



Religulous

Tom Roberts

Ridicule without reason

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Film title: Religulous

Director: Larry Charles

Screenplay: Bill Maher

Starring: Bill Maher

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Certificate: R (USA); 15 (UK) Contains strong language, sex references, drug use and sexualised nudity

[Image]

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Bill Maher, a well-known American comedian, satirist and religious sceptic has added this comedy-documentary to the growing number of voices challenging the rationality of religious belief. Filmed as an on-the-road journey, Maher travels across America as well as visiting Amsterdam, London, Egypt and Jerusalem. The film's title, created by combining the words 'religious' and 'ridiculous', gives a strong hint of the type of documentary this will be and provides little hope for a genuine dialogue with believers. The tone of the documentary is confirmed early on, as Maher comments, *'I certainly, definitely believe*

that religion is detrimental to the progress of humanity,' and goes on to bemoan the stupidity of people who believe *'things they know can't be true'*. He then sets out on his mission with the words, *'I have to find out, I have to try.'* This statement is not clarified, but it very soon becomes clear that he is not setting out to discover whether people have reasons for their beliefs; rather he wants to find out why people believe things that are obviously irrational and untrue.

It becomes obvious that Maher strongly doubts the historical existence of Jesus, but nonetheless has a high view of his character and teachings. One particular issue he raises is that of wealth and possessions. When standing outside the Vatican in Rome, he asks a Catholic priest if he thinks that, *'A giant palace ... is anything like what Jesus had in mind'*, to which he receives the unexpected reply that *'it is obviously at odds with Jesus's message.'*

He also looks at American 'televangelists' who preach a message of prosperity in health and wealth, if only their viewers will send them large sums of money 'in faith'. Maher interviews one of these preachers, a man called Jeremiah Cummings. During the interview, Maher comments on the quality of Cummings's clothing – a very expensive suit and lizard-skin shoes, to which Cummings replies that the congregation expect a minister to be well dressed, and that Jesus *'was not poor ... he was a well dressed man'* who wore *'fine linen'*. When Cummings remarks that *'money comes, money happens'*, Maher responds sharply that *'money happens for you, because they're giving it up to you. You're not giving it up to them!'* This shameless exploitation of people for financial gain deserves condemnation, but Maher then goes on to make a rather shocking and inappropriate link. During their interview, Cummings mentions some advice he gave to a young man who was *'going crazy over a woman'* to the point of wanting to commit suicide. Cummings says he told him to *'turn that passion to God and then see what happens'*; words that are immediately followed by footage of a car-bomb exploding somewhere in the Middle East! It is hard to see the logic in this as, although there are religiously motivated bombings in some countries, they are in no way linked to American televangelists or indeed to Christianity at all. Such underhand tactics – it was obviously done without

Cummings's permission – succeed only in undermining Maher's claim to rationality.

Early on in the film, Maher visits a 'trucker's chapel' in North Carolina, to question them about their beliefs – a rather bizarre choice for interviewing; only one incident is worth much comment. As Maher's challenges come out, one of the truckers speaks of his personal experience of coming to Christianity. He says that for his whole life he had been involved in Satanism, was a Satanist priest for six years, and his life was taken up with *'being addicted to drugs, running prostitutes and women and everything that goes with that.'* He then adds, *'I gave all that up when I got saved.'* This immediately cuts away to Bill in the car afterwards commenting, *'the guy says, "Yeah, I used to do drugs, I used to have women," and I'm thinking, "Your problem was?"'* Maher shows no appreciation for the complete turnaround this man experienced in his life because of his Christian faith; he chooses to ridicule him instead.

Maher also falls into the trap of seeking out the people with unorthodox or controversial views, rather than those who would argue for the rationality of Christianity from a historical, philosophical and moral point of view. One example is his interview with Jose Luis de Jesus Miranda, who believes that he is Jesus Christ. He apparently came to this conclusion after two angels informed him of his identity. What is odd is that although he claims to be Jesus, he denies a great deal of the teaching found in the gospels. He is shocked at the suggestion that hell is real, and claims there is no such thing as sin. This is a stark contrast to the views of the biblical Jesus, and is hardly worth devoting screen time to. Interludes such as this seem to be a result of Maher's irrepressible comedic urge taking control of the direction of his documentary.

Maher has some excellent searching questions, such as, *'Are you ever worried by things that are in Christianity that are not in the Bible?'* This is a key question for anyone looking at where the basis of the Christian faith is found: is it in the Bible, or is it based on human traditions? Maher perhaps unconsciously echoes the words of Jesus as he challenged the religious teachers of the Jews saying: *'they teach man-made ideas as commands from God'* (Matthew 15:9). However, although Maher has many good questions, he

seems to have no idea whom he should seek the answers from, often interviewing laymen or people with no expertise in the area he is asking about. For instance, he interviews Dr Francis Collins, whom Maher calls a *'brilliant, brilliant scientist'*. Collins is the Head of the Human Genome Project, and yet also an evangelical Christian – clearly an impossible idea to Maher's mind. Unfortunately, almost the entirety of the interview consists of questions on the historical reliability of the gospels, rather than the issue of whether there is an inherent conflict between science and religion. Collins is understandably left rather out of his depth trying to answer questions on historical documents, when his area of expertise is in science.

This is a recurring problem with Maher's approach – he has a wealth of important questions, but doesn't seek the right people for the answers. He repeatedly raises questions of the Bible's historical reliability, not only to Collins but also to the truckers from North Carolina. But not once does he seek out a historian, or indeed anyone with the expertise to answer these questions. There is certainly no lack of such people, and it is a disappointment to see Maher bolstering his position by presenting his difficult questions to people without the knowledge to attempt a proper answer. This allows him to get away with making nonsensical assertions such as, *'All the records we have [of Jesus' life] are gospels; gospels aren't history,'* and *'None of the gospel writers were eye-witnesses.'* There are, in fact, a great number of scholars and academics writing today who put forward strong arguments against both these statements, but Maher makes no mention of this. Another excellent question asked by Maher is *'If God is all-powerful and can do anything, why doesn't he just obliterate the devil and therefore rid the world of evil?'* Unfortunately his question is directed to a man dressed up as Jesus at the Holy Land Experience theme park in Orlando, Florida. It is things such as this which leave the impression that Maher's quest for truth is a little half-hearted and insincere.

As the documentary draws to its conclusion, Maher reveals previously unspoken venom towards religion. Echoing the sentiments of Richard Dawkins, he states with unabashed certainty that *'religion must die so that mankind can live,'* and that *'faith means making a virtue out*

of not thinking.' Maher's ominous warning that, *'the hour is getting very late to be able to indulge in having key decisions made by religious people, by irrationalists'*, begins to raise some sharp suspicions about his real motives in creating this documentary. Perhaps he has a political agenda rather than any desire for the truth?

This conclusion, interspersed with shots of soldiers in the Middle East and President Bush speaking about his belief in God, strikes a discordant tone after the irreverent interviews that precede it. Maher's ensuing declaration that, *'rational people, anti-religionists, must end their timidity, come out of the closet and assert themselves'*, reveals a somewhat frightening line of thinking: Maher apparently believes that religious people are like children playing a dangerous game that will ultimately lead to the destruction of us all. It is up to the grown-ups, the clear-thinking anti-religionists to take the reins and save us from the *'fantasy and nonsense that has spawned so much lunacy and destruction'*. He says that *'doubt is humble, and that's what man needs to be'*, but there seems to be little doubt in Maher's mind on this matter. He states *'the irony of religion is that because of its power to divert men to destructive courses, the world actually could come to an end'*. Coupled with his earlier remarks this suggests that the influence of religion is the only reason to fear that there might one day be a horrific nuclear war, or another similarly destructive event. But Maher hasn't understood what the Bible teaches about the ultimate fate of the Earth; it does not envisage a place of war and destruction, but rather a world where:

*The Lord will mediate between nations
and will settle international disputes.
They will hammer their swords into plowshares
and their spears into pruning hooks.
Nation will no longer fight against nation,
nor train for war anymore. (Isaiah 2:4)*

The Bible also teaches that the world will not be destroyed, but renewed and restored to a state of perfection. It will be a place where:

The dwelling of God is with men, and he will live with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the

old order of things has passed away. (Revelation 21:3-4)

Although Maher raises some important criticisms of religion in this documentary (primarily of Christianity, but also Islam, Judaism, and Mormonism), it is disappointing that he does not engage fully with that which he seeks to challenge. Those who are honestly investigating these issues, and those who are Christians, are likely to leave this with a feeling that we have stumbled in on something that was really little more than propaganda for half-hearted atheists, encouraging them to stand up against 'irrationality' and fight against religion in all its forms. If you are looking to engage with arguments for and against belief in God, look elsewhere as, while this is a lively and entertaining film, it doesn't deal with the questions it raises in a particularly satisfactory or enlightening way.

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