

Director steps out on a ledge with new atheist movie

by [Kimberly Winston](#)

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(RNS) In the new film "The Ledge," a man perches high above the city, ready to jump to save the woman he loves.

As storylines go, perhaps it's not the most original. But what is unusual about this film, said writer/director Matthew Chapman, is that its hero is an atheist, set aloft to illustrate two themes close to Chapman's heart.

"Religious intolerance is a very bad thing," he said as the film opened last Friday (July 8) in New York and Los Angeles. "It is possible to be good without God."

The film tells of a love triangle between Gavin, an atheist, and Shana and Joe, a fundamentalist Christian couple. Between arguments about faith, unbelief and the meaning of life, Gavin seduces Shana. That causes Joe to force Gavin onto the ledge to save Shana's life by taking his own.

Two subplots concern a Catholic cop whose faith is tested as he tries to talk Gavin down, and Gavin's gay roommate, whose faith is trampled when he and his partner seek a rabbi's approval.

Chapman says the film is a work of both art and activism. He hopes it will entice atheists and other freethinkers "out of the closet" and into the mainstream.

"I am hoping that people will watch this, both atheists and believers, and have a discussion about this," he said.

The film has met with almost universally bad reviews from the media and mostly positive reviews from the freethought community. Greta Christina, an atheist, praised the film on Alternet and examined its potential to be the atheist version of "Brokeback Mountain," which was credited with broadening the acceptance of same-sex relationships.

"`Brokeback Mountain' was the result of decades of activism and consciousness-raising" about gay people, Christina wrote. "`The Ledge' isn't that. It isn't the culmination of a decades-long cinematic conversation about atheism. It's the beginning of it. And that might be even more important."

Chapman welcomes the comparison. "The Ledge" is dedicated to his gay uncle and his partner of 55 years, whose encounters with religious intolerance made Chapman an atheist.

"I saw the cruelty they had to endure in England up until five years ago (when civil partnerships became legal) and I realized it came entirely from religion," he said.

The film's gay subplot is Chapman's effort to get atheists to connect the dots between their position in society -- they feel, at best, ignored, and at worst, discriminated against -- and the plight of homosexuals. In a June essay for The Huffington Post, Chapman suggested atheists pattern their push for civil rights after that of the gay community's.

"Can atheists ... reduce the antipathy?" he wrote. "Only if they learn from the gay rights movement that the first step toward acceptance is the one that takes you out of the closet, hard though it may be."

Many in the freethought community have praised "The Ledge" as a step in that direction.

"It brings into focus the average guy who is an atheist," said David Silverman, president of American Atheists. "He has his own reasons for being who he is and that is one of the many facets of atheism -- the people who aren't shouting it from the rooftops. It brings atheism into the realm of the regular because he is regular, and that is what makes

it important."

Others have reservations, however, questioning Gavin's morality for seducing a married woman. "This will only provide the religious with presumed evidence that atheists are immoral and steal other people's partners," worried one commenter on the blog of the Richard Dawkins Foundation, a major freethought organization.

Chapman is used to controversy. He is best known as the author of two non-fiction books about the divide between atheists and fundamentalists over science education. He is the great-great-grandson of Charles Darwin, whose theory of evolution is often at the center of the divide.

"There are a lot of intellectual arguments for atheism, but in reality the effects of religious control and violence are emotional," he said. "So why should not one appeal to the emotions when making an argument against that kind of cruelty?"

He chalks up the negative reviews to unawareness.

"I think some of the negative response has come from the big cities where people don't believe that fundamentalists like Joe exist," he said. "I know if this movie played in smaller towns, people would recognize that character in an instant. There is a very primitive kind of religiosity in the middle of the country that people on the edges don't seem capable of realizing is there and underestimate."

Indeed, moviegoers have traditionally been lukewarm to films about unbelief. The most commercially successful is Bill Maher's 2008 "Religulous," which cost about \$2.5 million to make and grossed \$13 million in the U.S. Compare that to films about faith -- most notably "The Passion of the Christ," which cost \$30 million and earned \$370 million in the U.S. alone. "The Ledge" cost \$5 million to make, according to Chapman.

Chapman has his own measure of success for "The Ledge." He tells of a friend whose fundamentalist Christian mother saw the movie and then, as the end credits were rolling, called her estranged gay nephew to

reconcile.

"That is a very real thing, for a woman who is, for religious reasons, homophobic to overcome that," he said. "I have heard several stories like that."

Whether "The Ledge" will advance freethought remains to be seen. There are no plans for a wider release. The film can viewed online through video-on-demand at iTunes and SundanceNow.