

A mind so open that the brain fell out

Dogma, written and directed by Kevin Smith

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Dogma is an occasionally funny and only superficially transgressive comedy about Catholicism and religion. Many notable—actors Matt Damon and Linda Fiorentino—and notorious—comedians George Carlin and Chris Rock—figures participate as members of the cast. The plot consists of an Armageddon scenario that is alternative to the Biblical one. Two angels cast by God into Wisconsin find a theological loophole that threatens to erase all existence.

As much as a nearly complete failure to do so can, *Dogma* raises interesting questions about how to critically treat, through the medium of art, the beliefs of Catholicism and “organized religion.” Like many of its characters, *Dogma* relentlessly talks trash to its opponent.[1] Unlike them, however, the film is all too ready to pull its punches and shy away from a serious fight. This is why the movie can come across as simultaneously over-the-top—the most egregious example of this being George Carlin's badly acted Cardinal Glick—and animated by pusillanimous restraint.

The film, in fact, adopts an irritatingly defensive posture from the beginning (with its otherwise humorous disclaimer) to the end (with a sequence of outtakes showing all the actors bursting in laughter after being unable to sustain the serious expressions required by the scene). There is a second and counterproductive satirical layer to the movie: to the satire of the Catholic Church is added a satire of its satire. *Dogma*, that is, tries too hard to dismiss itself. Moreover, empty references to popular culture appear with distracting regularity. With an eye to the cheap laugh, *Dogma* takes an otherwise welcome shot at the truly dreadful *Con Air*, and has the angel Metraton say to a mortally wounded Bethany (Fiorentino), about God, that, “She can rebuild you, she has the

technology.”

The film adopts a playful attitude toward Catholic dogma by incorporating Nordic [2] and Greek [3] strands into Catholic mythology, by introducing the thirteenth black apostle played by Chris Rock—“Do I know Jesus? N—— owe me twelve bucks!”—and by flirting with neo-pagan notions of a female god(dess). The Catholic dogma, therefore, is reworked, exaggerated and bastardized. These are classic and legitimate, if double-edged, weapons of satire. In the case of *Dogma*, they tend to blunt the critical edge of the work.

What I have so listed so far are the film's venial sins. There is, I believe, a deeper flaw in the work. In spite of the still significant social power of the Church, Catholic beliefs at the intellectual level can only appeal to interest of the antiquarian. The Catholic Church retains the not indifferent charm of all that is archaic and long-surpassed. While it walks the line between the mystic and the folkloristic, it hardly ever comes across as trite, even in the face of millennia of theological ruminations. What is trite, and insufferably so, is the kind of ideology animating the movie. The attentive viewer will note that *Dogma* is more preachy than your average Sunday homily.

What is its “Dogma”? In the movie, the notion of “beliefs,” as a set of deeply held, systematically organized thoughts, is presented as wretchedly evil. Structures of systematic belief—and this criterion is not necessarily restricted to organized religion—are held accountable for genocide, wars and general mayhem. Mere “ideas,” as easily discarded and unsystematic thoughts, are, on the other hand, good; “An idea you can change, but a belief ...” The message is brought home numerous times during the film, and it is not simply, or even mainly, a defense of reason over faith.

This attack on all systematic “ideology,” of course, comes across as just as totalizing and dogmatic as its target. One feels compelled to inquire about the ideological origin and character of the film's attack on “ideological” thought. The film embraces the ethos of he who is ready to discard “ideas,” as often as possible, before they harden into “beliefs.” Is this figure not that of the ideal, well-behaved and harmless intellectual consumer of ideas in a capitalist society? Can any sort of consistently critical perspective on the various institutions governing and organizing our present world, from the Catholic Church to global capitalism, be developed and retained by the ever-shifting and noncommittal consciousness endorsed by the movie? The spirit inhabiting the film is that pseudo-radicalism which today haunts academia, [4] art and popular culture alike. In times like these, one must demand even—and perhaps especially—from works of comedy, a more thoughtful treatment of their subject.

Notes

1. The only genuine, if guilty, pleasure I derived from the movie, came in the form of Jason Mewes' character Jay: an amusingly foul-mouthed, vile and sex-obsessed teenage prophet.
2. God's Angel of Death, played by Matt Damon, is named *Loki*.
3. Greek Muses infiltrate Catholic theology, and God periodically takes human form to pursue earthly pleasures.
4. See, as an example among countless others, Feyerabend's *Against Method*.



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