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# Oprah Finds Reasons to Believe

Her seven-night miniseries may highlight similarities between religions, but it also seeks to render the complexities of various faiths honestly.



Greg Allen / Invision / AP

**JONATHAN MERRITT** | **OCT 18, 2015** | **POLITICS**

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“We are more alike, my friend, than we are unlike,” the late Maya Angelou once wrote. And according to Oprah Winfrey, this sentiment is at the heart of *Belief*, a television series exploring faith and spirituality around the world that will air seven consecutive nights on OWN, from October 18 to 24, at 8 p.m. ET.

Such an endeavor should thrill hand-holding interfaith activists who think all faiths are equally valid paths up a common mountain. But what about those who think their religion is the *one and only* true path up God’s mountain? Exclusivist believers tend to be allergic to anything with a pluralistic message that seems to erase the lines of difference between their religion and others. They will naturally be skeptical of this series, especially given the squishy spirituality for which Oprah is famous.

But *Belief* allows the message and core tenets of every religion to shine through in a way that honors them while remaining honest. Even the most exclusivist believers will find something to love in this epic spiritual series. If they tune in, they will not be turned off.

The breathtaking aesthetics of *Belief* are reason enough to watch. Oprah spent a heap of cash over three years to produce a series packed with stunning cinematography and effects and a soaring score. The package is reminiscent of BBC’s epic “Planet Earth,” a similarity that Winfrey has [admitted](#) was intentional. Oprah’s celebrity status and the big-budget quality she was able to provide make for a powerful combination.

But the billionaire media mogul is both *Belief*’s greatest asset and its highest hurdle. She was widely admired during her talk show’s heyday, but things shifted among her religious fans when she began espousing an eclectic

spirituality. She claimed that there are “[millions of ways](#)” to get to God and endorsed New Age gurus like Deepak Chopra and Eckhart Tolle.

Her most devout viewers were not pleased. A writer at the conservative Christian journal *First Things* called her “[a destructive cultural force](#).” Mike Bickle, leader of The International House of Prayer, a national evangelical group, said she was a forerunner of [the Antichrist](#). Her difficult-to-nail-down theology led *Christianity Today* to [call](#) her “a postmodern priestess—an icon of church-free spirituality.”

These faithful will be apprehensive about a miniseries with Oprah’s backing, and there's plenty in the series for her critics to scoff at. Her millions-of-ways approach to faith comes through—and more than once. The debut episode depicts a birth to highlight that “every single one of us enters through the same universal experience” before asking why we are here and whether “there is a divine order to the mystery of our lives.” In the introduction to episode two, Oprah says, “Our planet is home to countless religions, and nearly every one of those faiths asks us to love—love your God, your family, your neighbor.” It's a muffled but constant drumbeat.

The saving grace may be that nods to the similarities between religions are scattered and subtle. “Belief” is mostly free of potentially divisive content. Instead, the series honors each religious tradition by showcasing its most prominent beliefs and most precious practices. And the depictions are fair and undiluted.

Najeeba Syeed-Miller, an assistant professor of interreligious education at the Claremont School of Theology, screened the series last month and was pleased by the two segments on Islam.

“There is an inherently pluralistic message, however, I do not think the series homogenizes the narratives of different traditions. This was a fear of mine,”

she says. “This is avoided because the subjects are shown embedded in their context and articulate in their own deep connection to their individual traditions.”

As an evangelical Protestant, I took particular note of the segments dealing with my religious tradition. They were theologically accurate and utilized language familiar to us. One segment focused on a teenage girl who was seeking emotional healing from God after having been raped.

“Evangelicals believe faith in God allows them to see their burdens with a new perspective,” Oprah says. “And when they exchange their earthly suffering for a life of following Christ, their lives can be made new.”

The segment explains that, for evangelicals, “life is built around a close, personal relationship with God.” A scene depicting a baptism service states, “for evangelicals, baptism illustrates a death to sin and new life in Christ—an outward display of an internal transformation.”

The second episode follows Larissa Murphy, a Christian woman in Pennsylvania who married her college sweetheart even after he suffered a physically debilitating brain injury. In the segment, “Christian faith, a daily commitment to Christ” is pictured as the heart of their marriage. Larissa is shown reading Bible passages from the book of Proverbs to her husband and states, “Jesus gave us an example of love when he died for us.”

“As Christians, Ian and Larissa believe that Jesus teaches them how to live with compassion and love unconditionally,” Oprah explains. “Through his broken body on the cross and his resurrection, they have hope beyond the troubles of this world and the promise of eternal life.”

This careful handling should please evangelicals—and, in fact, it already has. In September, Oprah screened the series before a gathering of religious

leaders, and the evangelical Christians in attendance walked away happy. Leith Anderson, the president of the National Association of Evangelicals, [called](#) the series' stories "interesting and fascinating and appealing." He wasn't the only one.

Gabriel Salguero, the president of the National Latino Evangelical Coalition, was pleased that the episodes "positively highlighted Gospel messages of love, marriage, forgiveness, redemption, healing and commitment." He thinks that others within his religious tribe would benefit from the series.

"When asked if Christians should watch 'Belief,' my answer is, 'yes,'" Salguero says. "I am not a universalist. I hold unequivocally that Christ is the one and only savior, but that does not mean I cannot engage in listening to stories from other faiths while holding firmly to my own conviction."

Lynne Hybels, a co-founder of Willowcreek Community Church, was pleased that "each faith system is presented respectfully" but she offered another reason that people of all faiths should tune in: to gain an accurate view of other faiths.

"It's pretty hard to love those we don't even know, yet many American Christians have little understanding other faiths," said Hybels. "Oprah's *Belief* series offers an introduction to many of the world's religions, not by focusing on sensationalized accounts of extremists, but by telling the stories of sincere seekers."

Often, the only information believers receive about other faiths comes from religious leaders within their own tradition. This information may be riddled with myths, or border on propaganda. *Belief* provides a stage on which each religion can make its best case and be considered on its own merits.

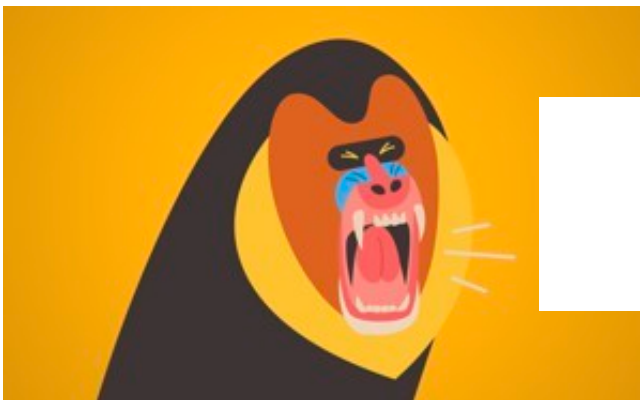
The faithful often assume that hearing from other religions somehow puts

their own faith at risk. But nothing could be further from the truth. Being exposed to other faiths doesn't require accepting their beliefs or compromising your own. Instead, it fosters understanding, respect, and more informed dialogue. It can even strengthen one's own convictions, reminding them of why they have made their religious commitments to begin with. As Hybels said, she "was challenged by these stories to be a more devout Christian myself." If you believe your faith has the most compelling message, there is no reason to fear your "good news" being heard alongside others.

As a result, even Muslims—who believe "there is no God but Allah"—and evangelical Christians—who believe that "no one can come to [God] the Father except through [Jesus]"—can get behind it. Critics looking for reasons to gripe will find them. But on balance, *Belief* is a beautifully shot and educational series that will appeal to believers of any faith or none at all. It should not be missed. Believe me.

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#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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