

Introduction

What is Oprah? A noun. A name. A misspelling. Oprah is a person we know because of her publicity, a pioneer we recognize because of her accolades, and a personage we respect because of her embodied endurance, her passionate care, her industrious production. First and foremost, though, Oprah is a woman. An African American woman with a story broadcast 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 Oprah? Oprah is an instance of American astonishment at what can be.

From the start, it should be clear: this Oprah is maybe not *your* Oprah. She is most likely nothing like the Oprah you recollect, the one who hugs and helps and heals the world, one sympathizing smile at a time. For the purposes of this work, the materiality of Oprah Winfrey—her body, her biography, and her singularity—is interesting only insofar as it documents and creates *Oprah*.¹ Shifting from *her* to *it* is not easy, since Oprah is a professionally lovable sort of she. But the move is necessary if we are to know just what it is, exactly, that she sells. Because whatever Oprah is, it will be, in perpetuity, a product. This book examines a person who is also a product, a woman who blends,

bends, and obliterates the line between private practice and public performance and whose aesthetics completely ignore what we have historically conceived as a great divide between what is properly religious and what is not. This is the space between the eighteenth-century itinerant preacher George Whitfield and the twentieth-century incorporation of Coca-Cola; it is the charisma between the formation of churches and the formation of empires. *Oprah: The Gospel of an Icon* argues that the products of Oprah Winfrey's empire offer a description of religion in modern society. Within the religious pluralism of contemporary America, Oprah extols what she likes, what she needs, and what she believes. These decisions are not just product plugs but also proposals for a mass spiritual revolution, supplying forms of religious practice that fuse consumer behavior, celebrity ambition, and religious idiom. Through multiple media, Oprah sells us a story about ourselves.

Before we can understand the story she sells, however, the seller must be described. Inverted to Harpo, Oprah is a corporation, an employer of nearly a thousand people, a distributor of an internationally recognized brand.

Oprah, *The Oprah Winfrey Show*, *Oprah & Friends*, *Make the Connection*, *Oprah's Book Club*, *Use Your Life*, *Live Your Best Life*, *Oprah's Favorite Things*, *Wildest Dreams with Oprah*, and *Oprah Boutique* are registered trademarks of Harpo, Inc. Harpo is a registered trademark of Harpo Productions, Inc. The Oprah Store, Oprah.com, *Oprah's Big Give*, *The Big Give*, *Give Big or Go Home*, *Expert Minutes*, the "Oprah" signature and the "O" design are trademarks of Harpo, Inc. Oprah's Angel Network®, Angel Network, O Ambassadors, and the corresponding "O" design are trademarks of Oprah's Angel Network. Oprah Winfrey Leadership Academy for Girls is a trademark of The Oprah Winfrey Leadership Academy Foundation. *O*, *The Oprah Magazine* and *O at Home* are registered trademarks of Harpo Print, LLC. All Rights Reserved.²

These titles and imprints are not just trademarks. They 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 didactic community.³ 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, Oprah established Harpo Studios, a production facility in Chicago. Produced by her production company, Harpo Productions, Inc., the show, as of 2009,

is seen by an estimated forty-two million viewers a week in the United States and is broadcast internationally in 147 countries.

The spin-offs were inevitable, as the republic of the daily show became the empire of a transnational O. 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) intertwined, always. “You become what you believe.”⁴ 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. Just as her expressive medium seemed bent upon new extremes of exhibitionism, Winfrey found herself in the midst of multiple personal transitions.⁵ 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.⁶ Yet this time, with a product tie-in, with a mass-distributed print culture twist. Oprah is someone who objectifies her mistakes, casting the commodification of those mistaken objects as seemly despite their confessional graft. Harpo, Inc., doesn’t understand *sellout* as an epithet. It just sells more, more ardently, under the banner of self-love.

As such, Oprah is an effect and an affect, a product that responds to a marketplace as well as an imagined marketplace to which the products reply. In 1996, a group of Texas cattlemen sued Winfrey for twelve million dollars 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.⁷ Her experience in Amarillo, the sharp shift in talk show tastes, her own psychological awakening, and a midlife professional restlessness coalesced to a metamorphosis of her own programming. “I really am tired of the crud,” she said.

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.⁸

The despair is reflexive, as Winfrey repudiates herself as much as the medium. She calls upon herself, and her viewers, to invent practices of reply and to *do* something about the problems that pervade. Elsewhere, she fantasized: “I dream about finding a new way of doing television that elevates us all.” 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.” 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.”⁹ She confessed to come clean, creating over a four-year period (1994–98) a corporate makeover worthy of the converting rites she herself would come to master. Programming would now, late in the neoliberal heyday, focus on the reformation of the world in her own image, on what she called “Change Your Life TV.”¹⁰

“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.”¹¹ 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.’”¹² 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. “I wanted to help people think differently about themselves and pursue ideas about spirit and balance and the possibility of a better life,” Winfrey would recollect later. “It was a decision that was bigger than money or material interest.”¹³ Winfrey’s narrative of this program shift expresses an

indifference to profit margins. Yet what matters here, what matters to understanding what makes *Oprah*, is that this explicitly missionary maneuver to help people was her empire's ascent. Her spiritualization programmed her incorporation.¹⁴ This is how Oprah Winfrey became Oprah, how she became a product. Oprah Winfrey can be canceled, boycotted, and condemned. *Oprah* cannot.

Once Change Your Life TV changed *The Oprah Winfrey Show*, so too was her O brand altered, quickly multiplying forms to cajole new thought, new selves, and new lives. Oprah was seemingly everywhere, exploding media formats that themselves exploded the bounds between text and image, studio and audience, world and stage. 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 two 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 and charitable giving. Oprah.com, the Web site 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 thirty-minute weekly radio show, *Oprah's Soul Series*. And finally, Oprah and Discovery Communications announced plans to create OWN: The Oprah Winfrey Network. The new multiplatform media venture will be designed to entertain, inform, and inspire people to "live their best lives." (All rights reserved.) OWN is slated to debut in more than eighty million homes. With Change Your Life TV, 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.¹⁵

What has Oprah become? No longer merely a therapeutic idiom, Oprah has become an insignia, supplying a stylized economy that includes 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, and stage productions), educational philosophies, international philanthropies, interpersonal counseling, self-care workshops, and product plugs. Tracking the product amid all this making and recasting is hard. What is this, the object that she sells within these many productions? “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.”¹⁶ She is, of course, more than this, more than just her life. The brand supersedes her biography, progressing from “everything I stand for” to recommending an Oprah that can stand in for something, filling a space where before there was something missing.

This seems odd to say, since what *can* be missing? The late twentieth century might have been a moment of extreme income disparity and global trauma, but in the country of Oprah’s ascent, the problem seemed not deprivation but excess: so many options, so many stores, so many ambitions, and so much of absolutely everything. For scholars of religion, this late modern moment is also described as similarly redolent. Although some theorists posited it to be a “secular” age increasingly lacking certain forms of religious polity and ideation, for religionists this description misses the diagnostic mark. Religions are everywhere, available to everyone, in every color of the conceivable theological, ritual, and experiential rainbow.

Amid all this abundance, Oprah nominates herself as cheering section and signifying arbiter in an economy of revelation that she constructs. The revolutionary imperative pervades. “Become the change you want to see,” she says, offering herself as the model and mode to that change.¹⁷ Every maneuver and claim by Harpo Productions suggests that change must happen, now; that inspiration is needed, now; and that our lives require revision, now. In her discursive profusion, Winfrey posits a world that seems stunned before plenty, dumbly stalled in one section of the grocery store rather than selecting, moving, changing, and acting. Breaking the impasse of her viewers, Oprah interrupts their silencing.¹⁸ She offers a discriminating plenty in the form of her own biographic

freight: “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.”¹⁹ 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 past and present that can be described only as ubiquitous, insistent, and universal.²⁰ 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 they seat her audience at her long table of memory and market might. Oprah replies to the want of her imagined people with the voluminous convenience of herself. Her products, her ideas as her product, seep into every nook and cranny and become common sense.²¹ Such sense is needed (urgently, daily, now); it is wanted (podcasted, downloaded, papered) to rectify silences, to offer assurance to an unnamed restlessness (for the missing, for the needed, for the silenced).

One way to imagine her presence, her repeated iconic referral and reproduction, is to say that Oprah supplies the way to survive this thronged silence, a way to endure the plenty before which bearings seem hard to find. “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.”²² Transforming pulverized space into a produced consumer caress, Oprah defines a territory where clarity 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.” After a survey of the optional glut, Oprah selects 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 clearinghouse counterpublic she has defined.

Do not be deceived: this is no discursive ephemera. 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 O, Marilyn, Jesus) limit as much as they

encourage. 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 that we need.²³ But of course: we'll keep taking. Oprah is an instant of overflowing cultural iconography, providing stuffing for every nook and cranny of your psychological gaps and material needs. This redolence seems singular, offering few neat comparisons. Yet Oprah, like her iconic predecessors, is also very much a production of taste cultures, race cultures, gender cultures, and economic cultures that append and assist her existence. 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.

This is another way of saying that Oprah Winfrey is not forever. Her death (the death of the founder) will be the end of the body but perhaps not of her. Although she is franchised and globalized, she remains limited by her materiality. Oprah makes Harpo, Harpo makes Oprah, and Oprah will die. Is she so pervasive as to transcend that end? The recent announcement that she would cancel her show in 2011 inaugurates her public incorporation of her charisma, her own consciousness that the person of Oprah must diminish if the Oprah product is to endure.²⁴ 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 without the steering hand of L. Ron Hubbard.²⁵ 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 the religious.

"My show is really a ministry," Winfrey 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."²⁶ By definitions currently codified in law and supported by scholarship, Oprah does not constitute a religion.²⁷ But Oprah tempts study by scholars of religion, because her productions overspill 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." Her religious aspects are literal (episodes of her shows addressing "everyday miracles," her satellite radio *Soul Series*, her issuing of *Spirit Newsletters*) and iconic. 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, hawk-ing magazines, bloated on tabloids), she helms national initiatives, and 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 laugh on the premise of her cultural suffusion.

This domination transfixes *Oprah: The Gospel of an Icon*, because her suffusion is familiar, and her modes are recognizable: 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 opines repeatedly on the meaning of existence, the seat of the soul, the purpose of your life, and the place of a higher calling. Oprah plays religious even as she is, most adamantly (by scholarly classification and by her own), *not* a religion.

For some critics of pop culture and its money-milking strategies, the religious idiom deployed by Harpo, Inc., may be seen as a clever angle on a profitable product, a product that uses spiritual discourse to smooth its solipsism. 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. Is she, to borrow from another observer, just practicing “another capitalist enterprise that thrives on social dislocation, privatization, and feelings of disempowerment and disenchantment”?²⁸ This is a tempting demotion, allowing cultured despisers to admire that genius, to sneer wickedly at the duped consumers, and, most disturbingly, to imagine the producing agents (Oprah, Harpo, Hearst) as motivated neatly by one ambition. Yet, to describe any endeavor—legal or governmental, business or religious—as sourced so singularly is to refuse the multiplicity of cultural experiences, artifacts, and products.²⁹ The competitive performances 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 as they did (and that she does as she does) tells us more about what is human about them than what was perfected from their microeconomics coursework.

More important, 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, this African American product. Reducing Winfrey to a profit grab misses an opportunity to observe the symphonic way in which consumption and religion are categories not in opposition to each other but rather in collaboration. That we 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 about what believers (and consumers) consider sacred and profane. What is 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); and popular culture as religion (fandom as religion).³⁰ This neat troika perpetuates the sense that religion and culture 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 of religion (or religion an accessory to popular culture), one encourages estimation of the interaction, such as an evaluation of the tastefulness of Passover action figures or graphic novels depicting Muhammad. 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. 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. There have, as it turns out, always been pigeon sellers, in every temple.³¹

No neat equation of expenditure and commodity 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 sees herself as a product not 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.”³² Oprah dominates tabloid culture more than

business reports; more magazine covers address her weight and clothing than breathlessly account 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.”³³ Claiming that she operates with no strategy, no bureaucracy, and no spreadsheets, Oprah controls one of the most successful conglomerates in modern America.

As we will see, this anti-institutional and anti-creedal discourse surrounding her business acumen echoes her critiques of religious subjects. Just as she dismisses descriptions of her as a businesswoman, she also resists any attributions of herself as a leader of her own church. She eschews the category of religion, always, since to her religion represents hierarchy, rules, and male manipulation. Oprah won’t let the chroniclers press her into one category or another, slinking sweetly between corporation and religion, celebrity and common gal. She isn’t Warren Buffet, and she isn’t any demigod. She’s the lemonade stand gone global.

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,” she explains. “My brand developed deliberately by accident. . . . Just daily choosing to do what felt like the right thing to do.”³⁴ This is the accidental deliberation seeking precision in *Oprah: The Gospel of an Icon*. This book addresses imperatives applied outside the realm of the specific tax-exempt sect, turning instead to the imperatives of comfort nestling modern women in a language of self-service. That language is the secular that Oprah creates.³⁵ Scholars define the secular as a way of conveying a condition in which theism is an option, rationalism is the logic, and liberation is the universal ambition. This is no slick revelatory steam engine: the secular, in such cataloging, is freighted by its own plurality. To be secular is to be confronted with seemingly unending difference over and against the assimilating forces of doctrinal religious identity.³⁶ Winfrey’s media empire is an exposition on this religious context, an exposition on her allegedly irreligious society. Scholars of American religious history have mapped the polyglot expressions of this society, showing the gregarious religiosity within the absence of an established faith. 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. 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 in which 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 demonstratively exposed, of how contemporary mass culture convinces us of its conveyances. Is it a religious culture? A consumer culture? Simmering beneath the particulars of this study is the proposition 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 analysis of Oprah so instructive to students of late modernity. Whatever definitions of religion we develop must speak to the dynamism of the invention of religion as a category 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, somehow, without it; that we are, somehow, apart from it; that we can, somehow, separate ourselves from it. Oprah is a climax of multiple intersecting histories, as well as an exemplar of many modes and manifestations of modern religion.

A certain plotline of American religions exists here, one upon which I rely even as I question its checkmate. The overarching patterns of U.S. religious history draw a picture of the past that concludes with the storied religious buffet distinguished by the plurality of option and the individual's move toward a nonsectarian identity. 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 muddled. In the economies of popular culture to which Oprah has contributed (talk shows, women's magazines, televisions specials, musicals, and Monday night melodramas), claims of ethnic and sexual identity are not grounds for ideological formation but rather accessories to a proposed assimilation of the postmodern self.³⁷ This self 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.³⁸ In this, Winfrey again serves as a secular exemplar, advocating for her 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."³⁹

Of the many cultures that compose Oprah's personae, her Christian preamble bronzes the naming of her nonreligion religious. 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 celebrities' charismatic might. 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.⁴⁰ She was and is the amalgamation of her epoch's exposition, reducing enormous global change to one woman, with one weight problem, in one mid-western talk show studio. In order for us to understand contemporary American women and their discontents, in order for us to access the ways public religion has melded to consumer compulsion, Oprah is our optimal guide.

How, then, do we approach such an objectified Oprah? *Oprah: The Gospel of an Icon* is a study of the good news (gospel) related by a symbolic figure (icon). In the fields of religious studies and art history, the study of icons has a long history, including everything from Marian statuary to Andy Warhol's series portraiture. Icons are multivalent objects and ideas, simultaneously engendering ritual worship and being

engendered by such ritual adoration. This double valence (the icon is made by the very thing it makes) invites many different sorts of scholarship, from studies of those ritual processes (ethnographies of pilgrimage, for example) to studies of iconic construction (such as iconographic readings). Oprah is an icon both because she invites ritual processes toward her and because her iconography fosters produced rituals. In order to study this synecdoche, then, we must see what it has rendered and read what it has made. Focusing solely on the last twelve seasons of *Change Your Life TV*, we can tally 1,560 transcripts of original episodes; 105 issues of *O, The Oprah Magazine*, 17 issues of (the recently defunct) *O at Home*; 68 Oprah's Book Club selections; 52 *Spirit Newsletters*; and literally hundreds of books hawked by her spiritual advisers, domestic organizers, and body therapists. In addition, there are 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 outweighs the primary. Reading, watching, comparing, and collating this material with an eye toward her dramatic structures—her iconography—made up 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."⁴¹ This is a process of removing the mummy's wraps, seeking instances of discursive production, the production of power, and the propagation of knowledge.⁴² The researcher, then, does the triplicate process of reading the scripts, of pressing to the ways they are marked as (in Adorno's terms) so "enjoyed."

Much of the challenge of such a work is to convey the content of the object (in this case, Oprah) in order to encourage cultural criticism from the reader as much as the author. For this reason, I have included a lot of Oprah's words in the pages that follow. I do this not only to demonstrate the nature of the icon but also to encourage a reply. If the Oprah created herein by me is not recognizable to you, then I encourage you to use this material to respond. With the productions of Oprah, how might you interpret her iconicity? This is no flippant encouragement: at stake is the interactive value of popular cultural studies. I do not own Oprah any more than any viewer or consumer of her empire does. My task, as

I saw it, was to sift through the determined contingency and incurable excess of Harpo Productions in order to find its patterns. Oprah hasn't just been consistent; she's been repetitive. This is not shocking since the nature of the corporate entity requires product control, and Oprah is the total incorporation of her totalized self. If brands were not reliable, they would not be brands; when brands evidence inconsistency the audience parries, complains, or even abandons. The success of the product relies upon its predictability. What patterns I found I documented and, with the assistance of scholarship described in the footnotes, I interpreted. But I surround these interpretations with as much of her as the page will tolerate precisely so that viewers and scholars may not only come to know what I think I have seen but also can come to decide, too, what they might see in this corporate clarity. *Oprah: The Gospel of an Icon* should not close the book on Oprah; my hope is that it will foster other readings, encouraging viewers to wonder at the repetitions they see and scholars to think about the cultures and discourses this volume parallels and explains.

By establishing a catechism from Oprah that is codified and corporate, I diminish two important aspects of her enterprise. First, Winfrey (*the Oprah*) undoubtedly opines more diversely than her empire, which assimilates her human complexity into a brand resolution. 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 inquiries about the authentic self are what matter. She encourages her consumers to wonder about her actuality and to consider her intentions. "I believe intention rules the world," she regularly repeats. Second, by focusing on the products of her enterprise, one might also suggest that individual practitioners are eclipsed. Her audience consumes more creatively than she produces, contradicting at times her monolithic advice. Ethnographic pursuit of Oprah's viewers would demonstrate the wide variety of experiences gleaned from her prescriptive hegemony, showing how people fit some of her counsel into their lives, 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 biography, nor does it focus on the reception of her message in the pews. Such research could answer compelling questions. But these are questions already entertained abundantly by Winfrey. Wherever you turn in