


2004

## Analyzing Dominant Cultural Narratives of Religious Pluralism: A Study of Oprah.com

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### Recommended Citation

Webb, Patricia and Waggoner, Zach (2004) "Analyzing Dominant Cultural Narratives of Religious Pluralism: A Study of Oprah.com," *The Journal of the Assembly for Expanded Perspectives on Learning*: Vol. 10 , Article 6.

<https://doi.org/10.7290/jaepl10xpql>

Available at: <https://trace.tennessee.edu/jaepl/vol10/iss1/6>

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### Cover Page Footnote

Patricia Webb is a professor of English at Arizona State University, Tempe. Her work includes publications in *Computers and Composition*, *Kairos*, and *The Writing Instructor*. Her research interests range from the impact of technology on writing instruction to the rhetorical construction of national identity in national parks. Zach Waggoner is working on a Ph.D. in Rhetoric, Composition, and Linguistics at Arizona State University. His research interests include gender and identity constructions, video game theory, and the intersections between these fields.

# Analyzing Dominant Cultural Narratives of Religious Pluralism: A Study of Oprah.com

Patricia Webb and Zach Waggoner

The cover of the January 8, 2001, issue of *Newsweek* features Oprah Winfrey, a woman in a dynamic red shirt on a spiritual mission. The text on the cover situates her as a “Woman of the New Century,” and the corresponding article presents her as a trailblazer who is influencing television talk shows, our reading habits, and our views of religion in an electronic age. At the time, it seemed as if Oprah was tapping into our culture’s growing desire for religious diversity. Her website, television show, and magazine seemed to call for dialogue between various religious communities in an effort to invite them to participate in larger cultural conversations. In the first part of the millennium, Oprah was clearly trying to start conversations about religious diversity through Oprah.com and other uses of media.

When looking at her current website, however, significant changes have occurred over the last two years. Instead of religious discussions centered on communal and global growth, Oprah now highlights topics such as a guidance counselor who posed for X-rated photos, an Oscar extravaganza show, and an Oprah 50th birthday bash. While her website still contains links to such areas as “Spirit and Self” and “Mind and Body,” these sections seem less visible than the newer “Oprah Boutique” which offers Oprah-logo clothing and “About Oprah” which claims that Oprah “entertains, enlightens, and empowers millions of viewers around the world.” Once focusing on fostering community and participation in diverse forms of religion, Oprah.com now seems to focus on the importance of the individual over community and a singular, assumed view of spirituality drawn from traditional definitions of Christianity. Rather than dialogically exploring ways to better the communities within which the individual lives, the main focus of the site is now the lone individual on a heroic quest to better her/himself for the sake of that individual.

What happened? Why did this shift occur? What insight does this shift give us into larger cultural discussions about religious diversity and pluralism? By comparing the 2002 website to the 2004 website, we see ways in which the idea

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of spiritual pluralism can be subsumed into a singular, almost invisible Christianity that assumes everyone shares the same definition of spirituality. Studying Oprah.com shows that while religious pluralism may seem to be advocated in our culture, a limiting religious unity can still be the underlying, dominant ideology driving the larger framework of society, including Oprah's website.

### Religious Traditions in the United States

Although many definitions of religion have been offered, we base ours on Christian theologian William B. Williamson's from his influential *Encyclopedias of Religion: One Hundred Religious Groups Speak for Themselves*:

Religion is the acceptance of a belief or set of beliefs that exceed mundane manners and concerns; the commitment to a morality or the involvement in a lifestyle resulting from these beliefs; and the psychological conviction which motivates the relation of belief and morality in everyday living and consistent behavior. ("Definitions of Religion")

We rely on it because this definition can apply to a variety of types of religion and highlights that religion involves multiple arenas: beliefs, morality, lifestyles, and psychology.

Although the definition of religion we adopted allows for religious pluralism, whether or not American culture encourages religious pluralism is up for debate. One set of scholars argues that America has always been defined by its free spiritedness and resistance to religious persecution. In *Spiritual but not Religious: Understanding Unchurched America*, Robert Fuller, a religious studies professor at Bradley University, argues that America's acceptance of alternative religious practices dates back to the first European settlers in America. Fuller paints a picture of colonialist Americans who attended a formal church to take care of their souls after death and yet practiced witchcraft to attend to their daily, earthly needs. Diana Eck, professor of comparative literature at the Harvard Divinity School, contends that the founding fathers embraced religious diversity: "Working from their own religious principles, the founders had sense enough to see that religious freedom was part and parcel of who we are as human beings, created to be free" (383). As a result, Eck argues, the state remained "religiously neutral" (336) while still providing "the guidelines for a multireligious nation, the likes of which the world has rarely seen" (384). Citing the growing number of Americans who are practicing Muslims and Buddhists, Eck, like Fuller, asserts that this history of religious pluralism is seeing a resurgence in the current moment as well.

However, religious historian William Hutchison contends that religious pluralism in the United States has not always lived up to the claims we have made about it. Hutchison points out that while we may discount "blistering indictments of the American mainstream's seeming inability, under any definition, to live up to its stated pluralist ideas," he suggests that "it seems in order to ask why early Americans, in particular, did not do a better job of responding to diversity" (7). Expressing a concern for unity and coherence among Americans, many colonialists resisted—both actively and passively—other religions besides Protestantism: "As embodied, especially, in America's unofficial Protestant

establishment, this unitive ideology responded to diversity with less direct forms of resistance, with some genuine concessions, and with promises to ‘outsiders’ that were conditioned on successful assimilation” (8). In a similar fashion, J. Christopher Soper, professor of political science at Pepperdine University, insists that the Constitution was not religiously neutral, as Eck suggests; rather, it was directly influenced by religious theories of Reformed Protestantism which furthered the belief that “Christians have a duty to use the political order to reflect God’s glory. . . . The Christian must make every effort to transform aspects of culture that are not consistent with God’s intentions in this world” (15). Interpreting the writing of the Constitution in this way, Soper clearly links politics and religion in ways that made political activism “a natural and faithful response for the redeemed when pushed into the world of politics” (15). These theorists challenge the actuality of religious pluralism and political neutrality in regards to religion.

An added factor in the debates about religious pluralism or religious unity is the role that media technologies such as television and the Internet play in the practicing of religious activities. Because of the phenomenal popularity of both television and the Internet, many theorists argue that we need to analyze relationships between popular culture and religion in dominant cultural representations. In the introduction to his edited collection called *Religion and Popular Culture in America*, professor of religious studies Bruce David Forbes maps out four distinct relationships between religion and popular culture: religion as popular culture, popular culture in religion, popular culture as religion, and religion and popular culture in dialogue (10).

In the first relationship, religion as popular culture, popular culture repeatedly creates a Christ-like figure in the image of a lone individual who stands apart from the dominant culture and saves the culture by some heroic act. Superman, E.T., and Ellen Ripley of the *Alien* series are examples of this usage of religious icons in popular culture. Secondly, the popular culture in religion relationship “refers to the appropriation of aspects of popular culture by religious groups and institutions” (12). This occurs when churches or synagogues “borrow popular musical styles, or organizational or advertising techniques or popular-culture slogans and icons”(12). Forbes cites Neil Postman’s warning about these intersections: “The danger is not that religion has become the content of television shows . . . but that television shows may become the content of religion” (13). The third relationship, popular culture as religion, highlights that for many, media “events” such as the Superbowl and fan re-enactments of *Star Trek* have become the rituals through which they live their lives. Forbes contends that “popular culture and traditional religions function in similar ways, providing meaning and helping people cope with life’s problems” (15). The fourth and final relationship, popular culture and religion in dialogue, analyzes dialogues and usually consists of religious leaders analyzing the effects of media on family, religion, and children. Forbes gives the example of violence in the media, an issue that “is an ethical issue which concerns both religions and religious people and the general population as well. Religion wants to take part in the broader discussion” (16). These four major relationships identify the ways in which media technologies intersect with religious belief systems and practices.

While we find Forbes’s four categories useful to our study of Oprah.com, we have revised his framework because studying the ways the categories interact

with each other best explains the significance of the shifts in Oprah.com. In the following analysis, we combined religion in popular culture with popular culture in religion because the role that religion plays in popular culture helps to explain how religious organizations have increasingly incorporated popular culture principles into their practices and doctrines. In that section, we analyze the ways in which Oprah as the Christ-like or mythic hero has a direct influence on the ways in which people define religions other than their own and the manner in which religion takes up and uses popular culture strategies in delivering its own message. We have also combined popular culture as religion and religion and popular culture in dialogue because the ways in which popular culture is seen as a religion illustrate the kinds of possibilities that exist for religion and popular culture to discuss and debate issues. In that section, we compare Oprah's television show and website as a religion to Buddhism as explained by Thich Nhat Hanh in order to demonstrate the singularity of Oprah's religious views and the limits these views place on the possibility for dialogue between religions.

Within our analysis of each of these four categories, we draw upon Hutchison's mapping of three major stages of pluralism: pluralism as tolerance, pluralism as inclusion, and pluralism as participation. While these stages can be linked to progressive historical time periods, with tolerance being an earlier phase than inclusion, Hutchison argues that these stages compete with one another in any given time period of American culture's discussions around and practices of religion. According to Hutchison, the potentials for religious pluralism to open new conversations and create space for active participation of all members of our society will remain unrealized until we determine if our culture truly embraces pluralism as participation.

Pluralism as tolerance is best illustrated through the notion of legal acceptance. This means that different religions will not be banned from being practiced in the U.S.: "According to this definition of acceptance, a deviant person or group should be accorded the right to exist and even to thrive, but in general to do so only as an outsider to the dominant religion and culture" (Hutchinson 8). Others are accepted in this framework, but their position as other, as deviant, is clearly maintained. Paganism, for example, can be tolerated because it is kept at the margins, with its practitioners labeled as outsiders.

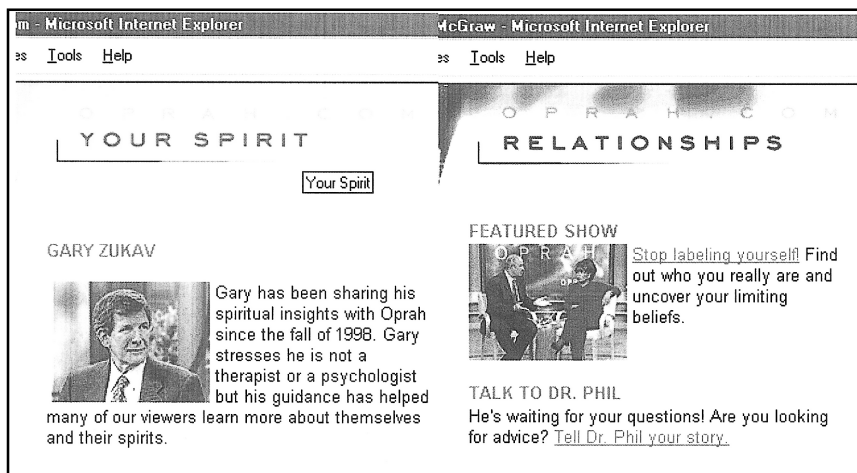
The second stage, pluralism as inclusion, occurs when minority religions are added to the culture, but their addition does not change the dominant Protestant definitions of religion. The concept of the melting pot demonstrates that when difference is added to the dominant mix, it is erased. Hutchison offers the image of the "other" being able to ride on the bus, but having to sit at the back.

Hutchison argues that the third stage—pluralism as participation—is the most progressive one. "Pluralism as participation impl[ies] a mandate for individuals and groups (including, quite importantly, ethnic and racial groups) to share responsibility for the forming and implementing of the society's agenda" (7). In this framework, pluralism demonstrates the way that religious alternatives can affect the long-standing hold that the singularity of Christianity has had on legal, political, economic, and cultural components of our society. With these three definitive stages of pluralism in mind, we now turn to the first of our category groupings.

## Religion in Popular Culture/Popular Culture in Religion

As we outlined earlier, images of Christ-like saviors and mythic heroes permeate our culture. Looking at Oprah.com, we asked the following questions: in what ways does Oprah.com present the "hero"? Further, what do the patterns that emerge through examination of the website's evolution over the past two years reveal about Oprah.com's relationship to religious pluralism?

To be sure, Oprah herself has permeated all facets of the website from its inception: her face, her name, and her words are everywhere. However, in 2002, there seemed to be more space for other voices and experiences. Dr. Phil McGraw and Gary Zukav (see Figure 1) were both featured prominently in the 2002 version of the website.



**Figure 1**

For example, on the "Sexuality" page (a sub-link under the "Mind and Body" category), Dr. Phil was listed with several other sexuality experts. Viewers could also follow a more general "Dr. Phil" link, leading them to excerpts from Dr. Phil's numerous appearances on The Oprah Winfrey Show and advice on a wide variety of relationship issues/problems. In addition, Oprah.com 2002 advocated Gary Zukav as a dispenser of knowledge in a similar fashion. With a stable link devoted to him under the "Your Spirit" page of the website, Zukav offered viewers "guidance for self-empowerment and spiritual growth," the opportunity to email him questions, or to read excerpts from his books or interviews taped on Oprah's television show. Even though their messages were certainly compatible with Oprah's own philosophies, both Zukav and Dr. Phil (and various other experts) were powerful authority figures in the 2002 version of Oprah.com. This type of inclusion seems to hearken to Hutchison's third stage, pluralism as participation: Zukav's and Dr. Phil's differing views were both welcomed equally on Oprah's website, and both share responsibility in creating knowledge on Oprah.com.

In 2004, these links to the two men either do not exist or are not as prominent; the website's search engine must be used to locate the pages related to the men.

Dr. Phil's presence on the site is relegated to the website's archives of The Oprah Winfrey Show, where he made over 100 appearances before launching his own talk show. While Dr. Phil's diminished presence on the site can be explained by the creation of his own show, Gary Zukav's seeming disappearance has no similar explanation. Zukav's presence on Oprah.com is reduced in the same manner: he can only be found in the archives devoted to the television show. As these archives only initially list the theme of shows on particular dates, it can be difficult for a viewer to locate Dr. Phil and Zukav unless she or he knows what topics to associate them with. In this way, Oprah.com seems to have regressed into pluralism as inclusion, offering the men's alternative viewpoints, but privileging Oprah's own messages over anything the men have to say.

This drastic reduction of the presence of knowledge-makers like Zukav and Dr. Phil is significant in showing how Oprah.com has gradually de-emphasized ways of knowing that aren't specifically Oprah herself. In fact, when examining Oprah.com through Forbes' frame, Oprah does seem to have become a mythic character, the Knower/Savior. From a stable link entitled "About Oprah," viewers have a variety of options, all providing insight into some aspect of Oprah. For example, viewers can read a biography of Oprah's life. The first two sentences of this bio are a vivid example of how Oprah's mythic status is fostered on the website: "Oprah Winfrey has already left an indelible mark on the face of television. From her humble beginnings in rural Mississippi, Oprah's legacy has established her as one of the most important figures in popular culture." Oprah epitomizes the Horatio Alger story, but this updated version even overcomes race, class, and gender.

On the "About Oprah" page, viewers are also bombarded by images of Oprah: in all, seven pictures of her are scattered throughout the page (see Figure 2). Although this page is exceptional in the number of images of Oprah it contains, every main page of Oprah.com contains at least one image of Oprah, thus solidifying her monolithic presence as "The One" source of knowledge. Of course, the repetition of Savior imagery is prevalent throughout religious iconography (Christ, the Virgin Mary, the Buddha, etc.), and Oprah.com sets up Oprah in a similar fashion. Oprah's one-name status (is it even necessary to use "Winfrey" anymore when referring to her?) and the instant recognizability of her symbol "O" (featured prominently throughout the website and as the title of her magazine) provide further evidence for the Oprah-as-Savior religious motif.

Oprah, as mythic hero and Knower, now professes a singular wisdom on subjects that used to be presented as a dialogue. Interestingly enough, many of the themes identified by Forbes earlier in this section, love ("What Would You Do For Love" and "Getting the Love You Want" are among the over 2700 hits on Oprah's site for "love"), finding meaning ("Finding Meaning and Purpose in Your Life" is one of 115 hits on the website), and forgiveness ("Ritual for Forgiveness: Atonement," one of 142 hits), are all themes central to the website's messages. The 2004 website presents a unified vision of each of these topics now and situates Oprah as the Knower. Much of Oprah.com is devoted to these types of soul-searching questions.

In keeping with the Savior-like motif of the rest of the website, Oprah.com does contain other voices, but they are presented as disciples spreading Oprah's messages to the masses. One recurrent theme on The Oprah Winfrey Show is "Lifestyle Makeovers." Many pages on the website are devoted to this



theme (and, really, isn't the notion of remaking one's life in positive ways a central religious tenet?). One example of this is the page entitled "Lifestyle Makeovers: What Do You Need To Surrender?" Here, Oprah allows motivational speakers and life coaches Cheryl Richardson and Debbie Ford to share their recipes for successful living, but neither woman's presence on the site is as visible or as permanent at that of Dr. Phil's or Gary Zukav's on the 2002 site. No permanent links to Richardson or Ford exist on the website. Instead, excerpts from

Figure 2

**OPRAH.COM**  
**ABOUT OPRAH**

Home Page  
The Oprah Winfrey Show  
Oprah After the Show  
O, The Oprah Magazine  
Oprah's Books  
Oprah's Angel Network  
About Oprah  
Oprah Boutique **NEW**

Spirit, and Self  
Relationships  
Food and Home  
Mind and Body  
Oprah.com Presents **NEW**

Oprah's Workshop **NEW**  
Message Boards  
O Groups  
Online Journal  
Oprah Alert  
Newsletter  
E-mail Us

What do you want to know about Oprah? Stay up-to-date on what's happening with the show, *O, the Oprah Magazine*, and Harpo Productions. It's all about Oprah, right here!

**Fast Facts**

- [Oprah's Bio](#)
- [The Oprah Winfrey Show](#)
- [Oprah.com](#)
- [Oprah's Book Club](#)
- [Oprah's Angel Network](#)
- [The Oprah Winfrey Show global distribution list](#)

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What's Oprah's e-mail address?  
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[What's on Oprah's bookshelf?](#)  
[Take The Oprah Winfrey Show quiz.](#)  
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their texts and worksheets for self-improvement can be found underneath Oprah's larger "Lifestyle Makeover" categories, making it clear that Richardson's and Ford's ideas fall underneath Oprah's larger rubric. In this way, Oprah.com continues its reversion back to pluralism as inclusion. Each prophet is allowed to share part of Oprah's gospel, but not the whole thing: only the Savior can provide the whole message.<sup>1</sup>

It seems clear that much religious imagery and thematic material are present on Oprah.com. What needs to be explored next is exactly how Oprah's religious views play out on the website: what form does her religion take? How does the lone hero actually present her wisdom? A savior, a knower, must, after all, have a message. In describing how popular culture in religion often manifests itself, Forbes suggests that the line between religion and entertainment is often problematically blurred:

"Religion on television is presented simply as entertainment. . . . When churches adopt the strategies and techniques of modern marketing from the business world, and 'the audience becomes a market and the gospel is transformed into a product,' should religious people view these influences as effective adaptation or a threatening transformation?" (13)

Forbes's concerns are valid ones and lead to an interesting question: is there a product being sold on Oprah.com? Our analysis indicates that the answer to this question is yes. The website's portrayal of Oprah as hero/savior effectively serves to commodify her: it is this image of Oprah-as-Knower, as the way to personal enlightenment that is being packaged and sold on Oprah.com. Pluralism, if found at all on the 2004 site, goes no further than inclusion.

As we mentioned earlier, Oprah's religious themes of love, finding meaning, forgiveness, and so on permeate all facets of the website, including the portion of Oprah.com devoted to her television show. Here, viewers have the opportunity not only to read excerpts from the Oprah-approved<sup>2</sup> expert discussions (led by the likes of Richardson, Ford, Zukav, and Dr. Phil) that took place on these topics on The Oprah Winfrey Show, but also to purchase transcripts (\$7 to receive them via mail or \$6 to download them) or videotapes (\$29.95) of the episode desired. Oprah's messages can be sent directly to one's home, if the price is right.

The ability to purchase her message is also offered through the opportunity for a more dynamic multimedia online workshop (Figure 3). After following the link entitled "Oprah's Workshop" from the main page, viewers find themselves at an advertisement for "Live Your Best Life Online: An Online Workshop With Oprah Winfrey." Featuring a large picture of Oprah in another dynamic red shirt (much like the one on the 2001 *Newsweek* cover) speaking into a microphone

<sup>1</sup> The presence of Oprah's disciples can also be seen on the website's "Phenomenal Women" page (a category under "Inspirations" on the "Spirit and Self" page). Here, Oprah.com shares the stories of inspirational women: "Every month, *O, The Oprah Magazine* profiles women who are inspiring others, forging new paths, or beating the odds. Discover how these women are using their lives. Their stories might change your life." These profiles function as parables, providing readers with stories that show the life lessons learned by the authors, and offering the reader the opportunity to reflect on their own experiences. In this way, Oprah.com brings new disciples to the website each month.

<sup>2</sup> Not all discussions that took place on the television show are included, obviously, but the ones highlighted on the site privilege the singular message that Oprah-as-hero is presented as delivering.

(preaching to the masses, perhaps), this advertisement explains how the workshop can help the user to “develop more meaningful relationships, enrich your life by learning who you really are, [and] live a happier, more fulfilled life.” To help one achieve these goals, “Oprah’s personal insights and life moments” will be included, rendered in “rich multimedia” that will make “these stories come alive!” The individual’s growth seems to be based on drawing on the hero’s journey into the unknown and delivering an enlightened message when returning home. Without the inclusion of Oprah’s own stories, would one be able to achieve the goals of the workshop? Are the Knower’s own tales integral to achieving success and happiness? For \$24.95, one can find out.

**Figure 3**

Already enrolled? Enter here

### An Online Workshop with Oprah Winfrey

**LIVE YOUR BEST LIFE ONLINE**

**Designed to Help You:**

- Develop more meaningful relationships
- Enrich your life by learning who you really are
- Live a happier, more fulfilled life

**ENROLL NOW!**

**Free Trial Offer!**  
Experience the complete online workshop.  
**Take the trial!**

**Features:**

- Oprah’s personal insights and life moments—rich multimedia makes these stories come alive!
- An Oprah-guided interactive workbook with self-paced exercises that you can save and print.
- Optimized experiences for both dial-up and broadband (high speed).

**Enroll now for \$24.95!**

Even Oprah’s Angel Network, a non-profit organization created by Oprah to raise money for charity, contributes to the creation and commodification of Oprah-as-Knower on the website. From the main page of Oprah.com, there is a link to Oprah’s Boutique, which sells Oprah merchandise (shirts, hats, tote bags, loungewear, etc.). Even though all the proceeds (ranging in price from a \$10 key chain to a \$120 spa robe) go to Angel Network charities, the Boutique items themselves contribute to the construction of Oprah’s iconic mythos. Most of the items contain Oprah’s signature religious symbol: a large, stylized “O.” Those Boutique items that don’t contain the “O” instead bear Oprah’s name or say “Oprah’s Book Club,” a sub-sect in Oprah’s larger group of followers. The inescapable presence of Oprah symbology on all Boutique items helps to cement the commodification of Oprah’s iconic religious status.

In much the way Hutchison warns, a singular, unified definition of religion can disguise itself as an inclusive pluralism. While Oprah.com includes other voices, the image of Oprah as mythic hero and/or Christ-like savior permeates both the 2004 website’s presentation of Oprah as well as the ways to interact with the concepts/messages Oprah offers. Yes, other voices are tolerated. Yes, other perspectives are included through guests and show transcripts. But, as Hutchison argues, true pluralistic participation requires not only the representation of multiple religions, but also a “mandate for individuals and groups . . . to share responsibility for the forming and implementing of the society’s agenda” (7).

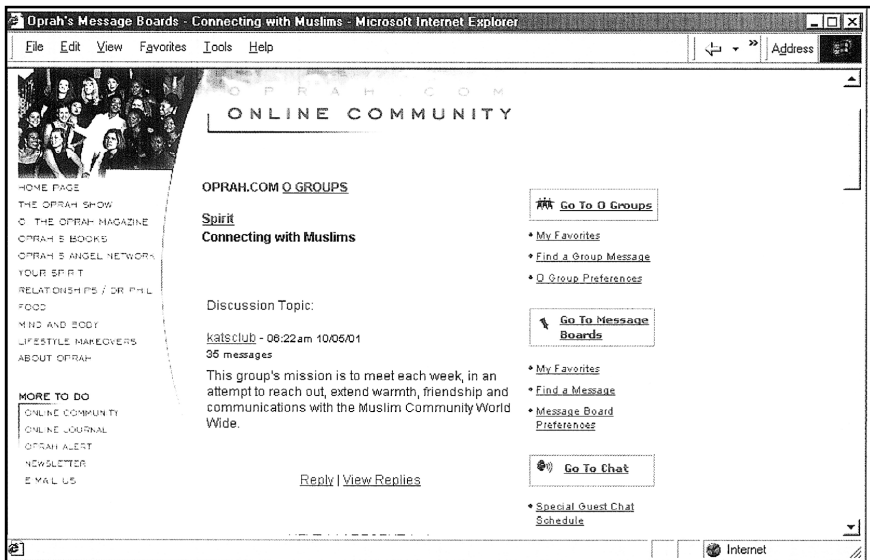
While the first factor—representation—might be present on Oprah.com, shared responsibility is overshadowed by a commodified image of Oprah as savior.

## Popular Culture as Religion/Religion and Popular Culture in Dialogue

When popular culture becomes a religion, the form that religion takes has a direct impact on the possibilities for dialogue between religion and popular culture about beliefs and values of cultures and communities. While Forbes argues that religion and popular culture in dialogue is a category that covers actions that do not fit in the other three categories—as a sort of clearinghouse for the "extras"—we contend that because popular culture is seen as a religion it necessitates that the two entities be in dialogue with each other, either implicitly or explicitly. If, as Forbes argues, “for many . . . religion provides an interpretive lens through which culture may be read and critiqued” (241), then it makes sense that the status of popular culture as religion would be shaped by and in turn shape the interpretive lenses used to create dialogues around them. In order for constructive dialogue to take place, we must go beyond tolerance and inclusion; active participation and shared responsibility of pluralism as participation are required for effective dialogue.

As we argued before, Oprah has become a mythic or Christ-like hero for many, and her message has become a religion in and of itself. In 2002, Oprah.com worked to resist “electronic colonialism” (Cobb 237) by avoiding “the homogenization of culture into one particular viewpoint” (237). Despite the fact that Oprah.com uses English exclusively both in 2002 and 2004, the 2002 version of the website attempted to connect individual transformations to larger social changes. These pluralist goals were illustrated through the website’s “Connecting with Muslims,” one of the 2002 “O Discussion Groups” (Figure 4). The stated

**Figure 4**



purpose for the group was as follows: "This group's mission is to meet each week, in an attempt to reach out, extend warmth, friendship and communications with the Muslim Community world wide." The types of messages here ranged from direct questions about Islamic religious beliefs (misty902 asks: "I am interested to understand your religion and I wonder if your coran being your version of our Bible contains the book of Revelations as does our Bible.") to calls for wider understanding (misssd63 writes: "Wouldn't it be great if we could start a group of people of all religions, colors, nationalities, etc. so we can learn about each other and understand. I would love to talk to people in Afganastan, Pakastan, Iraq, Israel, and so on. Maybe just maybe if we understood each other we could pass the word on and enlighten others. If anyone knows how to get in touch with others let me know please").

While the discussion board opened a space for pluralistic discussion, the conversations were clearly situated in an Us/Them binary. Yes, a community aspect is part of the discussion, but one community, the American Christian community, is established from the beginning as the "One" and the other religions are situated as other. Reaching out to the Muslim community suggests that the discussion board includes and tolerates the "other," but has not allowed the other into the community fully. In the stated goals along with writers' messages an assumed unity among Christians can be found. Misty902's "our Bible" creates an "our" that is unified. Questions are posed by those identifying themselves as Christians, assuming that the "other" will answer them in a way that compares them to the "standard" of Christianity. Misty902's comment specifically asks a "you" and a "someone" to compare their Koran (which she misspells) to "our Bible." The discussion board tries to create a community, but does so in a way that prohibits an "other" community—Muslims—to actively participate in the shape of the discussion.

No matter what its failings were, the 2002 focus on community was a move toward religion as participation because it called for people of various religions to be in dialogue with each other. The 2004 Oprah.com site's over reliance on "the individual" as the driving framework/structure erases the possibility of communal participation that not only tolerates or includes other religions but actually makes them active participants in the construction of the belief systems. Now instead of communities divided into Us/Them, we find the individual who is out to better her life for the sake of her own self. Discussion boards such as "Goddess Women" and "Pagan and the Novus Spiritus" still exist on the 2004 site, but the entire site is overshadowed or dominated by an emphasis on the individual.

This emphasis on Oprah's doctrine as religion to the exclusion of dialogue with other religions is clear when comparing Oprah.com's (2004) presentation of meditation to Buddhist practitioners' definitions of meditation.<sup>3</sup> The web page, "Spirit and Self" includes a link to "Meditation." Once there, users find this basic introduction to meditation: "Meditation allows you to bring together your mind, body, and spirit. Take five minutes out of your day to get in touch with yourself." Another link offers a guided meditation from Cheryl Richardson: "Just be yourself . . . just ponder the question: Why am I here? . . . What are you called to do?" By

<sup>3</sup>We acknowledge that there are multiple forms of Buddhism and various practices attached to these multiple forms. For simplicity's sake, we are using Thich Nhat Hanh's definitions of and practices in meditation.

understanding one's "calling," meditators can "be yourself" and relate "to what is happening." The focus is on meditation as means to individual success and/or fulfillment.

Most telling is a link to a print version of a presentation made by Oprah and Cheryl Richardson (Figure 5). Oprah's view on mediation is presented in the following way, in her own words:

We believe in meditating. I believe in meditating in the tub with some very nice bath products. Origins Ginger Bath is one I use a lot. However, you can do it however you want to do it. You can sit in a chair, you can sit on the floor, you can sit in the window, you can sit in the tub. I give myself at least ten minutes every day in some form of meditation. I happen to like the tub.

On the surface, Oprah seems to be offering multiple interpretations of meditation—you can meditate, she says, in multiple places. But place is the only multiplicity offered. The purpose for meditation, the ways of actually meditating and various religions' interpretations of meditation are not offered. The only choice lies in where one will practice the supposedly "universal" definition of meditative practice. Further, this meditative practice focuses on the individual doing something nice for themselves—taking a bath—while at the same time selling products—Origins Ginger Bath—that are supposedly important to the process.

The form of meditation being advocated on Oprah.com is decontextualized,

**Figure 5**

The screenshot shows the Oprah.com website interface. At the top, there's a navigation bar with 'Oprah.com Membership: Log in or Join now', a search bar, and a 'GO' button. Below the navigation bar is a large banner image of Oprah standing with arms raised, with the text 'SPIRIT AND SELF' overlaid. To the left of the banner is a sidebar menu with links: 'Home Page', 'The Oprah Winfrey Show', 'Oprah After the Show', 'O, The Oprah Magazine', 'Oprah's Books', 'Oprah's Angel Network', 'About Oprah', 'Oprah Boutique NEW!', 'Spirit and Self Relationships Food and Home Mind and Body Oprah.com Presents NEW!', 'Oprah's Workshop NEW!', 'Message Boards', 'O Groups', 'Online Journal', 'Oprah Alert Newsletter', and 'E-mail Us'. The main content area is titled 'INSPIRATIONS > Meditation' and features a section 'The Power of Meditation with Oprah and Cheryl Richardson'. Below this is a photo of Oprah and Cheryl Richardson sitting on a couch, with the text 'From the Live Your Best Life Tour, 2001'. To the right of the photo is a quote from Oprah: 'Oprah: We believe in meditating. I believe in meditating in the tub with some very nice bath products. Origins Ginger Bath is one I use a lot. However, you can do it however you want to do it. You can sit in the chair, you can sit on the floor, you can sit in the window, you can sit in the tub. I give myself at least ten minutes every day in some form of meditation. I happen to like the tub.' Below the quote is a quote from Cheryl Richardson: 'Cheryl Richardson: I do, too.' Further down is another quote from Oprah: 'Oprah: I'm telling you, you have to be willing to do this for yourself. Otherwise you can't say, 'Oh, I just wanted to,'—a woman did this to me once. I recommended meditation and she said, 'Oh, I did that. I went in the closet. I spent 20 minutes in there. Nothing happened.' Below that is a quote from Cheryl: 'Cheryl: So don't worry if nothing miraculous happens in the next five minutes. As long as you spend five minutes of quiet time with yourself just'. To the right of the main content area is a sidebar with the heading 'INSIDE SPIRIT AND SELF' and a list of links: 'Know Yourself', 'Transform Your Life', 'Inspirations', 'Thought for Today', 'Breathing Space', 'Phenomenal Women', and 'Meditation'. Below this is a section 'TALK WITH OTHERS' with links for 'Message Boards' and 'O Groups'. At the bottom right of the sidebar is a link 'Email This Page to a Friend'. At the bottom left of the page is a small advertisement for 'New Chicken McNuggets made with white meat' with the text 'Tender and juicy on the inside, golden and crispy on the outside.' and the McDonald's logo.

universalized, and individualized. Not only are other religions' meditation practices not invited to participate, they are not even included on the website. Clearly, Oprah's way of meditating (in the bath with Origins' products) is the religion and presented as the "One," so much so that there is no recognition of, or dialogue with, other religions. How the popular culture religion gets constructed, then, directly impacts the possibilities for dialogue.

Compare this presentation of meditation to Zen master, peacemaker, and author Thich Nhat Hanh's teachings about meditation. In *Teachings on Love*, one of over thirty-five books he's published, he recognizes that meditation is an individual practice that begins with looking "deeply at our body, feelings, perceptions, mental formations, and consciousness and see[ing] clearly what our real needs are, so we will not drown in a sea of suffering" (15). However, for him, the end goal of meditation is not solely individual growth. Hanh explains the communal significance of an individual's meditation:

If you take good care of yourself, you help everyone. You stop being a source of suffering to the world, and you become a reservoir of joy and freshness. Here and there are people who know how to take good care of themselves, who live joyfully and happily. They are our strongest support. Everything they do, they do for everyone. (18)

Instead of asking what the purpose is for life, as Oprah's and Richardson's comments suggest, the individual meditates in order to take care of the community.

This unified Christian representation demonstrates the ways in which American religious traditions have not lived up to the pluralism claimed by many Americans, including Fuller and Eck. The underlying message of such representations is that there is one culture that perhaps includes others, but our analysis of Oprah.com (2004) demonstrates that this inclusion occurs only to the extent that the "other" does not threaten the unified view of religion as seen through the Christian lenses. So, while a dialogue might seem to be occurring, it does not include others as full participants with shared responsibility. When looking at other religions such as Buddhism, we see religious beliefs that encourage active participation and dialogues across religions. Instead of insisting that one adopt only Buddhist practices, Hanh argues that "Buddhist practice can offer effective means to heal, reconcile and reunite with one's blood and spiritual families, in order to discover the precious gems in one's own traditions" (166). Buddhist practice can help people of all religions to redress dissatisfaction with their primary religions:

Thanks to the practice, people will see that Buddhism and their own spiritual traditions have many things in common, and therefore it is not necessary to reject their own spiritual tradition. They will see that there are things that need to be transformed in Buddhism as well as in their own tradition. (166)

In his configurations, Buddhism encourages dialogue between religions and invites multiple religions to participate in a variety of religious practices. Buddhism is not presented in this framework as "the One." However, since popular culture is dominated by Christian religious themes, dialogues with other religions are stifled and limited. Therefore, popular culture does not get represented through Buddhism and hence popular culture conversations with religions are limited to the dominant form of religion as presented in popular culture, Christianity. As a

result, the individual reigns supreme over community good.

### Drawing Conclusions

We began this article by asking whether pluralist claims about religion are making headway in our culture or if pluralism has been so thinly defined that it is actually unity disguised. Eck takes a very optimistic stance on this issue:

America's religious diversity is here to stay, and the most interesting and important phase of our nation's history lies ahead. The opportunity to create a positive multireligious society out of the fabric of a democracy, without the chauvinism and religious triumphalism that have marred humanity, is now ours. (383)

However, Hutchison argues that pluralism holds no significance if it is “defended as little more than a necessity, a prudent stance taken because of the pressures of diversity and the demands voiced by the American Civil Liberties Union” (236) nor if a religious group demands respect (not just tolerance) for their beliefs but in turn are intolerant of other religious groups’ beliefs. Instead of these idealistic claims of pluralism that do not acknowledge the failure to achieve the kinds of pluralism that make a difference in our culture, Hutchison argues for a new, civil pluralism that arises “as much from day-to-day social experience as from social theory or judicial decisions” and emphasizes the right of every group to not only be tolerated or included but also be able to participate and to “share responsibility for the forming and implementing of the society’s agenda” (7). This civil pluralism would be framed through tolerance, inclusion, and participation.

Our analysis of Oprah.com suggests that multimedia mogul Oprah Winfrey not only fails to achieve religious pluralism as participation, her website has in fact moved further away from it over the past few years, increasingly depicting Oprah’s way of knowing (a decidedly Christian way of knowing) as the way to enlightenment. Yet less discerning viewers may perceive Oprah’s website as space where all forms of religion are equally welcomed. This is problematic in that Oprah.com unquestioningly and uncritically presents Christianity as the norm, ignoring the social and historical construction of the faith. Even though the website on the surface seems to welcome multiple voices and perspectives, in actuality opportunities for dialogue are shut down: the view of Oprah-as-Knower offers no invitation for contradictory perspectives.

Our analysis of Oprah.com also reveals the need for constant vigilance in monitoring dominant ideologies: they manifest themselves in many guises, often seeming to embody traits and embracing perspectives that they really do not. Oprah has sold herself with great success as a religious icon in keeping with the dominant religious doctrines of our society, all the while seeming to embrace a wide variety of non-denominational religious views. This is a clear example of how we entertain the illusion that we are embracing diversity even when we never have to challenge our (dominant) core beliefs. While Eck argues that the “ongoing argument over who ‘we’ are—as religious people, as a nation, and as a global community—is one in which all of us, ready or not, will participate” (385), our analysis of Oprah.com suggests that Eck has been too hasty in proclaiming the arrival of religious pluralism in America.

The shifts in Oprah.com from 2002 to 2004 demonstrate the insidious power of any religion that dominates through an assimilation of any challenges to its



authority. Recognizing that these dominant power structures have prevented pluralism from living up to the claims made about it is a first step toward greater acceptance of pluralism as participation. Creating dialogues between multiple religious communities must follow this recognition if effective change is to happen. Religions in participatory dialogues that lead to alternative practices that challenge current perceptions can help us fulfill the promise of sharing “responsibility for the forming and implementing of the society’s agenda” (Hutchison 7). ☺

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