

Zealous skeptic: Bill Maher's *Religulous*

by [Jason Byassee](#) in the [November 18, 2008](#) issue

Whereas new atheist writers like Richard Dawkins and Christopher Hitchens are deadly serious, Bill Maher's mockumentary on religion, *Religulous*, is as funny as Maher's comedy show on HBO.

The bulk of the film is a travelogue that begins in Megiddo in Israel (reputed site of Armageddon in the book of Revelation) and swings through Amsterdam, Salt Lake City, the Vatican and lots of Anywhere USA spots. When the owner of a Catholic bookshop describes the miracle he witnessed when he held a cup out a window just in time to catch an unexpected downpour, a slightly raised eyebrow shows Maher's incredulity. After a band of truckers gathers to pray over Maher, he thanks them for how nice they were, then asks, "Hey, who took my wallet?" He has this exchange with a leader in the Church of Cannabis: "So does pot hurt your short-term memory?" "Yes." "So does pot shorten your short-term memory?" When he asks a black prosperity preacher how much his lizard-skin shoes run, he gets this reply: "Lizards don't run, they crawl." Funny stuff, and Maher sometimes lets others deliver the zingers.

Maher delves into his family history—his mother was Jewish, his father Catholic—which lends the story a sort of authenticity. He calls religion a "neurological disorder," yet he remains somewhat interested in its internal logic. "You're smart people!" he tells the truckers. "You can't possibly believe this!" The truckers' responses aren't impressive.

At the Holy Land Experience in Orlando, Florida, Maher engages a character named Jesus, dressed in biblical garb, who explains the unity of the Trinity by comparing it to water, ice and steam. "He had me with that analogy," Maher says, surprised. "Until you think about it for two minutes and realize it's still total bullshit."

That's the intellectual level of most of the film. Maher is either unaware of or uninterested in the fact that doctrines like the Trinity have been argued over and

refined in the church for centuries. Because truckers or an amateur actor can't answer a smart aleck's question, Maher assumes Christianity cannot.

At times Maher seems to be genuinely seeking dialogue on the issues and even argues from within the faith: "But Jesus preached against the rich!" "How do you reconcile Jesus and nationalism?" These are good questions to ask of preachers in \$2,000 suits and of politicians, but Maher seems unaware that at these moments he is actually adopting part of a Christian perspective.

Maher's interview with Francis Collins, a Christian who is a scientist with the Human Genome Project, is wasted because Maher grills him on the historicity of the New Testament, which is not Collins's field. This is like a prosecutor calling an expert in one field to testify in somebody else's area of expertise. George Coyne, S.J., former head of the Vatican Observatory, delights Maher by roasting fundamentalists for their belief in a six-day creation—but Maher doesn't seem to recognize that he is talking to a Christian who can think.

Maher is obsessed with the virgin birth, and he grills Collins on why this element of the Christian story fails to show up in two Gospels. He calls Jesus "a space man on a suicide mission." Believing that Christianity's great failing is its inability to pass muster scientifically, he brings in a neuroscientist who is interested in what parts of the brain are stimulated during religious activity. Maher is as fawning before this scientist as a graduate student sitting at the feet of an esteemed professor. Who says only religious people are uncritical?

Maher's narrowness is especially troubling when he turns his gaze on Islam. If Christians come off as buffoons, Muslims are ticking time bombs: they are either blowing things up or apologizing for those who do. I noticed that the theater crowd that had relished Maher's dissection of George Bush and Catholic kitsch squirmed uncomfortably at the treatment of Islam, which seemed at times to be a neoconservative push for bombing Iran.

The film ends with Maher standing on a mound at Megiddo amid images of nuclear holocaust, flames and religious incitement, mostly by Muslims, along with some Christians. Maher preaches that we must repent of religion or the zealots will carry out their apocalyptic fantasies and kill us all. It's a manipulative altar call enhanced by a musical and visual crescendo. After a two-hour bashing of fundamentalists of all stripes, Maher delivers the biggest fire-and-brimstone sermon of them all.