

Old dogma

by [Karl Stevens](#) in the [December 15, 1999](#) issue

*Dogma* (1999), directed by Kevin Smith

Director Kevin Smith's 1997 film *Chasing Amy* focuses on people in their early to mid-20s who are at a crossroads between adolescent sexual experimentation and the possibility of mature relationships. He shrewdly notes these characters' hip mannerisms and Gen-X obsession with mass culture.

In the opening scenes of Smith's new film, *Dogma*, it seems that he might successfully translate his hip style into a penetrating religious satire. Cardinal Glick, played by George Carlin, holds a press conference on the steps of a church to unveil his "Catholicism Wow!" campaign, replete with a winking, thumbs-up statuette of Christ. In an age when supermarkets sell stuffed bears wearing WWJD bracelets, a self-marketing church practically offers itself up for parody. But by the next scene Smith has abandoned this theme—the first of many missed opportunities.

The story involves two fallen angels, played by Ben Affleck and Matt Damon, one of whom was the former Angel of Death. Their exile on earth is the direct result of their having told God that Old Testament retributive justice is wrong. They believe that they've found a way to get back into heaven. But since God is infallible and therefore can't have been wrong to have kicked them out in the first place, the loophole that is the angels' passport back through the pearly gates creates a contradiction that will end the world. This turns out to be a very confused premise to hang a movie on, and it reflects the film's confused image of God. God is both bloodthirsty and retributive on the one hand and gentle and childlike on the other.

One could make the argument that the biblical story could lead to such a view of God. *Dogma* would have been a more interesting movie if Smith had been more interested in his characters' effort to reconcile themselves to such a God. Instead, the film is content to follow its characters through a long series of pointless adventures, depending for humor on infantile behavior and foul language.

The angels are given theological one-liners which are probably meant to shock, but have been common parlance among liberal Christians for so long that they almost

feel like platitudes. Christ was black, we are told, and God is a woman. In *Dogma*, such liberalism is strictly a pose. God may be portrayed as a woman, but the women characters are subjected to a steady stream of verbal abuse. One is introduced while dancing happily in a strip bar. As for the claim that Christ was black, besides Chris Rock (who plays the 13th disciple), the only black people in the film are stereotypical gang-bangers.

Most dishearteningly, *Dogma* is a smugly gory film. Although the characters make outraged comments about the wars fought in Christ's name, the film delights in its own cartoonish violence. We are asked to laugh at jokes about how tiring genocide is. The violence seems to be incorporated only because it is part of the common aesthetic of Smith's generation of filmmakers.

The cinematic language of Gen-X directors relies on violence and a knowingness about culture. *Dogma* is a clear example of the limitations of this language. Smith's first film, *Clerks*, contained a very clever piece of dialog about the morality of blowing up the Death Star in *Star Wars*. In *Dogma*, the subject of morality might as well not have been raised at all.