

Oprah Winfrey

By Bob Waldrep

Date of Birth: January 29, 1954, in Kosciusko, Mississippi.

Publications and media: *The Color Purple* (1985); *The Oprah Winfrey Show* (1986); *Native Son* (1986); *The Women of Brewster Place* (1989); *There Are No Children Here* (1993); *Before Women Had Wings* (1997); *Beloved* (1998); *O, The Oprah Magazine* (2000) *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (2005).

Organizations: HARPO Entertainment Group: HARPO Productions; Inc., HARPO Films and HARPO Video, Inc.; Oxygen Media, Inc. (partner). Her widespread influence is evident in a 2004 press release by HARPO Productions, announcing a contract extension through the 2010-11 season: "The most-successful, highest-rated talk show in global television history, *The Oprah Winfrey Show* enters its 19th season... [It] is currently broadcast on 212 stations throughout the United States, representing 100% of the country... [it] is distributed to 107 countries worldwide by CBS Broadcast International."¹

HISTORY

Her birth certificate reads Orpah, but due to the mispronunciation of her name while a child, she became known as Oprah. Born out of wedlock and raised by her grandmother until age six, she was active at Kosciusko Baptist Church and dreamed of one day becoming a missionary. As she acknowledged in a 1991 interview, this was a definitive period in her life: "I was an orator for a long time. I've been an orator really, basically, all of my life. Since I was three and a half, I've been coming up in the church speaking... Other people were known for singing; I was known for talking."²

In 1960 she moved to her mother's home in Milwaukee where she experienced a number of very difficult life circumstances. Eventually, she was sent to Nashville to live with her biological father, Vernon Winfrey, a strict disciplinarian and active church member, whom she credits with helping turn her life around. There, she remained involved in church, but also began participating in local beauty pageants while in high school.

A pageant performance led to her first broadcasting job, reading news copy at the Nashville radio station WVOL. While in college she was hired as a reporter/anchor by local television station WTVF. Now focused on a career in television broadcasting, she quit college (she did get a degree later) in 1976 and became part of the news team at WJZ-TV, Baltimore. In 1978, her poor performance as an anchor resulted in a new assignment: co-host of the talk show, "*People Are Talking*." Later Winfrey recognized the wisdom of this move: "I was 22 years old, I had no business anchoring the news in a major market... I said to myself, 'This [hosting a talk show] is what I should be doing. It's like breathing.'"³

In 1984 she made another career move: Oprah moved to Chicago to host WLS-TV's morning talk show, *AM Chicago*, which became the number one local talk show—surpassing ratings for *Donahue*... In less than a year, the show expanded to one hour and was renamed *The Oprah Winfrey Show*. The broadcasting landscape was forever changed in 1986, when *The Oprah Winfrey Show* entered national syndication, becoming the highest-rated talk show in television history.⁴

Also in 1984, she achieved her dream to be an actress. While visiting Chicago, Quincy Jones saw her show and contacted her to audition for a movie he was producing, *The Color Purple*. She got the part and an Oscar nomination. Her star power was rising and soon she

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could pick and choose her roles.

In 1988 HARPO Productions gained ownership of her show, giving Winfrey control over the show's content and direction. This, along with the subsequent wealth it brought (in 2003 she became the first African-American woman to make *Forbes* list of American billionaires), allowed her to promote the charitable causes and issues she supports. She became keenly aware of the influence she had on the lives of others: "I'm in a position to change people's lives. It is the most incredible platform for influence that you could imagine, and it's something that I hold in great esteem and take full responsibility for."⁵

The extent of her influence is evident from the professional and humanitarian awards she has earned: *Time Magazine*—100 Most Influential People of the 20th Century (1998); 100 Most Influential People in the World (2004); 54th Annual Primetime Emmy Awards—Bob Hope Humanitarian Award (2002); National Academy of Television Arts & Sciences—Lifetime Achievement Award (1998); *Newsweek*—Most Important Person in Books and Media (1997).⁶

As these awards attest, Winfrey has, without question, used her fame and wealth to accomplish much good. And unlike many in her position, she remains approachable and very much one of the "common folk." However, Winfrey has undergone one significant change: her religious beliefs have shifted dramatically from those taught by her grandmother and father. She readily acknowledges the change: "I would say 1994 was a time of profound change for me, emotionally, spiritually, and physically."⁷

Like most of Winfrey's changes—weight, hairstyle, wardrobe, etc.—the change in her spirituality became part of the show and the magazine. Increasingly, New Age practitioners found her show a sympathetic venue to promote their teachings and books. Her guests have included a veritable "who's who" of prominent New Age gurus (many made famous by her endorsement): Marianne Williamson, Deepak Chopra, Gary Zukav, Iyanla Vanzant, Eckhart Tolle, Shirley MacLaine, and Sophy Burnham. Their influence upon her is evidenced by her website, which lists many as her personal favorites.⁸

Winfrey not only embraced many of their teachings but she took them to her audience with the zeal of a television evangelist, realizing her childhood dream of being a missionary: "I always wanted to be a minister and preach and be a missionary... I feel that my show is a ministry... I feel that it is a teaching tool, without preaching to people about it. I really do. That is my intent."⁹ However, the message she delivers, primarily through her guests, is a carefully packaged self-help, feel-good New Age spirituality.

Winfrey denies being New Age: "I am not New Age anything and I resent being called that. I am just trying to open a door so that people can see themselves more clearly and perhaps be the light to get them to God, whatever they may call that. I don't see spirits in the trees and I don't sit in the room with crystals."¹⁰ Her stated purpose, to share "the light to get [people] to God," is noble. However, New Age beliefs go beyond "crystals" and "spirits in the trees" and, despite her protestations, the "light" she shares is clearly a New Age gospel, not the gospel of Jesus that she heard as a child.

One who has disputed Winfrey's denial of the New Age label is her former pastor in Chicago, Jeremiah Wright of Trinity United Church of Christ. In a 2002 interview, Wright acknowledged that Winfrey had not been to church in eight years (corresponding to her 1994 spiritual change). He stated that "She has broken with the [traditional faith]... She now has this sort of 'God is everywhere, God is in me, I don't need to go to church, I don't need to be a part of a body of believers, I can meditate, I can do positive thinking' spirituality. It's a strange gospel. It has nothing to do with the church Jesus Christ founded."¹¹

Winfrey rarely discusses her personal spirituality, but on occasion she makes statements on her show, in interviews, and in her writings that clearly indicate she has adopted many of the beliefs of her New Age guests: a view of God akin to pantheism (all is God, God is not a personal being, God is a universal force); Jesus is merely a great teacher (like many others); salvation takes many forms through many lives (reincarnation); all religions lead to the same truth (no absolute truth).

DOCTRINES

Though Winfrey often refers to God and Jesus as if speaking from a Christian perspective, the following quotations clearly indicate that she has strayed far from the teachings of her childhood, embracing a view much more closely aligned with New Age teachings.

God: “What I know is that God, nature, the Spirit, the universe, whatever title you wish to give him—or her—is always trying to help each one of us to be the best and do the best that we can.”¹² This quotation is particularly revealing, because it presents the universe and God as interchangeable titles for the same reality. Winfrey often appeals to the universe in her meditations and prayers (see next quotation).

“The universe is not interested in your struggles and your pain and your sorrow. It wants you to be joyful... *All that is God, my heart is open to you. My heart is open to find the flow, the flow, the flow, the flow that is my life.*”¹³ This is part of a guided meditation recommended by Winfrey.

“Because I am so connected to the bigger picture of what God is, I realize I’m just a particle in the God chain. I see God as the ocean, and I’m a cup of water from the ocean.”¹⁴ This is a common New Age illustration to explain how everyone is part of the oneness of all things.

“My prayer to God every morning on my knees is that the power in the universe should use my life as a vessel or a vehicle for its work.”¹⁵

“I think you know what’s so important to me is that God isn’t a he or a she but is everything.”¹⁶

“I was raised a Baptist and we were too hung up on traditional ways. I was sitting in church and heard that God is a jealous God. I asked ‘Why?’ Come on—let’s get over it!”¹⁷

“I believe in the FORCE—I call it God.”¹⁸

“You believe in love; then you believe in God.”¹⁹

Jesus: “If what we are taught in orthodox religion—I mean I was raised a Baptist—if, in fact what we are taught when you go to church and you adore Jesus and praise Jesus ... means Jesus would have been the biggest egotist that ever lived, if that was his purpose in coming to the world to have people adore him and worship him and carry on about him as people do.”²⁰

“One of the most important books I have ever read is Eric Butterworth’s *Discover the Power Within You*. In it he said, ‘Jesus did not come to teach us how divine he was, but to teach us that there is divinity within us.’”²¹ New Age enlightenment is realizing, like Jesus, that all is God.

Salvation: “One of the biggest mistakes humans make is to believe that there is only one way. Actually, there are many diverse paths leading to what you call God... There couldn’t possibly be only one way... Does God care about your heart or whether you called His Son Jesus?”²² This was Winfrey’s reply to an audience member’s statement that Jesus is the only way.

The Bible: “As I read more of Shirley MacLaine—about the crystals—what you are saying in *The Aquarian Conspiracy*—it seems to me to say what the Bible has said for years. It is just that many of us were brought up with a more restricted, limited vision of what the Bible said.”²³

Reincarnation: (including karma—belief that in the next life one will be rewarded for the good and punished for the bad done in this life): “The first time I got a huge check I closed my office door, lit a candle, and sat there with it. I prayed to the force that I call God, all that is goodness and light, that my life might be an extension of the energy represented in that piece of paper, that it bring that kind of value to myself and others.”²⁴

“I believe that life is eternal. I believe that it takes on other forms. And I believe that there’s so many different levels that the mind can’t even hold it all. So I believe that, yes, life will continue.”²⁵

Channeling: Jonathan Demme, director of *Beloved* shared, “Oprah had explained to me...it was her goal and intention to channel the spirit of Margaret Garner, the woman whose cataclysmic real-life experience had first given birth to the idea of *Beloved* in the mind of Toni Morrison.”²⁶ When speaking of the actors in the film *Beloved*, Winfrey said “We were all channeling.”²⁷

Winfrey might try to dismiss her views of channeling as simply calling upon the experiences of others, but revealingly she wrote in her journal during the filming of *Beloved*: “I awakened early, and did my daily prayer to the Ancestors.”²⁸ A few days later she wrote: “I bring the force and grace of history and pain with me, carrying the Ancestors in my heart, hoping, but also knowing, they too carry me...I really believe I can call her up. Her and so many others. I’m counting on them.”²⁹

CHRISTIAN/BIBLICAL RESPONSE

The New Age adherent holds that truth is relative and determined by the individual. In responding to this one must point out that while conflicting truth claims can both be wrong, both cannot be true. Be prepared to present a biblical clarification of the real God, Jesus, and gospel, in contrast to those of the New Age which attempts to blur the distinctions between biblical and New Age teachings. Point out:

God: God is not all and all is not God, nor is God an impersonal “it.” He is a triune, personal, transcendent being, Creator of “the world and all things in it” and as such governs the universe and all that is in it, including man (Acts 17:24–27; see also Gen. 1:1; Isa. 44:24; John 1:2-3; Col. 1:16-18).

Jesus: Jesus Christ is not the “Christ consciousness” or divine idea of God. He is the Christ (Matt. 1:18; Luke 2:11), God uniquely manifested in the flesh; truly God and truly man, the only Savior, and the only truth and Lord (John 1:1-3,14; Col. 2:9; Phil. 2:6-7; John 14:6).

Salvation: Salvation is not gained through enlightenment or deeds but is the objective righteousness of Christ given to us by grace through faith alone (Rom. 5:17, 19; Phil. 3:8-9) in the finished work of Christ on the cross — that is, His death, and bodily resurrection. It is an act of God’s grace, and cannot be earned through any human action or merit (Eph. 2:8-10, 1 Cor. 1:30-31; 15:1-4; Rom. 6:23). Neither is salvation or the knowledge of God obtained through reincarnation and karma; instead, humans live only once, and then face judgment from God (Heb. 9:27).

Channeling: Rather than encouraging channeling the dead, the Bible forbids such communication (Lev. 19:31; Deut. 18:9-12, 15; 1 Sam. 28; 1 Chron.10:13-14; Isa. 8:19). Those involved in channeling are either faking it, are self-deceived (2 Thess. 2:10; 2 Tim. 3:12), or are actually communicating with familiar spirits masquerading as deceased spirit masters (Isa. 19:3; Eph. 6:12; 1 John 4:1-3).

Relativism: All religions are not equally valid, thus all religions do not lead to the same place, or truth (Matt. 7:21, 24:24; John 14:6; Acts 4:12).

Notes

- ¹ NSI Wrap Sweeps, “About Oprah,” Oprah.com, www.oprah.com/about/press/about_press_2010renew.jhtml (accessed February 14, 2005).
- ² “America’s Beloved Best Friend,” Academy of Achievement, www.achievement.org/autodoc/page/win0int-1 (accessed February 21, 2005).
- ³ Richard Zoglin, “Lady with a Calling,” *Time*, August 8, 1988, 62-64.
- ⁴ “About Oprah,” Oprah.com, www.oprah.com/about/press/about_press_bio.jhtml (accessed February 21, 2005).
- ⁵ “America’s Beloved Best Friend,” www.achievement.org/autodoc/page/win0int-1.
- ⁶ “About Oprah,” www.oprah.com/about/press/about_press_bio.jhtml.
- ⁷ Oprah Winfrey, *The Uncommon Wisdom of Oprah*, ed. Bill Adler (New York: Carol Publishing Group, 1997), 234.
- ⁸ “Oprah’s Favorite Books,” www.oprah.com/books/favorite/books_favorite_main.jhtml, Oprah.com (accessed February 21, 2005).
- ⁹ “America’s Beloved Best Friend,” www.achievement.org/autodoc/page/win0int-1.
- ¹⁰ *The Oprah Winfrey Show*, produced by Harpo, Inc. (tape on file).
- ¹¹ LaTonya Taylor, “The Church of O,” *Christianity Today*, April 1, 2002, 38.
- ¹² *The Uncommon Wisdom of Oprah*, 233.
- ¹³ “Meditation With Oprah,” www.oprah.com/spiritself/insp/med/ss_insp_med_lyblopah.jhtml, Oprah.com (accessed February 21, 2005).

- ¹⁴ *The Uncommon Wisdom of Oprah*, 233.
- ¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 234.
- ¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 239.
- ¹⁷ *The Oprah Winfrey Show* (tape on file).
- ¹⁸ *Ibid.*
- ¹⁹ *Ibid.*
- ²⁰ *Ibid.*
- ²¹ *Ibid.*
- ²² *Ibid.*
- ²³ *Ibid.*
- ²⁴ Gary Zukav, “Soul Guest: Oprah Winfrey,” Gary Zukav, <http://216.237.115.156/index.soul?pv=2111&aid=246> (accessed February 21, 2005).
- ²⁵ *The Uncommon Wisdom of Oprah*, 232.
- ²⁶ Oprah Winfrey, *Journey to Beloved* (New York: Hyperion, 1998), 9.
- ²⁷ Pearly Cleage, “The Courage to Dream!” interview with Oprah Winfrey, *Essence*, December 1998, http://www.findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m1264/is_8_29/ai_53460740/pg_2 (accessed February 21, 2005).
- ²⁸ *Journey to Beloved*, 45.
- ²⁹ *Ibid.* 5.



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