

ARTS & ENTERTAINMENT

Review: Religulous

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Contributor

The end of the world. Is such an event in store? If so, how will it come? Where will it begin? Fire or ice? Beast or rebirth? Paper or plastic? Religions often offer answers to these types of questions. The general consensus is that the end will not be the sort of fireworks show any of us would want to be at pain, plague, war, famine.

Religious traditions often depict these things sourced in God because they seem beyond human control or ability. Following the wars of the early 20th century, humans have the ability to unleash all of those horrors and more. Many religious individuals look to this end with yearning, awaiting its arrival. This is the message Bill Maher greets and departs his audience with in *Religulous*.

Maher is concerned; we have developed the ability to destroy the earth and everything on it before developing the ability to be virtuous or rational. This is problematic. Unfortunately, he does not call for greater investment in the arts and humanities and a shift away from a culture of materialism, greed, and fear.

Instead, Maher is primarily concerned with the role of religion in this apocalyptically-able age. The matter of global catastrophe is often in the hands members of seemingly destructive, violent, and exclusive cartels. And not just American political parties. Why is the fate of life as we know it in the hands of the many, the proud, and the irrational?

Religulous is largely autobiographical; raised Catholic by a guilt-ridden father and a silently Jewish mother, Maher has taken the long route to utter skepticism. After outlining his theological history and frustrations with organized religion, he states his thesis. He offers a sincere, direct, I don't know. He then proceeds to lampoon the object of his unknowing.

Transitioning from point to point of religious belief or narrative which he finds unlikely or absurd, he introduces each topic with a certain smugness and charm for which he is well known. Frankly, this is terribly funny, and it is what one expects from a Bill Maher piece. At times, Maher hits on serious issues for those who believe in any major religion; why is there evil, how do we know God or the divine?

Maher shows himself to be an expert at setting up a straw man. Expounding on each point, he relies on interviews with the faithful to illustrate religion's absurdity. However, Maher is not interviewing theologians or bishops. He seeks out the most ridiculous and ignorant examples to interview. These weak and embarrassing interviews are made even weaker by constant asides, sound effects, and other distractions. You know, a clean, fair fight.

In addition to weak interviews concerning central theological issues, Maher attempts to find the most obtuse and unpopular religious narratives to explore and illustrate. Cantheism (a religion created by an Amsterdam native centered around pot) and a punctuated backstory of Scientology are among these critiques. Maher

may soundly minimize Cantheism and show what sorts of ridiculous things people believe, but this is a fallacious generalization. Even if one of these narratives of transcendence are completely without merit, that does mean that all belief systems are such.

It is not often that the Roman Catholic Church is depicted in a positive light, but Maher's interviews with the Chief Vatican Astronomer and one of the senior priests of the Vatican are quite direct. They both come off as rational, knowledgeable individuals who assent to some of the criticisms he has towards religious fundamentalists and religious superstition.

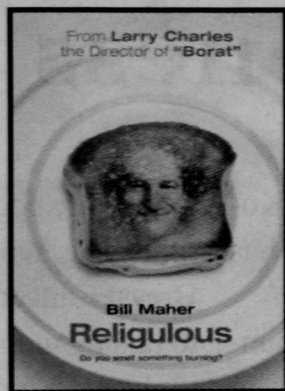
While these interviews were not in themselves problematic, it seems Maher has employed a very confusing use of authority. He uses these interviews to point out absurdities present in his other interviews (such as the Creationist Natural History Museum), but never asks these men any questions about their faith or religious experience. So, of the few competent and fair interviews Maher employs, few are ever asked anything directly about the topic at hand, but are only used to shed light on suspicious dogma held by others.

Each of these aspects of *Religulous* is entertaining, and it is clear that the movie intends to be comical and engaging. I am critical of the film because Maher is making an argument about the nature of religious belief: rational, objective thought will result in non-belief or agnosticism, and only the ignorant or simpleminded believe in God.

Ironically, Maher reaches this conclusion only after employing irrational and far-from-objective methods to his empirical survey. He not only sets up his straw man, he also burns it and adds a laugh-track.

Religulous is an experience of cognitive dissonance. Maher is concerned with the tension within religion, often unobserved by its practitioners, which should concern us all. It is an entertaining and comic film, which also manages to be incredibly pandering, reductionist and offensive. It is a piece which seems to be dedicated to an obvious standard of reason, and yet Maher manages to employ flagrant informal fallacies with great frequency. While searching for the reason people believe in some transcendent experience, he never takes the time to ask them about their transcendent experience.

Maher is right to be concerned with our capacity for destruction, and our apparent inability to be civil and ethical. Maher is wrong in making an association between this fallen nature and religion as its cause. *Religulous* is a film worth seeing, but has no message worth subscribing to.



Augsburg

A-List

DAVIS JONES
A & E Editor

Theater

The Caretaker

Dowling Studio

Wednesday, Oct. 15—Sunday, Nov. 2

The Guthrie Theater

818 South 2nd St, Minneapolis

Tickets: \$18

www.guthrietheater.org

Art

The Interior: Contemporary Photographic Views

The Weinstein Gallery

Saturday, Oct. 18—Sunday, Dec. 6

The Weinstein Gallery

908 West 46th St, Minneapolis

Free

www.weinstein-gallery.com

Painting's Not Dead Yet

The Rosalux Gallery

Saturday, Oct. 4—Friday, Oct. 31

The Rosalux Gallery

1011 Washington Ave S, Minneapolis

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www.rosaluxgallery.com

Music

Ill Bill, Sean Price, & Ruthless

The Cabooze

Monday, Oct. 20

The Cabooze

917 Cedar Ave S, Minneapolis

Tickets: \$14

www.cabooze.com

Yonder Mountain String Band

First Avenue Mainroom

Sunday, Oct. 19

First Avenue

701 N First St, Minneapolis

Tickets: \$25

www.first-avenue.com