

Oprah's *Belief* series, a seven-day exploration of faith

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October 14, 2015

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(RNS) Reshma Thakkar was raised Hindu and felt guilty about questioning her faith.

So in 2013 the information technology consultant traveled to India's Kumbh Mela festival to better understand herself as a Hindu.

It was a trek made by 30 million other pilgrims—and a crew of Oprah Winfrey's new *Belief* series.

Thakkar's is among 33 stories of faith—and no faith—told in the series as Christians, Jews, Muslims, and people of other traditions travel on personal paths of self-discovery, overcoming hate, grief and loss and celebrating love and friendship. The seven-part series premieres Sunday (October 18) at 8 p.m. Eastern on OWN, the Oprah Winfrey Network, and continues for six consecutive nights.

Thakkar said a family of pilgrims she met by the Ganges River “helped me understand it was OK to be questioning.”

They taught her, “Be on the journey and don't be so focused on getting to a certain destination or a certain point,” she said.

That key insight is part of the reason Winfrey undertook the project.

“When I set out to create *Belief* I wanted to entertain, enlighten, and encourage people to explore their own faith or spiritual practices more deeply,” she said. “I wanted the series to be a tool to help connect people. I have always known that my calling was to share ideas through storytelling that reflects the human spirit and allows people to see themselves reflected in the stories of others.”

Executive producer David Shadrack Smith said Winfrey was “very hands-on from start to finish,” focusing the themes, choosing people who would be featured and

narrating the series as it explored individual searches for answers to universal questions: Who am I? Why am I here? What does this all mean?

“That really suffuses every story throughout the whole series,” Smith said.

The production team condensed more than 800 hours of footage into seven one-hour episodes that feature, among other rituals, a boy preparing for his bar mitzvah in Budapest, Hungary, where a tiny population of Jews remain, and a former professional skateboarder from Northern California taking part in the hajj, a Muslim pilgrimage to Mecca, Saudi Arabia.

The series also features lesser-known traditions, such as an Aborigine teaching his grandson ancient songs that connect them to their Australian ancestors, and a South Pacific religious ritual in which men—including a young boy—make a dangerous dive off a high tower of bark and vines in hopes of a successful annual harvest.

The series, co-produced by Harpo Studios and part2 pictures, also includes those who don't embrace a particular faith, from an atheist climber who finds meaning as he mounts a desert cliff in Utah without harnesses or ropes to a father and daughter who take part in Nevada's Burning Man festival.

The new series follows the trajectory of Winfrey's career, which has included touring with former evangelical pastor Rob Bell and interviewing Pakistan activist Malala Yousafzai.

“Her passion has always been for faith stories and for the spirit, in the sense of spirit that animates people's journeys,” said Marcia Z. Nelson, author of *The Gospel According to Oprah*.

Winfrey invited more than 100 faith and spiritual leaders to a September screening in Santa Barbara, California, followed by dinner at her house in nearby Montecito.

National Association of Evangelicals president Leith Anderson, who attended the event, said the series presents evangelicals fairly.

“Theologically, I don't agree with these other religions and I'm not going to advocate for them,” he said. “But in terms of the stories being told, they are really interesting and fascinating and appealing.”

Imam Mohamed Magid, president emeritus of the Islamic Society of North America, who also attended the California gathering, said the story of a pastor and imam in Nigeria who were once enemies and now express love for each other showed “how people can resolve issues by using religion as a source of solution, not only the cause of the problem.”

Members of a “Belief team” have been meeting on biweekly conference calls to plan more than 600 watch parties, screenings and other events throughout next week. Union Theological Seminary has been developing a related discussion guide.

The project also has prompted off-screen stories of belief by its producers.

Winfrey, in a series of short videos posted online, speaks of her spiritual practice.

“I’ve reached a point in my life where I actually pay attention to every breath and my spiritual practice is that I awaken and the first thought is ‘thank you,’” she said.

Producers and early viewers said the series could spark not only personal discovery but greater interest in interfaith dialogue.

Magid said he’s already told Winfrey he would like to introduce it abroad.

“I talked to her about the importance of taking this on the road and creating dialogue and religious literacy about it,” he said. “I’m willing to help screen it in Saudi, in Qatar, in Malaysia, in Africa.”