
THE CELEBRIFICATION OF RELIGION IN THE AGE OF INFOTAINMENT

A RITUAL DEMISE

ON THE MORNING OF MARCH 24, 2011, Elizabeth Taylor landed on the front pages for a final time. “Elizabeth Taylor, the actress who dazzled generations of moviegoers with her stunning beauty and whose name was synonymous with Hollywood glamour, died on Wednesday in Los Angeles,” reported the *New York Times* obituary scribe Mel Gussow.¹ Media outlets used her death as an opportunity to saturate their pages with her legendary beauty and to recount the gossip surrounding her serial weddings. Occasionally a clip of her performance in *Giant* (1956) or *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* (1958) was included in these memorials. But her afterlife coverage emphasized Elizabeth Taylor as a dreamscape, and did not detail her artistic accomplishment.² She became a “lustrous pinnacle of Hollywood glamour,” enshrined in an epithet about her near-perfect facial profile and her penchant for diamonds.³ She would not be remembered for what she did or who she was but for how she permeated popular culture as a replicable idea of doing and being.

The media tracked Taylor’s physical processing with the announcement, “Private burial service held for Elizabeth Taylor.” Here star-watchers would be reminded of Taylor’s specific religious identity, inspiring subsequent stories that sought to make sense of her midlife conversion to Judaism. Journalists offered plots resonant with tabloid arcs: the star grew up in a restrictive denomination (Christian Scientist) and quickly abandoned these sacred structures upon entering her profaning orbit as a celebrity. Trauma (the death of ex-husband Eddie Fisher) inspired a turn to new spiritual pathways, and the star began studying with a teacher, guru, or adviser

(in this star's case, Rabbi Max Nussbaum). In this postmortem account, her conversion included a variety of subsequent controversies. Taylor's spiritual devotion reduced larger problems to accessibly personal dramas: her 1959 purchase of one-hundred-thousand-dollar Israeli bonds prompted a ban of her films in the United Arab Republic; her financial support of Israel led to the 1962 banning of *Cleopatra* in Egypt; and in 1976 she offered herself to be exchanged for Israeli hostages held by PLO terrorists. The reader is meant to understand from these details that Taylor's commitment to Judaism was, like the icon herself and like the characters she played, passionate, extravagant, and a little headstrong. The article concluded:

How much Judaism played into Taylor's life in recent years is unclear. But the *Jewish Journal* reported in its obituary that Taylor had been a supporter of the Kabbalah Centre in Los Angeles. And [Benjamin] Ivry of the *Forward* suggested that Taylor's relentless campaigning on behalf of AIDS research and treatment reflected a deep understanding of the Jewish commitment to *tzedakah*, or charity.⁴

Focusing on the funerary reportage surrounding Elizabeth Taylor's death illuminates how celebrities and religion most frequently intersect on the news. Celebrities offer journalists an opportunity to expand religious literacy in the news, using the biographical decisions of the subject to explain foreign concepts or rites, like *tzedakah*. Celebrities, too, provide portals to complex conflicts, like that between Israelis and Palestinians. Those readers who don't understand a suicide bomber may relate to the passions of Ms. Taylor, and find some new understanding in their connection. The plots of celebrities offer a focal lens to the ambiguities of religious cultures, structures, and rites.

Finally, the news coverage of religion within Elizabeth Taylor's life allows the opportunity to access a new descriptive vocabulary for Taylor herself, since it is not just Judaism that is explained through this reportage but also Taylor. At the heart of celebrity, iconicity has its own mysteries. Viewers may obsess unrelentingly over the physical features, decorating choices, and romances of individual celebrities. Yet such scrutiny never quite explains the celebrity's ascent. Why this figure and not that one? Why did this violet-eyed damsel so transfix the world? And why did AIDS, diamonds, and men transfix her? Deploying religious data to plumb the person, religion inserts itself as a possible clue to her true self, to the woman behind the eyes, behind the diamonds, and behind the men. Naming the religious in

Taylor begins to explain some of her incommensurability, the very mystery that makes of her life and death something near religious for many.

STUDYING CELEBRITY AND RELIGION

Studying celebrity and religion in concert requires parsing the multiple ways these terms have become increasingly interactive, overlapping, and co-constitutive in modern America. This chapter will explore by what means this has transpired, focusing on both the forms of news reporting that have succeeded in recent years as well as on the changes in the ways religion is discussed in public. In salute to its phenomenal popularity, the national American daily newspaper *USA Today* will be the documentary focus. With a circulation of nearly two million, *USA Today* competes with the *Wall Street Journal* to be the most widely circulated US paper. One of the reasons *USA Today* provides an excellent archive for the relationship between religion and celebrity in the news is its own oft-touted (and oft-satirized) synthetic style, including short articles, cheery cartoon graphics, and an intentionally “easy-to-read” rhetorical style. The paper consists of four sections: News, Money, Sports, and Life. Though Life will be the section where most stories concerning religion, celebrity, and combinations of those topics are located, there will also be instances when stories on such subjects slip into the News section, especially when market forces are at a more dramatic stake.

The abundance of celebrity news within the pages of *USA Today* signals an editorial certitude of the universal appeal of such stories. “Celebrity culture is now ubiquitous, and establishes the main scripts, presentational props, conversational codes and other source materials through which cultural relations are constructed,” Chris Rojek writes. Rojek sees ours as a culture in which celebrities have become the mythic scrim for our quotidian lives. It seems impossible to avoid celebrities, as they pervade every part of market, print, and artistic cultures. Scholars of celebrity have observed that the importance of celebrities has heightened in an inverse relationship to the importance of religious authority. Or, as Rojek writes, the circulation of celebrity has become “the milieu in which religious recognition and belonging are now enacted.”⁵

Rojek’s narrative is one that fits that of the secularization thesis in which the role of religion is described as in a process of declination through the many

philosophical, scientific, and sociological shifts of modernity. In recent years such secularization narratives have been criticized, suggesting that the word *secular* is a problematic diagnosis for the contemporary condition. Given the available anthropological, demographic, and textual evidence, there seems no lack of social forms organizing relationships to superhuman powers. It cannot be useful to say that religion has diminished or been eradicated from the range of human expression. Rather, it seems more useful to specify how religion forms itself in the modern era, especially as it is articulated outside institutionalized forms of religious ideation and practice.

Like celebrity, *religion* is a word that seems to be an encompassing whole, but it is something that actually articulates multiple things at once. A census may ask “what religion are you” and you may have a single-word answer (i.e., Hindu, atheist, Lutheran). Everyone knows, though, that it’s not so easy to decide what makes someone Hindu, and even if you could, it is even more difficult to name something neatly consistent across all “Hindu” practice. Tracking how religion has been received in the news requires a consciousness of the way it is wielded as such a consolidated concept despite whatever plurality or idiosyncrasy might be felt, seen, or practiced by those espousing it as an institutional or ideational principle. *Celebrity* and *religion* are similar words, then, insofar as they each articulate in their very invocation something iconic and singular yet represent vast cultures that are irreducible.

Examples of this may be immediately found when observing coverage of religion in the news, which often means finding synonyms for *religion* more like epithets than neutral descriptors. For instance, in the 1970s, *religion* often meant “cult.” In the 1980s, *religion* often meant “scandal.” These caricatures connect to redactions of individual personality gone awry and to the dangerous possibilities for charisma. Descriptions of the cult menace of the seventies resulted from the imagined evil underbelly of the religious leader; the scandal suspicion of eighties’ lore resulted from the perceived decadence of the same pious figure. In *USA Today* the whisper of such condemnation continues, as the isolated compound cult or the over-sexed preacher seems likely to erupt onto the headlines.⁶ *Religion* has also meant “simpleminded,” a trope of description familiar to celebrity coverage. “Celebrities have long had an affinity for mystical mishmash,” writes one *USA Today* reporter in a 2006 article. “Shirley MacLaine, joking about her many lives, is no longer news.”⁷ It isn’t news because it’s so obviously silly that nobody needs to report it. Yet one of the ways journalists mock religious belief

is through the fame of figures like MacLaine. Rather than indict local citizens who claim to channel past lives, MacLaine is introduced in part to articulate a critique of faith. Like the adulterous pastor or the megalomaniacal minister, the free-spirited celebrity stands in for a broader secular suspicion of the power claimed by religious authority.

News reporters offer their own rationale for the conjunctions of religion and celebrity that they introduce time and again:

The relationship between celebrities and religion can be mutually beneficial. “Religious groups clearly feel having a celebrity endorsement helps give pizzazz and credibility, just like any product that benefits from a celebrity endorsement,” says Steve Waldman, editor of beliefnet.com, a multi-faith and spiritual web site.⁸

According to this description, it is helpful for religions to have a celebrity involved. But is it helpful for the celebrity to be religious? “It hurts celebrities,” says the media image consultant Michael Sands. “Celebrities should maintain separation of church and state. These people are not Billy Graham.”⁹ This language from *USA Today* offers many of the reasons that religion and celebrity saturate the news in frequent combinations. Celebrities present glamour (that pizzazz) and familiarity (that credibility). But they also present a test of what we want to be sacred (like Billy Graham) and what we want to be profane. Like “church and state,” it seems celebrities should be kept from religion. Yet they cannot be so controlled. Celebrities dramatize basic conceits about proper religion simply by participating in religions themselves, and by provoking religious responses from their fans. Just as religious groups benefit from religious celebrity, so do newspapers benefit from religious celebrity and celebrity religion.¹⁰

In media reports about celebrities and religion, it is important to note that the reportage itself is rarely centrally motivated by religious exploration. Almost always, the news reporting that ties these two categories together arrives at religion through some form of celebrity promotion in which the celebrity seeks to connect the journalist, reader, and consumer to his or her new film, CD, or project. That religion appears therefore in a form of press release to the ultimate advantage of the star’s publicity and market circulation should not be overlooked. This genre of journalism invites the celebrity to open up, intimating that this is no mere product plug, but rather earnest disclosure. Hence, the consumer becomes complicit in a cycle of commodity, gossip, and detective work. “The game itself is the

source of pleasure, as players scrutinize celebrity appearances and entertainment magazines, sharing their knowledge with one another as they peel away the never-ending layers of the proverbial onion,” write David Croteau and William Hoynes.¹¹ The cycle begets itself, manifesting more products to satisfy the desire that cannot be sated, since the unpeeling is simultaneous with obfuscation. Just as you think you begin to know the celebrity, he or she must disappear again into their mystery to propel your desire to know them. To maintain celebrity, the celebrity must be known as both accessible and untouchable.

Such subjects emerge in certain rote modes. First, religion may be a subject *within* celebrity productions. Religion may then be mentioned in reviews of films or books, such as a review of a PBS documentary on James Baldwin, or a profile of the outsider artist (and evangelical preacher) Howard Finster, whose art gained prominence through use on Talking Heads and R.E.M. album covers.¹² Second, religion may be a devotion or identity *of* celebrities. Athlete profiles, like those of the Olympic medalist Carl Lewis, the University of Utah quarterback Scott Mitchell, and the Houston Rockets center Hakeem Olajuwon, often include descriptions of the motivational power of faith.¹³ One might even claim that there are some celebrity *religions*, chief among them being the Church of Scientology (SCI). Few subjects appear as unrelentingly connected to celebrity as SCI, as illustrated by *USA Today* headlines like “Cruising with Scientology,” “Celebrities Celebrate Scientology,” “Scientology’s Stars,” “Celebrities Denounce Anti-Scientology Stand,” and “Church: A Hold over Travolta?”¹⁴ More than any other religion in contemporary America, SCI carries forward the specter of cult accusation, a looming indictment that invites its allies to return to the media for its defense, thus reigniting its accusation through its endless disavowal.

Life-cycle rituals connect celebrity with religion in a different mode of submission and personalization. Whether it is Mick Jagger defending the legitimacy of his Bali union to Jerry Hall (December 4, 1990), celebrities seeking to design remarriage rituals (June 21, 1991), Scientology conducting rituals for baby delivery (the birth of Jett Travolta Preston, reported on April 14, 1992), or celebrities going to midnight masses (December 15, 1993), *USA Today* tracks these events with an eye to the ritual needs of the famous. Even if burials at sea or expensive christening gowns are not accessible for the common reader, they are possible facets of his or her life, thus linking him or her to the ritualism, however excessive, of the reported celebrity. It isn’t just you who are humbled by doctrine; the icon, too, must supplicate.¹⁵

Third, and finally, religion emerges as a diagnosis *for* celebrity consumption itself. In *USA Today*, this appears most frequently in updates about Elvis Presley, his estate, and his continuing celebration as an icon producing relics and worshipful adherents.¹⁶

Distinguishing these three different forms of intersection between religion and celebrity may suggest a neat and tidy usage of those terms in *USA Today* or the broader culture. This is certainly not the case. Perhaps no celebrity appears more often in conjunction with the term *religion* than Madonna, who seems to partake of every modal relating to that term, displaying the constant amalgamations and shifts of religion and celebrity even within one subject. There is religion in her productions, there are religions in which she is involved, and her celebrity itself forms its own kind of devotion for her fans. Madonna may mark an arc of transitions that celebrity and religion have taken together over the last thirty years, and so she will reappear in this chapter as a metonym for religious invocation, personal piety, and object of communal adulation.

Occluded in the forthcoming treatment will be the ways religions themselves deploy the language of celebrity in a positive and negative manner. For instance, the Church of Scientology publishes *Celebrity* magazine, while the Amish decry tabloids altogether. Likewise, I will not focus on celebrities *in* religions, such as the evangelists Billy Graham or Rick Warren. This is due to the fact that such subjects scarcely appear in *USA Today*, underlining the emphasis in that publication on celebrities within ostensibly secular media.¹⁷ Religions appear as fads (i.e., Tibetan Buddhism) and as nemeses of certain subjects (i.e., Sinéad O'Connor and the pope).¹⁸ But what transfixes this research is the way that entertainment news deploys religious idiom to express something inexpressibly potent in its subject and to translate democratic moral agency in an increasingly privatized corporate media structure.

INFOTAINMENT AND CELEBRIFICATION

Infotainment is a hybrid term, a neologism that emerged in the late 1980s to refer to a specific genre of news as well as an overarching shift in the content of news. Specifically, it refers to a genre of news reporting in which the reporters themselves must reflect on celebrity performances and in which those reporters, now cast also as entertainers, provide information about

other entertainers.¹⁹ More broadly, though, the invocation of *infotainment* is a category of critique, speaking to the changing patterns of ownership, structuring, and information distribution among current affairs programs and publications. In a similar lexical tone, the terms *militainment*, *charitainment*, and *politainment* have emerged in the last ten years to diagnose an analogous shift to portrayals of war (i.e., the Iraq War), charity fund-raising (like the 9/11 telethon), and political candidacy (such as Sarah Palin's) as formatted to serve an aesthetic more coordinated with the history of entertainment cultures than those of journalism. It would be wrong to imagine that entertainment and such ventures had been in some easy binary, that prior to this particular moment wars weren't drawn as dramas (see, for example, World War II newsreel footage), that fund-raising wasn't made fun (see charity balls), or that politics wasn't seeking sound-bite legibility (see Theodore Roosevelt). But media scholars consistently draw our attention to the media proliferation and consolidation over the last twenty years, empirical shifts that have created a different market culture for the news.

The proliferation of news outlets has led to increasing competition for audiences. "As television news has been commercialized, the need to make it entertaining has become a crucial priority for broadcasters, as they are forced to borrow and adapt characteristics from entertainment genres and modes of conversation that privilege an informal communicative style, with its emphasis on personalities, style, storytelling, skills and spectacles," writes Daya Thussu. There are more networks, with more options, specified to a narrower audience share. Meanwhile, this multiplicity has not meant a diversification of ownership. Rather, news networks across the United States are increasingly owned by a small number of conglomerates. Not coincidentally, these conglomerates possess as their primary investment interest the *entertainment* business; for instance, Viacom-Paramount owns CBS News, ABC News is now a part of Disney. "This shift in ownership is reflected in the type of stories—about celebrities from the world of entertainment, for example, that often get prominence on news, thus strengthening corporate synergies," Thussu concludes.²⁰

Despite its origins in an elaborate corporatism, infotainment articulates itself as a populism designed—to borrow from their idiom—to tell *you* the real stories behind their stories and the real stories that help *your* life. One scholar has described this as a transition from slogans espousing the "news you need" to networks arguing they offer "news about you."²¹ From the news of the CBS anchor Edward R. Murrow (1908–1965), whose celebrated objectivity led to his eventual appointment as head of the United

States Information Agency, to the news of the Fox journalist Bill O'Reilly (1949–), who performs a doggedly subjective conservatism, this transition in modern journalism might be witnessed through any number of documentary fronts.²² However, within *USA Today*, the complexity of this opposition continues as a form of secular surprise, as if every reporter approaching a religious subject is a latter-day Murrow in an overwhelmingly O'Reilly world. Whenever a religiously intoned object appears materially successful, the editors at *USA Today* seem temporarily floored, no matter the recurrence of the success. “Holy Bestsellers! Christian Mysteries Are Hot,” headlines announced when Christian-themed mysteries by Frank Peretti became blockbusters. “Spiritual Thriller Is an Unlikely Success,” read the headline when *The Celestine Prophecy* became a best seller in 1994.²³ Christian novels or hip-hop gospel, Catholics with Sirius radio stations or Jews using books titled *Kosher Sex*—the posture of surprise evinces the secular assumptions of the staring critic.²⁴

None of this is exactly new. Journalists have had a complex relationship to the interpretation of religious materials; religious authorities have always maximized the use of available media; and the journalistic enterprise has never been without its soliciting entertainments. To imagine some neat divide between old news and new news, between the news and infotainment, requires a neat dichotomy in which the news is critical, objective, rational, and investigative, whereas infotainment is amusing, personalized, superficial, and manufactured.²⁵ Obviously, such a divide is as impossible to draw as the attempt to distinguish religion from culture. “From one perspective, this sinking of religious performance into cultural entertainment might be seen as religion’s decline into something more insipid, and thus as evidence of religion’s weakening hold on American life,” Amanda Porterfield has written. “From another perspective, however, this submergence of Christian religiosity into American culture, and its seepage into the land of entertainment, might be said to lend strength and vibrancy to American life.”²⁶ Historians of religion wobble on a pivot of indecision as to which perspective possesses more archival credence. What is clear is that the news participates in a formation of religion that shifts our definition of what right, safe, and democratic religion is.

The medium of infotainment has increasingly shaped the message of religion in modern American society. Celebrities become the key characters in these unfolding changes. Chris Rojek describes *celebrification* as the increased tendency to imagine every social encounter through the filter of media and its emphases on charisma, beauty, and fame. Thinking about the

representation of religion among celebrities in the news is to think, then, about how religion itself becomes formatted to such media standards. Insofar as celebrities “*humanize* desire,” observing celebrification cannot be distinct from observing patterns in the history of religion, in which the effort to mediate human desire and social possibility has been a central feature.²⁷ This is not to say that the religions of celebrities become the religions of ordinary Americans. Rather, it is to say that infotainment regards religion as not merely a usable trope for celebrification but also the stakes for its perpetuation. In the space remaining, a short history of the emergence of infotainment reportage and its corollary celebrification will be offered to illustrate the speed of these changes and the central characters through which the drama of celebrity religion has been played.

RELIGION AND CELEBRITY, 1989–96

The end of the Cold War left a vacuum in the news. For nearly a half century, the Manichean terms of Cold War conflict held rapt a viewing audience uncertain of the outcome. Would *they* win, or would *we*? Its conclusion required a new framing of nemeses. Perhaps an enemy could be named again in and through religious authority. In the same year that inaugurated the quick close to the Cold War spectacle, a music video circulated that would not only begin a new stage in a single artist’s celebrity but also become a signifier for the sort of way religion might solve a certain narrative problem. The success of Madonna as an international pop star cannot be disconnected from the religious history she created through her relationship with a series of religious authorities—Catholic, Hindu, and Jewish—whom she lashed out at with her ostensible profanations. That these contestations did not take place through ecclesiastical courts but in the entertainment pages shows how religion became a usable post-Cold War enemy, and also how by diminishing institutional authority, it encouraged the ascent of new forms of moral leadership.

Released in February 1989 by Sire Records, “Like a Prayer” was the first single from Madonna’s fourth album by the same title. The single would go on to be one of Madonna’s most successful and, for many, marked the emergence of her artistry from the shallow waters of eighties pop. Yet it is the video that drew the most vitriol. In it, Madonna witnesses the murder of a white girl by white men. When a black man is arrested for the crime, she

tries to intervene, but then is only accused herself. The crux of the controversy emerges next, as Madonna flees to a church for safety; there she prays to a stature of Saint Martin de Porres. In her worshipful state, she kisses him. He weeps and comes to life. The climax of the video includes Madonna testifying to free the falsely accused and dancing amid a black gospel choir. Interspersed in the video are scenes of a cross burning and of Madonna developing a stigmata.

USA Today seized on the potent combination of sensuality and Catholic iconoclasm as a subject newsworthy for the latter and entertaining for the former. “Madonna’s new ‘Like a Prayer’ video, a passion play melding sex and religion, delivers its moral message through an erotic medium,” writes a reporter. “The video is open to interpretation, but Madonna—who was raised a Catholic—says her intentions were pure.” The reporter, Edna Gunderson, seeks to design a story in which anyone against the video must themselves be immoral. Madonna says she meant well, and the message of justice and racial redemption in the video fit certain liberal politics. It may bother some, but the article suggests nobody can stop something this popular. “Contrary to recent reports,” it concludes, “‘Like a Prayer’ will air in Italy, despite the protests of Catholic groups.”²⁸ The reportage moved from the Life to the News section when religious authorities—and not, it turned out, Catholic ones—threatened the economy of a Fortune 500 company, Pepsi, who had been using Madonna in an ad campaign. When Rev. Donald Wildmon of the American Family Association called for a Pepsi boycott, he did so because, he said, Madonna was “ridiculing Christianity.” Wildmon was identified by *USA Today* as the man “who also organized boycotts of the movie *The Last Temptation of Christ*.” In the necessary battle formats for infotainment reportage, *USA Today* cast Wildmon as the threat to values while casting Madonna as upholding values. The article on the boycott gives Pepsi’s representative Tod MacKenzie the last defensive word. “Why isn’t [Wildmon] going after the video?” MacKenzie asks. “Why has he targeted really an innocent, wholesome commercial people have responded favorably to?”²⁹

Why, asks MacKenzie, is Wildmon focusing on a wholesome commercial when there is a disturbing music video out there? Wildmon is cast as disconnected from the genre codes of consumer capitalism, as someone too tied to old institutions and ideas to participate productively in the political now. For Madonna, the medium of her productions insulates her from such old-fashioned final judgment by religious leaders. She isn’t trying to serve *them*, she winks to her audience. She is just trying to serve *you*. As she

does her pop star job, she will invariably incite formal religious replies to her creative religious statements precisely because what *we* want and what *they* want are no longer the same thing. In another story placed on the *USA Today* front page, rabbis accused her in 1991 of insulting Jews in certain versions of “Justify My Love” when she reads from Revelation 2:9.³⁰ Reports on such encounters between Madonna and religious authority emphasized her irrepressible religious individualism and constitutional artistic freedom as the presumed values of the public to whom *USA Today* reports. Madonna stands in for all of us who may not agree with her positions but believe she has the right to have them, to express herself however she pleases.³¹ “True to her taboo-smashing instincts, Madonna turns sexual and religious conventions inside out better to use English, often fusing the two to heighten discomfort,” explains a review of her *Blond Ambition Tour*. “To the eastern strains of a slowed *Like a Virgin*, she simulates sex on a velvet-draped bed, then cries, ‘God?’ In the presence of a priest, she partially disrobes and smashes a crucifix to the ground.”³² The description offers up the sacred to be smashed by Madonna’s profane usage of it; yet, it also enchants Madonna in her particular celebrity as the brazen truth-teller, the unstopably free actor.

Just as Madonna seemed in her productions intrigued by the commodity her profanations might make, so did *USA Today* seem intrigued by the inferred contrast between profane celebrity and sacred authority, like when Michael Jackson was kept away from the Wailing Wall. *USA Today* reporter Jack Kelley frames the Orthodox Jewish rejection of Jackson as ultimately futile in the face of the eighty thousand fans that filled one of his two sold-out Israeli concerts. The article concludes on these two notes:

“Nobody can excite people like M.J.,” says Tel Aviv University student David Eizenstadt. “Not Rabin, Peres or Arafat. Michael’s so electrifying. We think he may even be the Messiah.”

Jackson, 35, has been accused of molesting a 13-year-old boy, a charge he denies.³³

The article begins with the minor matter of one man’s approach to, and rejection from, a sacred site. It finds a way to explode the smallness of this transgression into an incident highlighting not the power of the rabbis but the power of the people. The people here are manifest in two senses: first, the public that chooses Jackson over political leaders; second, the public that makes up the juridical segment is also his potential judgment and downfall.

Although this era includes the emergence of megachurches as a news story as well as the rise of Tibetan Buddhism as a popular celebrity practice, it is the celebration of celebrity iconoclasm that distinguishes this media moment.³⁴

RELIGIOUS CELEBRITY, 1997–2003

Midway through the Clinton two-term presidency, many of the established features of celebrity coverage in the news remained the same, and Madonna could still be seen as embodying all of them. There was still talk of Madonna stirring trouble when she wore Hindu facial markings at the MTV Video Music Awards, and there was still the translation of new religions through celebrity support of them. Madonna's turn to Kabbalah inspired articles emphasizing her new spiritual enthusiasms as well as the faddish success of red bracelets sold through her Kabbalah center.³⁵ Yet the tone of this reportage was not defamatory. It was, increasingly, correlating celebrity spiritual wellness with a broader social turn to health and redemption through individual pursuit. Here again Madonna took the lead, declared by one agency as a positive force for sex education, and declared by herself as on a new trajectory: "I've found a way of life I'd like to share. Despite the illusions I've been a slave to all my life, I feel a tremendous amount of hope for a life of fulfillment and happiness."³⁶ Such a sense of hope pervaded accounts of the good role religion played in the life of certain hip-hop stars, like Mase, or the raunchy comedienne Roseanne, or the activist actor Jane Fonda.³⁷ If once the fourth estate looked upon religion with cynicism, it now began to name it as a force for transformation.

This spiritualization of celebrity was always a mutual process, with celebrities and entertainment reporters functioning in a complex dialectic of terms and tones. The late nineties may be seen as some sort of turning point in the history of religion in news reporting, if only because it began to seem requisite to the identification of the subject itself. Was this because a liberal evangelical occupied the White House, legitimating a brand of religious authoritarianism as properly rational and democratic? Or was it because that same leader had so publicly collapsed in a squalid story of failed spirit? Reportage on Robert Duvall's acting and directing in *The Apostle* (1998) could not seem to avoid invoking evangelicalism as a format for grappling with these immediate political dilemmas.³⁸ After portraying in that film a char-

ismatic preacher wrestling with the legacies of infidelity, Duvall visited the White House for a screening in the midst of a strangely analogous trauma. On the verge of the millennium, there were no obvious solutions to what ailed the nation. The economy was booming, and the media was exploding. Why, then, were individuals still collapsing under the weight of individual struggle?

It is perhaps no surprise that this era would be branded in its spiritualization by the talk show host Oprah Winfrey (1954–). Unlike her original talk show competitors, Oprah's show seemed always to be bent on a higher power. This became an explicit program change in the mid-1990s. When Oprah went to Amarillo, Texas, to testify in her defense against the cattlemen who were suing her for defaming the beef industry, she was asked a series of questions meant to imply that she had sensationalized the news. She explained later that this experience made her realize she must become a tool for good in the world. Her spiritual revelation was converted into a corporate makeover in which her show became "Change Your Life TV." Initial responses to her programming change were largely negative, with some suggesting that her move to Change Your Life TV was "too evangelical." At the time, she replied, "It's a shame that we've evolved into the kind of society where evangelical is considered negative. I have come to believe that we are all, or at least most of us, searching for the assurance that good exists in our world, even in the midst of evil and evil abuse."³⁹

For religious historians, Oprah's disavowal of critics is a familiar maneuver. Religious leaders often suggest that the words you use to insult them are precisely the terms of their power. Rather than disagree with naysayers, Oprah merely asks why you aren't on board. Aren't we all worried about evil? Don't we all want the good? In an era in which religion was increasingly portrayed as either idiotic or extremist, Oprah plotted a middle way in which her viewers could be both believers and critics, both consumers and missionaries. She criticized religious institutions on her show, but she encouraged spiritual practices. She encouraged everyone to buy her favorite things but also to offer the gift of who they are to the world. Later *USA Today* reportage would cover Winfrey's subsequent Live Your Best Life touring workshops. "The workshop's biggest surprise, however, was the openness with which Winfrey talked about her spiritual beliefs," the reporter describes, continuing:

She ends the show on a guided meditation—lights are lowered; melodic, instrumental music plays, and Oprah instructs the audience to close

their eyes, breathe deeply and open their souls as she recites her own personal mantra asking for guidance.

Something the audience already feels it has received from Winfrey.⁴⁰

Her spiritualization organized the expansion of her corporate empire as it also stood in for the spiritualization of a public seeking no longer to be embarrassed by its hunger for spiritualization. Winfrey enshrines an American sensibility of choice and personalism as the form of acceptable religious ideation for the marketplace.

Winfrey formed a public counter to spiritual seekers who wanted religion without religion, and spirituality without restriction in a world where some religious authorities still lingered.⁴¹ In 1999, *USA Today* narrated a situation where a Lebanese pop star was the subject of attack for “Muslim fundamentalists” who “decreed she should be put to death for reportedly naming her pet dog after the prophet Mohammed.” Described by *USA Today* as a young Christian woman, Najwa Karam was known as one of the most popular singers in the Arab world. Now, because rumor suggested she had given her dog the Prophet’s name, she was no longer safe. “In Qatar, Q-Tel, which controls the country’s television, said it would stop playing her music,” wrote Matthew Kalman, explaining that in Jordan and Lebanon, fundamentalist factions said she should be killed.⁴² As the United States entered a war against terrorists, it was in no small way fighting to protect the right for Karam to live in an Oprah sort of world, a world where she might name her dogs whatever she likes, be good through whatever rites she chooses, and sing for whoever will listen.⁴³

A MISSION EMERGES, 2004–10

The Cold War concluded, and in its wake new ethnic and religious conflicts emerged around the world, events that ranged from minor skirmishes to major global conflicts. In the United States, the role of the celebrity seemed only to rise. In its democratization of fame, reality television programming expanded the base numbers of potential celebrities. And with twenty-four-hour news coverage including paparazzi outfits focused solely on tracking celebrity movements, cognizance of celebrity lifestyles became increasingly detailed and pervasive. Now not only did we know what diamonds a starlet wore, but also the toilet paper she bought. The reality star and the stalked ce-

lebrity suggested an increasingly quotidian landscape of celebrity lifestyle. However, the programs and productions of celebrities only seemed to become more elaborate in scope and ambition. At the beginning of this chapter, celebrities were described as needing to be accessible and unknowable. To counter the popularization of celebrity access, there seemed to be an increase in talk of Armageddon and masculine crisis.

In 2004, Mel Gibson released *The Passion of the Christ*, a film that depicts the passion play in vivid, real-time detail. With an explicitly religious subject, and dialogue entirely reconstructed in Aramaic, Latin, and Hebrew with vernacular subtitles, the film seemed destined, by all market suppositions, to be a spectacular indulgence and an inevitable flop.⁴⁴ “After mainstream Hollywood studios and distributors spurned *The Passion of the Christ* because some thought it was too violent and included anti-Semitic themes, Gibson, who was forced to finance the film on his own, began discussing his fundamentalist views on Catholicism,” reported one *USA Today* journalist. “The movie would end up raking in more than \$370 million in the USA alone, the most successful R-rated film ever.”⁴⁵ Gibson claimed, time and again, that the production of this film was a testimony of his faith, a gift to the religion that had given him all that he had. Indeed, as *USA Today* would track, the passion play of Christ offered a compensatory articulation for a star who could not control his sins. Gibson offered *The Passion*, and he would also offer his mug shot to several arrests for drunken, disorderly, and violent behavior. Like the much-reported breakdown of the Scientologist Tom Cruise, Gibson’s fall only established the premises for his eventual resurrection.

Gibson’s passionate film offering—and his struggle to maintain its extreme moral aspirations—offers a fitting emblem for the opening years of the twenty-first century. For whatever spiritual sustenance was sought in Oprah Winfrey’s spiritual expansion transformed into an unabashed certitude that things had to change or else things would end. This is how “Change you can believe in” could become such a powerful slogan of political promotion during the 2008 election. In that year, *USA Today* reported that there was, perhaps, a “theological underpinning” to the enthusiasm espoused by Obama voters.⁴⁶ Obama could be interpreted as a climax to a patterned emergence of entertainment leaders as unequivocally confident in their abilities to assist, to serve, and to save. His resume was his personhood: his life story, his racial amalgamation, and his embodiment of the American Dream.

Just as politics seemed increasingly reflective of celebrity formats, so did celebrities seem increasingly complicit in politics. Two months before Elizabeth Taylor died, the actor George Clooney appeared on the cover of

Newsweek. Clooney was not promoting a film or television show. Instead, he was promoting an international problem, and himself as a missionary seeking to resolve it on our behalf. While the cover announces, “Mr. Clooney, the President Is on Line 1,” the article headlines with more declarative ascription, calling Clooney “A 21st Century Statesman.” “In January, Clooney was back in South Sudan,” we learn, “directing his star power toward helping its people peacefully achieve independence from the northern government of Khartoum after two decades of civil war.” No mention of religion is made in the article—no spiritual awakening seems to have brought Clooney here. Instead, the article infers that Clooney possesses a basic decency inherited from his father. Indeed, it was the influence of his father that led Clooney to cowrite and direct *Good Night, and Good Luck* (2005), a film depiction of Edward R. Murrow’s famed facedown of US senator Eugene McCarthy. *Newsweek* consistently presents Clooney as a form of responsible rationalism of a pre-infotainment age. He is the celebrity who wields his celebrity to the good beyond celebrity: “In this new environment—fueled by social networking—fame is a potent commodity that can have more influence on public debate than many elected officials and even some nation-states.”⁴⁷

As the political necessity of celebrity and the celebrity circulation in politics continue to expand, it will be useful to recall that such missionary projects do not merely have their origin in ideologies of secular reason. The power of celebrity to expand and contract, to fit the image of the given moment, and to belong in the crevice of every crisis is not because that image is denuded of meaningful religious authority. It is precisely because celebrities possess such spectral power that they may direct attention to their causes. “As a rock star, I have two instincts,” said Bono, the lead singer for U2. “I want to have fun, and I want to change the world. I have a chance to do both.”⁴⁸ Speaking this way, and developing interventionist programs commensurate with this speech, is what transports celebrities from the Life pages to the News pages. Deciding their individual spiritual ambitions deserve missionary effort, celebrities become not merely complicit with neoliberal power, but activist agents of geopolitical domination.