sans* the stereotypical kookiness long associated with it (e.g., pyramid hats, power crystals, mystical-magical teas). Oprah, in fact, has almost single-handedly given a new face to the New Age—a twenty-first-century makeover.

Beneath the cosmetic changes, however, are the classic New Age ideas that took root in the U.S. during the nineteenth century via the writings of various Mind Science luminaries (see endnote).⁴³ Those individuals are long gone. But their legacy remains, as evidenced by Oprah, who's become America's newest New Age icon—the “Queen of the New Age gurus,” as one of her critics has put it.⁴⁴

Winfrey's religious influence can't be overstated. She's become such a popular dispenser of spiritual advice that she's been likened to a pastor of sorts—a pseudo-minister with a congregation of millions.⁴⁵ As Phyllis Tickle—founding editor of the Religious Department of *Publisher's Weekly*—has observed, “She may not be ordained but she sure is pastoral, and pastoral at a level that has a vast impact.”⁴⁶

Who wouldn't be impressed by Oprah's accomplishments, especially in light of what she's had to overcome to succeed. And the way she's used her wealth, prestige, and contacts to help others has been inspiring and touching. But her version of Christianity, misuse of the Bible, and animosity toward conventional Christianity can't be ignored. And despite her claims of being a Christian, she's not, by any *traditional* definition of that term, a Christian. Her spirituality is far removed from the faith “once for all delivered to the saints” (Jude 3 NKJV), which she began rejecting in her late twenties:


I happened to be sitting in church. . . . And this great minister was preaching about how great God was and how omniscient and omnipresent, and God is everything. And then he said, “And the Lord thy God is a jealous God.” . . . And something struck me. . . . “God is jealous of me?” And something about that didn't feel right in my spirit because I believe that God is love and that *God is in all things* [emphasis added]. And so that's when the search for something more than doctrine started to stir within me.⁴⁷

Interestingly, just prior to this comment, she also revealed a bit more about her first years in the church: “I grew up in the Baptist church and there were, you know, rules and, you know, belief systems indoctrined.”⁴⁸ Oprah, it seems, wasn't fond of the constraints imposed upon her early in life by Christianity in relation to: (a) beliefs she was expected to embrace; and (b) behaviors she was expected to follow.


Winfrey responded by leaving the fold. In 2008, when asked about how she's been able to reconcile her *current* views with Christianity, her explanation included a quote from *A New Earth*, by New Age spiritual teacher Eckhart Tolle:

I was able to open my mind about the absolute indescribable hugeness of that which we call “God.” I took God out of the box. . . . I love this quote that Eckhart has . . . “Man made ‘God’ in his own image. The eternal, the infinite, and unnamable was reduced to a mental idol that you had to believe in and worship as ‘my god’ or ‘our god.’ ” Now I think that’s very eloquently put by Eckhart Tolle in Chapter 1. But that is exactly what I was feeling when I was, you know, sitting in church that Sunday listening to the preacher.⁴⁹

Apparently, by the time Oprah was in this service, she was more than prepared to embrace a new belief system. And given her reference to God being *in* everything, it seems that pantheism (“God” *is* everything) or panentheism (“God” *is in* everything) was wooing her. Both views are incompatible with Christianity, which teaches that God—although everywhere *present* (omnipresent)—is distinct from creation (Gen. 1:1).



Her business is more than business, it’s a “ministry.”



What is perhaps most striking about Oprah’s explanation is the lack of substance behind her reason for doubting the faith—i.e., God is “jealous” of us. The idea that God would literally be “jealous” is absurd. The verses wherein God is called “jealous” (Ex. 20:5; 34:14) reflect the Hebraic

expression of God’s desire for his followers not to share their devotion to him with any other so-called god: “You shall have no other gods before me” (Ex. 20:3). Jesus echoed this idea when he said the first and greatest commandment is to love God with all one’s heart, soul, mind, and strength (Mark 12:30).

But Oprah didn’t question the pastor, or anyone else, in hopes of gaining an accurate understanding of the message she’d heard. Instead, she went elsewhere for truth, seeking to find a faith that would meet not only her spiritual but also her psychological/emotional needs.

Eventually, Oprah found what she was looking for in the New Age Movement, and she is now using all her influence and wealth

to spread its teachings. As she's explained, her business is more than business, it's a "ministry."⁵⁰ That ministry, however, as the following sections will show, has nothing to do with supporting or disseminating anything remotely Christian—at least from a theological/doctrinal perspective.

OPRAH IS DIVINE . . . AND SO ARE YOU

God, according to Christianity, is as separate from creation as is an architect from a building or a community that he/she has planned and constructed. The Bible, without exception, portrays the Lord of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob as the *Creator* of all that is—not *part* of all that is. Acts 17:24 reads: "The God who made the world and everything in it is the Lord of heaven and earth." Paul also taught that God is the Creator, rather than a *part* of creation, denouncing in Romans 1:18–25 those who exchange the truth of God for a lie and worship God's creation rather than God himself.

Oprah's view mirrors the Hindu notion that all is one, "God" is all, and therefore, we are "God" (as is everything else). This concept was popularized in America by New Age advocates, who now call their philosophy the New Spirituality: "[A]ll reality may be reduced to a single, unifying principle partaking of the same essence and reality."⁵¹ What about the diversity of forms we see? It's an illusion. "Oneness is the only reality and diversity is its apparent manifestation," says New Age proponent David Spangler.⁵²

In other words, according to New Age beliefs, people only *think* a rock is in a field. The reality is that the rock *is* the field; the field *is* the rock. Similarly, people only *think* they are entities separate from others. The reality is that we *are* each other (i.e., at the deepest core of who we are—our real "self"). There is no individual spirit within us.⁵³ There is no "you-me" distinction. There is only a universal "I." This "I" is defined as "God." Hence, everything is "God." We are "God." There is no external "God." Everything is just a visible manifestation of

the reality existing beneath each outer form. The only *truth* is a single, metaphysical, underlying essence—often called the Source.

Such a perspective was openly presented by Oprah and Eckhart Tolle during their ten-week Webcast (beginning on March 3, 2008) covering Tolle's mega-bestseller, *A New Earth*. Tolle expressed the following:

[T]he very consciousness that you are is the one universal, the one life. . . . And that permeates everything. And so the entire universe is permeated by that consciousness, by life, which is another word for "God." . . . I don't see God as an entity that is in a particular place somewhere, but as the essence, the intelligence, the animating life essence behind all life forms.⁵⁴

This is the New Age god—an inner-self god to be realized, felt, experienced, or understood as mere All-ness. What about Christianity's God? Oprah has condemned that God as a false deity, declaring: "[If] your religion is a believing experience. If God for you is still about a belief, then it's not truly God."⁵⁵ And lest her views be misconstrued, she repeated back to Tolle his teachings about the *true* "God," saying, "God, in the essence of all consciousness, isn't something to believe. God is . . . God is. And God is a feeling experience, not a believing experience."⁵⁶

Tolle replied, "Yes."

These remarks are an obvious slap at any religion (most pointedly, Christianity) that calls for faith, or belief, in God. But scripture says, "without faith it is impossible to please God" (Heb. 11:6). The Bible tirelessly stresses *belief* in God.

Consider the story of the Philippian jailer, who was saved after meeting Paul and Silas: "The jailer brought them into his house and set a meal before them; he was filled with joy because he had come to believe in God—he and his whole family" (Acts 16:34). And in 1 Peter 1:21, we read: "Through him [Jesus] you believe in God, who raised him from the dead and glorified him, and so your faith and hope are in God."

Clearly, faith/belief *in* God is essential to *knowing* God. The only scriptures about *not* believing in God are in reference to those who will suffer God's wrath (e.g., see Ps. 78:21–22).

It should also be noted that Oprah's view of the divine portrays "God" as nothing more than an *impersonal* Force, Cosmic Energy, or Universal One (i.e., a life essence permeating all that is). This notion again contradicts Christianity, which depicts God as a *personal* being who hears (Ex. 2:24), sees (Heb. 4:13), speaks (Lev. 19:1), is all-knowing (1 John 3:20), judges (Ps. 50:6), loves (Prov. 3:12; Jer. 31:3), and has a will (1 John 2:17). In Jeremiah 29:11 (NKJV), God himself says he *knows* his *thoughts* toward his people.

The God of the Bible is a personal, compassionate, and faithful God, "abounding in love" (Ex. 34:6). He is just (Isa. 30:18), truthful (Ps. 31:5), patient (1 Peter 3:20), merciful, and forgiving (Dan. 9:9). Christianity's God is *not* some inner "self," but is an external God who guides his children, meets their needs, strengthens the weak (Isa. 58:11), and delivers those who trust in him (Ps. 140:7). He rescues the needy "from the hands of the wicked" (Jer. 20:13), and is a "fortress" in whom refuge can be found (Ps. 18:2).

ANOTHER JESUS

One of the most perplexing aspects of Oprah's spirituality is the way she keeps presenting herself as a Christian, despite her rejection of every major doctrine of Christianity. Winfrey, it seems, is simply unwilling to allow her "spirituality talk" to diverge from "the language of her own African-American Christian heritage."⁵⁷ An obvious question is: Does she even know the definition of the term *Christian*?

Contrary to what many people think, a Christian isn't merely someone who respects and honors the historical person of Jesus Christ and feels particularly drawn to him as a spiritual leader. Nor is a Christian someone who acts lovingly, gives generously, or behaves graciously (although such behavior would be consistent with a *true* Christian).

A Christian embraces as their personal Lord and Savior Jesus

Christ, whose divine/human nature and mission is presented in scripture.⁵⁸ The simplest picture of a Christian is in Romans 10:9: "If you confess with your mouth, 'Jesus is Lord,' and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved." This verse highlights two important aspects of saving faith in the one true God (Jer. 10:10; James 2:19).

We first have a confession here of Jesus as "Lord." This is a direct reference to accepting Jesus as *uniquely* divine (i.e., he *was/is* God in the flesh). It reflects the ancient Hebrew belief that there is only *one* God—the true and living Lord. As Israel's Messiah, Jesus fulfilled the Old Testament prophecies about the long-awaited savior being God himself, who would live among men as a man. Christ's name, *Immanuel*, literally translates from the Hebrew as "God with us" (Isa. 7:14; Matt. 1:23).

Next, Paul indicates that a belief in Christ's resurrection is essential to conversion. Interestingly, Winfrey has said little about this issue. But it wouldn't be without some justification to conclude that she *doesn't* believe Jesus rose again from the dead. Eckhart Tolle, perhaps her favorite spiritual teacher of all time, categorically denies Christ's resurrection and his ascension into heaven, boldly denouncing those events as "myth."⁵⁹

But without the Resurrection, Jesus' death becomes a defeat instead of a victory, which in turn renders useless our preaching and faith (1 Cor. 15:14). Its importance is fivefold: it confirmed Jesus' power over death (Acts 2:24; 1 Cor. 15:55–57); it proved his divinity (Rom. 1:4); it fulfilled Old Testament prophecies (Ps. 16:10; Acts 26:22–23); it made possible our justification before God (Rom. 4:25); and it serves as a guarantee that all believers in Christ will be raised from death to life everlasting (1 Cor. 15:20–23).

And yet, when it comes to Eckhart Tolle, who refers to Jesus' resurrection as a mere "myth," Winfrey is able to say of him, "I think he is a prophet for our time."⁶⁰

CHRIST'S MISSION UNPLUGGED

Obviously, Jesus Christ is central to Christianity. He is also central to Oprah. The only problem is that Winfrey embraces a different Jesus than the one described in the Bible. “I don’t believe that Jesus came to start Christianity,”⁶¹ she admits, which indicates that her understanding of Jesus’ mission is at severe odds with the church.

Christianity advances the belief that sin, which entered the world when Adam and Eve disobeyed God (Gen. 3), has separated humanity from God (Isa. 59:1–2), who in contrast to humanity is perfect and holy (Isa. 6:3). It is sin that also brought an ongoing curse: death (physical, spiritual, emotional, and psychological). According to theologian J. I. Packer, sin is perhaps best defined as a “lack of conformity to the law of God in act, habit, attitude, outlook, disposition, motivation, and mode of existence.”⁶²

Here is where Christ’s death comes into play. It is the “heart of the gospel,” the “center of gravity in Christian life and thought,” the “crucial point of Christian faith,” and the “distinguishing mark of the Christian religion.”⁶³ At the cross, via Christ’s death, humanity was *reconciled* to God (i.e., the wall separating humanity and God was removed—Rom. 5:10; 2 Cor. 5:19). We now have free access to God, as the old Christmas carol lyrics put it: “Peace on earth, and mercy mild. God and sinners reconciled.”

Reconciliation only occurred because Jesus died in our place, miraculously taking upon himself our sins, and paying the penalty for those sins that *we* would have otherwise had to pay ourselves. That penalty, which still must be paid by unbelievers, is eternal separation from God, also known as hell (described figuratively by Jesus as “outer darkness” [Matt. 8:11–12 NASB] and a “furnace of fire” [Matt. 13:42, 50 NASB]).

For those who accept Christ’s death and resurrection, the gift of “eternal life” (i.e., an afterlife with God) is given to them, apart from *anything* they could have done on their own (Rom. 3:21–26; Eph. 2:8–9). This is salvation by grace through faith—a belief that separates

Christianity from every other world religion, each of which offers “salvation” based on one’s own efforts. Among the many benefits of salvation are: forgiveness for one’s past, present, and future sins (1 John 1:9); a declaration by God by which we are seen as righteous in his sight (Rom. 4:5–8); and the promise of an “eternity life” in the loving presence of our Creator (1 Cor. 15:51–52; 1 Thess. 4:14–18).

Oprah, however, with regard to the cross, sin, and eternal life, offers an entirely different perspective: “I thought Jesus came, died on the cross. That Jesus’ being here was about his death and dying on the cross, when it *really* was about him coming to show us how to do it. How to be. To show us the Christ Consciousness that he had, and that that consciousness abides with all of us.”⁶⁴ And again: “Jesus came to show us Christ consciousness. . . . Jesus came to show us the way of the heart . . . to show us the higher consciousness that we’re all talking about here. Jesus came to say, ‘Look I’m going to live in the body, in the human body, and I’m going to show you how it’s done.’”⁶⁵

What is “Christ Consciousness”? That’s a New Age term for one’s inner divinity; one’s *real* self, which is “God” (i.e., the universal essence, or life energy). It’s also called the “Christ Within,” “Inner Christ,” or “Christ Self.” Oprah’s position is seen, once more, in the writings of her 2008 guru of choice, Eckhart Tolle: “Jesus speaks of the innermost I Am, the essence identity of every man and woman, every life-form, in fact. He speaks of the life that you are. Some Christian mystics have called it the Christ within.”⁶⁶

Tolle and Winfrey, like most New Agers, “distinguish between Jesus (a mere human vessel) and the Christ (variously defined, but always divine, and often a cosmic, impersonal entity).”⁶⁷ But the Bible draws no such distinction between Jesus the person and some “Christ” that either: (a) came upon Jesus; or (b) was realized by Jesus as an inner sense of self-divinity. Instead, scripture depicts Jesus and “Christ” as *one and the same*—i.e., Jesus *the* Christ (Greek, *Christos*, “anointed one”). As Luke 2:11 reads: “A Savior has been born to you; he *is* Christ the Lord” (emphasis added). From his birth, Jesus was the Christ.

There’s only one “Christ,” and it’s not an inner essence (or higher

consciousness) to be realized. When Jesus asked, “Who do you say I am?” Peter resolutely declared, “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God” (Matt. 16:15–16). He didn’t say, “You are Jesus, our enlightened Master who has realized his divine Christ Self within.”

Regarding Christ’s crucifixion, Winfrey once more agrees with Tolle, who gave his explanation to both Oprah and the world during an April 7, 2008, Webcast based on his book *A New Earth*. The whole event, said Tolle, was *symbolic* in its importance:

Jesus on the cross stands for humanity. Jesus represents every human being that has ever lived or will ever live. Jesus represents something that is part of the human condition, and this—what he experienced at that moment. . . . He’s totally unfree, totally limited, in deep suffering, and, at the same time, the words are suddenly remembered from what is said on the cross, “Not my will, but thy will be done.” And that was the act of complete acceptance of suffering. . . . And through this total acceptance of suffering, sudden transmutation happened, and the very torture instrument, the cross that had produced the suffering, was transformed and became a symbol for the divine. . . . And so in every human being’s life, every human being will experience some form of suffering.⁶⁸

Suffering is important, Tolle added, because it can help people realize their own inner divinity, which is symbolized by the “empty cross.” When we accept our suffering, as he then clarified, “the divine comes through. And the very thing that was the worst thing that could ever happen to you when you bring surrender to it, becomes an opening into the divine. And that’s the miracle in the transformative value of the cross.”⁶⁹

To this account of Jesus’ death, Oprah exclaimed: “Boy, I think that’s powerful. . . . I just got that. I had a big old epiphany. The very moment, the worst thing that can happen to you if you surrender to it, there’s an opening that allows the energy of the divine to come through; the moment of surrender.”⁷⁰

Here we have Oprah not only agreeing with Tolle, but voicing a view of the crucifixion that totally contradicts scripture. Jesus was *not*

a helpless victim forced to surrender to the inevitable. He willingly and deliberately laid down his life so he could take it up again, adding: “No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have authority to lay it down and authority to take it up again” (John 10:18). Jesus knew his ministry would end in death. That was his mission (Matt. 20:28; 2 Cor. 5:21) and he warned his disciples of that fact.⁷¹ It made possible our salvation (1 Tim. 1:15).

A last word must be said concerning Tolle’s comment to Oprah and her audience about how Jesus, *from on the cross*, said, “Not my will, but thy will be done.” Jesus didn’t say these words from the cross. He spoke that phrase in the Garden of Gethsemane (see Matt. 26:42; Luke 22:42). Moreover, the remark wasn’t a helpless resignation. It was Jesus’ cognizant submission to the Father’s perfect will.

ALL ROADS LEAD TO “GOD”

One of the earliest statements Winfrey made that caused evangelicals to begin questioning her orthodoxy dates to 1994, when her guest was Betty Eadie, author of the near-death experience bestseller *Embraced by the Light*. Eadie—who claimed that while “dead” she encountered Jesus—had been saying that Jesus (described as a “Being of Light”) told her that all religions are equally true and that everyone will be saved.

It was during this show that Oprah made her now widely reported and controversial remark: “I believe that there are many paths to God. Or, many paths to the light. I certainly don’t believe that there is only one way.”⁷² After making this comment, Oprah asked Eadie: “Did Jesus indicate that to you?”

Eadie replied, “Yes, absolutely.”

Winfrey rejoiced, “Well, I’m glad to hear that because if Jesus is as cool as I think he is, he would have had to tell you that.”⁷³ Oprah also made the following statements:

One of the mistakes that human beings make is believing that there is only one way to live; . . . there are millions of ways to be a human being, and many ways, many paths to what *you* call God. And her

path might be something else. And when she gets there, she might call it the light. But her loving, and her kindness, and her generosity—if it brings her to the same point that it brings you, it doesn't matter whether she called it God along the way or not.⁷⁴

When a Christian in the audience corrected Oprah, telling her there was indeed only one way to heaven because Jesus himself said he is the way, truth, and life (John 14:6), the talk-show host responded: “There couldn't possibly be just one way [to God]. There couldn't possibly be with the millions of people in the world. There couldn't possibly be. . . . Does God care about your heart, or does God care about if you call his Son Jesus?”⁷⁵

Whether or not it makes sense to Oprah, the Bible exalts Jesus as the *only* way to God. Jesus himself said the way

to eternal life is “narrow,” while the way to an eternity without God is “broad” (Matt. 7:13). And as an ongoing promise, he also stated, “I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish” (John 10:28).

The apostle Peter confirmed: “There is salvation in no one else; for there is no other name under heaven that has been given among men by which we must be saved” (Acts 4:12 NASB). Paul agreed: “There is . . . one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus” (1 Tim. 2:5). And in John 14:6, Jesus announced, “No one comes to the Father except through me.” He didn't say, “You can get to the Father by whichever path you choose to go, as you head toward the *Light*, or *God*, or whatever you consider the *Divine*.”

This is a difficult teaching, to be sure. Nevertheless, it's what scripture says, and it's part of the biblical package, so to speak. One can't simply pick and choose what one likes and dislikes in the Bible, keeping that which is palatable and discarding that which isn't comforting. According to scripture, there's one way of salvation—Jesus. “Everyone *who calls on the name of the Lord* will be saved” (Rom. 10:13, emphasis added).



Jesus himself said the way to eternal life is “narrow,” while the way to an eternity without God is “broad.”



A FAN'S ASSESSMENT

I am, in some ways, an Oprah fan. Her performance in *The Color Purple*, for instance, was poignant and riveting. And on her talk show, she's discussed deeply important issues: e.g., child abuse, rape, incest, economic misfortune, parenting, and racism. But in recent years Winfrey has turned into a zealous missionary for New Age spirituality who has used every means at her disposal to dispense a myriad of unbiblical teachings via online Webcasts with Eckhart Tolle, an emailed *Spirit Newsletter*, and emailed versions of Marianne Williamson's *Studies on A Course in Miracles*, which are commentaries on the New Age agenda-driven work *A Course in Miracles*.⁷⁶

Of particular significance is Oprah's endorsement of *A Course in Miracles*, which is a three-volume book by psychologist Helen Shucman. Shucman claims that it is a channeled work, meaning that a spirit spoke through her to deliver the text. And that spirit was allegedly Jesus himself!

According to Marianne Williamson,⁷⁷ it's "a psychological mind training that changes our thinking from fear-based thought to love-based thought."⁷⁸ Most striking about the book is how the words of Shucman's channeled "Jesus" depart radically from the words spoken by Jesus throughout the New Testament. In fact, *A Course in Miracles* is rabidly anti-Christian (see endnote).⁷⁹

These studies reflect the same New Age—and in some cases exceptionally blasphemous—ideas that permeate the teachings expressed by many of Oprah's gurus. Also significant is how Shucman's work asserts that the Bible doesn't say what it appears to say. Cult researcher John Weldon explains:

[B]iblical words undergo drastic changes of purpose. Often, the new meanings are the opposite of their biblical meaning. For example, "atonement" no longer refers to Jesus Christ's substitutionary death on the cross for sin. . . . For the *Course*, the term "atonement" refers to *correcting* the belief that men are separate from God, which is presumed to be a false belief.⁸⁰

This same approach is even taken when it comes to straightforward passages such as John 14:6, where the *real* Jesus declared that he alone was the way to the Father. But according to Shucman's Jesus, " 'No man cometh unto the Father but by me' does not mean that I am in any way separate or different from you except in time, and time does not really exist."⁸¹ Shucman's Jesus further declared: "Because I am always with you, you are the way, the truth and the life" and "The Son of God is you."⁸²

Oprah has also endorsed *The Secret*—a self-help book/DVD by Rhonda Byrne, whose message is that we can attract health, wealth, love, healing, fame—anything we want. Her secret is the "law of attraction," which Byrne discovered after reading the 1910 book *The Science of Getting Rich*. It's a *secret* based on what Byrne calls "the most powerful law in the universe."⁸³ She adds: "It is the law by which we are creating our lives. So, whether we realize it or not, the law of attraction is working all of the time."⁸⁴

We allegedly "attract into our lives the things we want, and that is based on what we're thinking and feeling."⁸⁵ In other words, "we create our own circumstances by the choices we make in life. And the choices we make are fueled by our thoughts—which means our thoughts are the most powerful things we have here on earth."⁸⁶ Byrne asserts "everything that happens to you—good or bad—you attract to yourself."⁸⁷

This might sound encouraging to those who either are successful or have the means of becoming successful, but it does little to comfort those who have either endured, or are in the midst of enduring, insurmountable odds: Hurricane Katrina victims, inner-city kids helplessly gunned down during drive-by shootings, Nazi Holocaust survivors, cancer patients, persons paralyzed after being hit by a drunk driver, women raped, soldiers who have lost limbs while fighting to defend peace and freedom.

Did all of these individuals bring such circumstances upon themselves by the power of their negative thoughts?

The answer would be yes according to the "law of attraction,"

which coincidentally has also been voiced by Betty Eadie, who said our thoughts “have exceptional power to draw on negative or positive energies around us.”⁸⁸

James Arthur Ray, another Oprah guest and a proponent of *The Secret*, put it in these terms: “Everything happens by principles and laws in our universe. And so consequently, we have an absolutely unlimited power within us.”⁸⁹ Jack Canfield, another believer in *The Secret*, describes the cosmos as a big, impersonal gift-giver waiting to bestow the best of everything on everyone: “[T]he universe has a conveyor belt of presents lined up for you, and until you receive the one and fully are grateful for it, the next one can’t come out of the chute.”⁹⁰

Canfield is not exaggerating. *The Secret* is about as me-me-me-oriented as any self-help resource can possibly be, as evidenced by the remarks made in *The Secret* video by various spokespersons: “What kind of a house do you want to live in?” “Do you want to be a millionaire?” “What kind of a business do you want to have?” “Do you want more success?” “What do you really want?” “[T]his secret gives you everything you want: happiness, health, and wealth.” “You can have, do, or be anything you want.”⁹¹

The Secret contradicts multiple scriptures wherein we, as creations of God, are told to humbly bring our thoughts, desires, hopes, and aspirations to the Lord in prayer (Ps. 5:2; Phil. 4:6)—seeking that *God’s* will be done (Matt. 6:10; James 4:3, 15).⁹² We should certainly dwell on positive/godly thoughts (Phil. 4:8). But nowhere does scripture mention any power in our thoughts *or* words that can create reality (good or bad).⁹³

DEAR OPRAH

Sharing the truths of Christianity with followers of Oprah’s New Spirituality can sometimes be difficult because those on her path of “enlightenment” tend to judge truth by feelings rather than by rational thought. As Eckhart Tolle says, “We all carry the Truth within

us as our essence,” so we should simply be able to “recognize” truth immediately when we hear it.⁹⁴ This kind of mindset, of course, leaves room for extreme subjectivity.

Christians, therefore, must first of all take some time to discover *why* a person is finding fulfillment in the New Spirituality. Are they trying to heal from a past wound? Do they desperately need peace in life? Did they have a bad experience with Christianity as a child (or adult)? There are many reasons why people shun Christianity and move toward the New Spirituality—which is typically a very feel-good system of beliefs.

Then, after finding out where a person is (spiritually speaking), a Christian can begin showing such an individual how God can meet those needs—and more. A believer in Jesus can point out how Christianity, unlike the New Spirituality, can not only bring temporal blessings (e.g., love, peace, joy, comfort, hope), *but more important*, provide answers to life’s most pressing question: What happens after we die? The hope of heaven is an incomparable blessing of Christianity (Col. 1:5, 27; 1 Thess. 2:19).

Even Oprah seems unable to let go of certain aspects of the faith in which she was raised. During an interview on *Larry King Live*, for instance, Winfrey noted how, in order to calm her doubts at one point in life, she sang the old gospel hymn, “I Surrender All”: “I surrender all, I surrender all, all to thee, my blessed Savior, I surrender all.”⁹⁵

Sadly, Winfrey’s “savior” bears no resemblance to the Savior depicted in either the Bible or those tender lyrics. This might seem harsh, but it’s the truth. And the truth is something Oprah has said she appreciates, even if in the form of criticisms:

[I]f the criticism is valid and comes from a point of view of being well thought out, and not just to attack, I accept it. . . . Critics have actually helped me to get better. . . . If it’s the truth. Of all things I would say I’m a truth-seeker. I believe that “the truth shall make you free.” I absolutely believe that. So if you are telling me the truth, I accept it and will move on it.⁹⁶

Oprah is quoting the true Jesus here, but is doing so incompletely. In the full context of this passage, Jesus declares: "If you hold to *my* teaching, you are really *my* disciples. *Then* you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free" (John 8:31–32, emphasis added). In view of Winfrey's comments, I close with an open letter to her.

Dear Oprah,

I respect, admire, and honor your accomplishments and attempts to make our world a better place. My criticisms of you were written in love, hoping that you will indeed see the truth. If you embrace the truth—i.e., the real Jesus of scripture, as opposed to the Jesus you now preach (2 Cor. 11:3–4)—you will truly be set free.