

Two (clergy) guys and a girl

by [Matthew Prins](#) in the [May 24, 2000](#) issue

*Keeping the Faith* (2000), directed by Edward Norton

Starting a review with a plot summary is commensurate with saying, "You know, that Shakespeare is almost as good as Jackie Collins." Of course, now I'm going to do just that, but I have a reason: a cursory look at the plot of *Keeping the Faith* can trick readers into thinking something religious goes on, and I need to correct that impression as early as possible.

Now then: The heroes of *Keeping the Faith* are Father Brian (Edward Norton) and Rabbi Jake (Ben Stiller), best friends since forever. Anna (Jenna Elfman), a mutual friend from middle school whom Father Brian and Rabbi Jake haven't seen in 20 years, comes to New York on business and visits them. She is attractive, so Rabbi Jake and Father Brian both--surprise, surprise--fall hard for Anna. Father Brian can't exactly act on his feelings, since he's got these silly little vows of celibacy, but Rabbi Jake can. So Rabbi Jake and Anna start seeing each other without telling Father Brian. But then Rabbi Jake realizes that he can't marry Anna since she's not a Jew, so he has to dump her or lose his position as a rabbi. Oh dear.

Imagine the same plot with a few teensy changes: Change Father Brian to just plain Brian, a suburbanite with a wife and two young daughters, and have Anna and Jake (sans the title of rabbi) work together as widget makers in a factory with a mean ol' boss who hates interoffice fraternization. Brian and Jake both still have a thing for Anna, but now Brian won't go out with Anna because he doesn't want to betray his wife and children (I know, I know; it's a little unrealistic for a movie, but bear with me). Jake, on the other hand, can't marry Anna or he'll get fired from his widget job. Oh dear.

What discernible differences have these changes made to the story arc? No need to write your answer in the margins: there are only ornamental discrepancies between *Keeping the Faith* and your run-of-the-mill romantic-triangle comedy romp. Strip away the clerical robes, and *Keeping the Faith* is simply about two guys in love with the same girl. Vicious rumors that the film is about the difficulty of balancing

spirituality and love are uninformed untruths.

In fact, *Keeping the Faith* might have been better had Stiller played a widget salesman; he's certainly not convincing as a rabbi. Stiller is a great comedic talent (see *Your Friends and Neighbors* or *Mystery Men*, for starters), but his cool, detached persona is all wrong for someone who is as sincere about his religion as Rabbi Jake is supposed to be. (Not that we see this sincerity except when it's necessary to create friction between Rabbi Jake and Anna.) Elfman, who plays Anna as a fairly down-to-earth woman defined by her job as a financial consultant, is convincing but dull. I guess she took this poorly written role only because it is nothing like the character of Dharma she plays on television; if anything, she's playing Greg here.

But *Keeping the Faith* is Norton's baby--he directed it and tweaked Stuart Blumberg's original screenplay--and it's Norton who balances all the aspects of his difficult role. He manages to float between sincere, silly, heartbroken, devious and hopelessly in love while still appearing like he could be deeply committed to God and the Catholic faith. Norton genuinely seems to care about his character; I don't see near the same degree of interest from Elfman and Stiller.

Norton's acting strengths are almost counteracted by his lack of skill as a director. *Keeping the Faith* constantly gyrates between sincerity and farce (the latter consisting predominately of the scenes featured in the commercials), and those two forces collide fiendishly at a poignant moment near the film's climax: Father Brian tries to mend his relationship with Rabbi Jake by giving him the last "Heroes of the Torah" trading card he needs to complete his set. Not only is the moment not particularly funny, its maladroitness ruins any momentum the film had been building.

The 20 minutes at the start of the film, before we meet Anna, contain the film's only important discussion about God and spirituality. Norton implicitly makes two points: First, one's perception of God should be based upon how one feels about God, not about what one reads about God or is told about God. Second, those who don't like modern forms of worship are bad, bad, bad.

Whether Norton is right or not, these are the two same tired points that Hollywood movies about religion make bombastically over and over, and I expected something better and different from Norton. (Norton isn't even very effective at making these points; *Sister Act* offers a more convincing defense of updated worship.)

Norton has said in interviews that most of the more spiritual aspects of *Keeping the Faith* were interjected after he realized that the script didn't include much talk about God and religion and other spiritual things that a priest and rabbi might care about. What surface changes he made in that area were inadequate if his goal was to make statements about religion or spirituality or God. However, if Norton's goal was to make a ho-hum romantic comedy that had a priest and rabbi going after the same girl because he thought that a priest and rabbi going after the same girl was funny, then congratulations to him. Welcome then, Ed, to the ranks of Garry Marshall.