

Oprah interview stirs debate: What is an atheist?

by [Kimberly Winston](#)

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(RNS) What was supposed to be a touchy-feely, one-on-one interview by Oprah Winfrey with long-distance swimmer Diana Nyad has morphed into a broader, sometimes angry exchange about what it means to be an atheist.

Earlier this month (Oct. 13) Winfrey, 59, hosted Nyad on “Super Soul Sunday,” her weekly talk program on cable’s Oprah Winfrey Network. Nyad, 64, recently completed a 53-hour solo swim from Cuba to Florida.

During the hourlong segment, Nyad declared herself an atheist. She then explained, “I can stand at the beach’s edge with the most devout Christian, Jew, Buddhist, go on down the line, and weep with the beauty of this universe and be moved by all of humanity. All the billions of people who have lived before us, who have loved and hurt and suffered. So to me, my definition of God is humanity and is the love of humanity.”

“Well, I don’t call you an atheist then,” Winfrey said. “I think if you believe in the awe and the wonder and the mystery, then that is what God is. That is what God is. It’s not a bearded guy in the sky.”

Nyad reiterated her lack of belief in a divine being, but the exchange upset many nonbelievers. They took to the Internet and social media to express outrage at Winfrey’s assumption that only believers can experience the transcendent or spiritual.

“As an atheist I am even more in AWE and WONDER about the Universe and Nature,” tweeted someone called “Mark Secular.” “I don’t need a god @Oprah to see

the beauty of it.”

“(I)t’s ‘difficult’ enough being an atheist in these parts,” Stacypie tweeted from Dallas. “I don’t need her defining MY spirituality for all.”

And Boston Atheists, which draws members from across New England, launched a Twitter and Facebook campaign to get Winfrey to officially apologize.

Within a day or two of the broadcast, several prominent atheist leaders and organizations issued statements expressing disappointment with Winfrey. Most saw in the talk show host’s rejection of Nyad’s atheism what polls, studies and often their own experience tell them — that atheists are among the least trusted and least liked Americans.

“Oprah ... does more to perpetuate negative attitudes toward nonbelievers than Pat Robertson or James Dobson ever could,” wrote David Niose, president of the Secular Coalition for America, on the website of Psychology Today. “Oprah, as a media tycoon and a beloved celebrity whose opinions are taken seriously by millions, has just confirmed that atheists are ‘the other,’ outsiders who just don’t belong in the in-group.”

On CNN’s Belief Blog, Chris Stedman, Harvard University’s assistant humanist chaplain, wrote, “Winfrey’s response may have been well intended. But it erased Nyad’s atheist identity and suggested something entirely untrue and, to many atheists like me, offensive: that atheists don’t experience awe and wonder.”

Others weighed in on Salon.com, Patheos.com, Skepchick and other atheist and humanist blogs. Even Fox News’ “The Five” weighed in, with co-host Eric Bolling saying, “Oprah shouldn’t have an opinion whether Nyad believes in God or not.”

Why has this struck such a deep chord? Ryan Cragun, an associate professor of sociology at the University of Tampa who studies atheists, said it may be because atheists are beginning to be more public about their lack of belief, seeing this as an opportunity to express their difference, their presence and their rights — much like the gay community has done before.

“Americans are beginning to realize that there are atheists, but they don’t really know who and what atheists are,” Cragun said. “They likely still think atheists are just crotchety old men saying, ‘Your god doesn’t exist!’ Thus, when they encounter

an actual atheist who says, 'I'm constantly amazed at the world we live in and it makes me stop and wonder all the time,' they are surprised."

Marcia Z. Nelson, author of "The Gospel According to Oprah," agreed, saying Winfrey may be exhibiting more unawareness than intolerance.

"As I see it, Oprah was being her spiritually and professionally curious self," Nelson said. "The problem atheists have is partly one of language; the God and religion people have been working on refining their descriptive languages for millennia. Oprah was actually doing atheists a favor by quizzing Nyad. Atheists need to concentrate more on expressing awe and less on taking hyperbolic offense where none is intended."