

FEATURE ARTICLE

Hugh Hewitt Is "Searching for God in America"

By Kate O'Hare, Tribune Media Services

"Is there a God? It's the question that we all ask ourselves. Ninety percent of America says yes, and 80 million Americans go to church every week. Big numbers are still voting yes. Why doesn't television reflect that?"

So asks Hugh Hewitt, an attorney, writer and co-host of Los Angeles PBS station KCET's Emmy-winning public-affairs series "Life & Times." To answer his own question, Hewitt and KCET have produced "Searching for God in America," an 8-part PBS series that airs on four consecutive Fridays, beginning July 5 (check local listings).

Each of the eight half-hour segments (two air each night) features conversations between Hewitt and eight of the most respected and provocative religious figures in the United States. They are:

Charles Colson (July 5): For more than 20 years, the convicted Watergate conspirator has headed Prison Ministries Fellowship, a non-profit organization that ministers to prisoners and their families and works for prison reform.

Rabbi Harold Kushner (July 5): "America's rabbi" is the author of "When Bad Things Happen to Good People" and "When All You've Ever Wanted Isn't Enough."

The Rev. Cecil Murray (July 12): The senior pastor of Los Angeles' First African Methodist Episcopal Church has spent almost two decades reaching out to his city.

Father Thomas Keating (July 12): Keating is the leader of the Contemplative Prayer movement, and a Trappist monk at St. Benedict's Monastery near Snowmass, Colo.

The Rev. Roberta Hestenes (July 19): Hestenes is the first female, Presbyterian president of Baptist-affiliated Eastern College, and the first woman president in the Christian College coalition — as well as the first woman to chair the relief organization World Vision.

Dr. Seyyed Hossein Nasr (July 19): The prominent Islamic scholar is the author of "The Need for a Sacred Science," and is currently the University Professor of Islamic Studies at George Washington University.

Elder Neal A. Maxwell (July 26): Maxwell is a member of the Council of the Twelve Apostles, the advisory body to the First Presidency of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (the Mormons).

His Holiness the XIV Dalai Lama (July 26): The outspoken human-rights advocate and leader-in-exile of Chinese-occupied Tibet is the head of one of the largest sects of Buddhism, one of the fastest-growing Eastern religions in the United States. He also won the Nobel Peace Prize in 1989 for his work on behalf of Tibet.

How did Hewitt and the series producers come to choose the interviewees? "In the

United States, it is true that 90 percent of our population is self-described Christian. On the other hand, the most rapidly growing church denominations are Buddhist, Islamic and Mormon. And when I looked at the statistics that would propel who we would select for this, it had to be ecumenical; it had to be widely diverse; it had to reflect the religious face of the population of the United States."

Why not include Native American beliefs? "It's just a question of, we ran out of segments. I don't know who we would back out to include Native American. I certainly hope we do a second round of these, and that that will be one. Hinduism would also be a natural for round two. But within eight, I'm very comfortable with our selection."

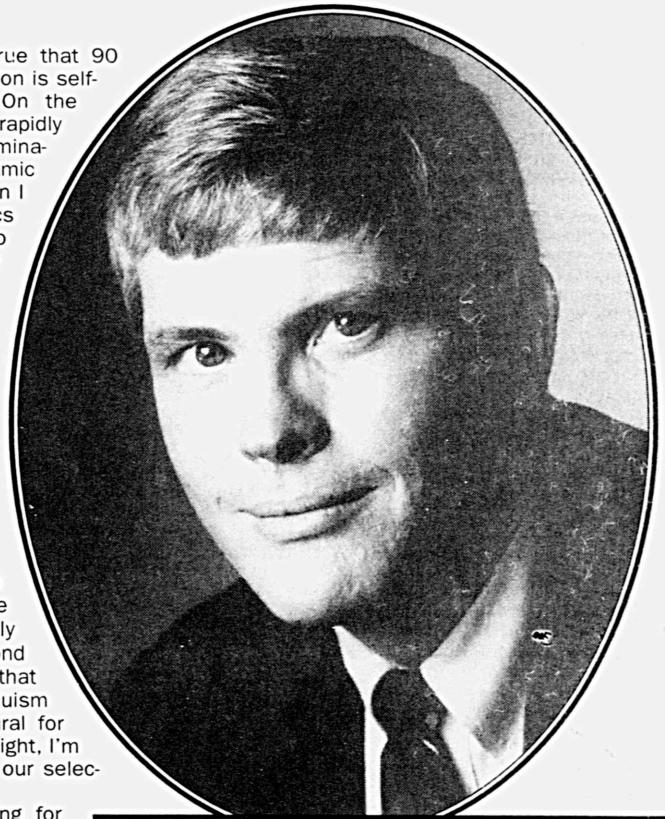
Hewitt felt "Searching for God in America" fills a niche that has long been left nearly vacant. "The sectarian television stations don't count. I look for commercial TV and PBS, and I look at the number of times they've touched on religion in the last 20 years, and it's nearly zero. And when they do, it's usually the politics of religion, the scandal. And then we follow around the Pope. Whenever the Pope shows, we'll follow him around."

"But we do not do these basic questions. As one of my friends described it, this series is a continuation of everybody's sophomore college experience."

"I kind of buy Medved's (critic Michael Medved) argument that the people that produce entertainment in this country are uncomfortable with faith, because it's tacky to talk about it. It's embarrassing, and it's perceived to be anti-intellectual, which of course it's not."

"And as a result, a huge market goes unserved that does not want to be served by TBN and '700 Club.'"

Does Hewitt expect the series will generate arguments? "I tried not to get in the way of this. It's a cultural tour, a magical mystery tour for boomers. They can go out and sample; they don't have to buy; they don't have to go anywhere near a church. It's



Hugh Hewitt serves as host of the new, four-part PBS miniseries "Searching for God in America," which begins Friday, July 5 (9-10 p.m. ET).

safe. Nobody's going to hit them with a Bible across the head or throw the Koran at them, or make them recite some dharma teachings.

"It's a safe distance for the endlessly curious. So, arguments? No. Although it may spur more than a few conversations that are intense around the country. They'll probably have a conversation about who was left out, who was included."

A former Roman Catholic who is now a Presbyterian, Hewitt did not find his own faith affected by the people he spoke to, but "I am very appreciative of different traditions and how everyone tries to get to the same God via different practices."

He also is not out to convince anyone what they should believe. "I want to have a serious conversation about these things without being drawn into sectarian rivalries. I don't want any part of that. I'm not here to declare a winner. I'm here to find out what people think."