Letters on some recent films: Religulous, Doubt, and Milk

6 January 2009

The following is a selection of recent letters sent to the World Socialist Web Site.

On "Bad Faith: Bill Maher's Religulous"

I believe it's time to dialog on the role of religion in the 21st century. There's a basic incongruity. Fundamentalist belief systems have no place in an enlightened, technological, literate culture. It's my contention that religious fundamentalism is both an elephant in the living room and a bull in the china shop. Daily, we hear of an egregious act perpetrated for the sake of some inflexible religious conviction, yet we as a society tend to ignore the root cause: intolerance. I honestly feel it's time to divest the notion that inflexible dogma is tolerable, for in addition to being a bull and an elephant, religious dogma is also a sacred cow. I don't believe that God ever expected "faith" to be the suspension of reason.

Kurt N
Arizona, USA 2 January 2009

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Your refer to the "exhibit of a dinosaur with a saddle across its back." This dinosaur is no more an exhibit than a steel Rhino at the playground mounted on a spring. It's not a part of any teaching or exhibit in the museum. It's simply something on which kids can have their pictures taken.

MC
2 January 2009

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Great article. The cynicism of Maher and the SNL type of satirist is pro-capitalist, and part of the propaganda machinery that Ken Kesey referred to as "the movie." The election was part of the movie, too.

Maureen M
2 January 2009

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The movie was a good concept, but I wish someone else had hosted it. Maher's abrasive, insulting manner will only make the religious people who watch it hate him—the ideas he is trying to get across will be lost to them. I am an atheist, and I found myself annoyed with Maher.

As for the central theme of the movie—that religion is a major cause of violence, bigotry, etc.—there is certainly some truth there. One does not have to look far for proofs of that assertion.

As you point out, Maher's tone shifts when addressing Islam. Christianity, Mormonism, Scientology and Judaism are mocked, but Islam is presented as being uniquely dangerous. Nothing funny about Islam. Watching Maher's treatment of Islam, I was reminded of a frequent guest of his TV show, fellow atheist Christopher Hitchens. Hitchens' special hatred of Islam enabled him to embrace and champion the invasion of Iraq.

Lloyd G
South Dakota, USA
2 January 2009

*On "*Doubt: Nothing ‘beautiful' about this ‘question'*"*

Hi David,

This was one of your most hard-hitting reviews—thank you! It is also interesting that a film that is apparently very comfortable with, if not approving of the Catholic Church, should emerge at this point, preaching to us that we simply cannot "know everything"—and, by implication, that we should stop trying to find out.

Anouk A
Australia
3 January 2009

*On "*Milk, identity politics and Gus Van Sant's art*"*

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I have just re-read your review of the film *Milk*, and find your description of its (and Harvey's) emphasis on gay identity politics to be accurate. I just thought I'd offer the comment that the Castro, while politically "left" and non-"mainstream," with lots of activism, is still devoted to the identity politics of gay liberation. This is not to say that the gay population is indifferent to other injustice, or that it is unaware of the predations of the capitalist system. It is just that so much activism is specifically motivated by how every political situation either helps or hinders an exclusively gay cause.

There are many in the gay community who would not be politically active at all if they were not gay and did not experience first-hand the consequences of that identity. The citizens of the Castro have waged many battles for equal rights under the law (the most recent against the appalling Proposition 8), but do not seem to recognize that the oppression and persecution of gay people is part and parcel of the greater capitalist divide-and-conquer technique, which of course includes racism and sexism. It is very difficult to engage my gay friends and neighbors in discussion about socialism unless there is a particular relevance to the gay liberation cause.

I wish this were not so, because many of my friends are astute about the workings of the politics of oppression—when it comes to the gay community and also as it applies to racism and sexism. What they don't seem to see is the relation of these individual oppressions to the general oppression of the masses of society at the hands of the capitalist ruling elite. Or, if they do see it, they don't believe that working for socialism itself is the quickest way to address the problems facing the gay community.

Anyway, thanks for the perceptive review. I was living in San Francisco at the time of the election of Harvey Milk and at the time of the murders. There was an enormous explosion of anger and some of my friends took part in the candlelight marches and also in the riots that followed the verdict in the Dan White case. One thing that can be said for the assassination and the dreadful "Twinkie defense" is that the gay community became much more politicized. This carried over into the fight against AIDS, which came shortly after.

Carolyn
California, USA
4 January 2009

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