# Bad Faith: Bill Maher’s Religulous

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Comedian Bill Maher, host of HBO's *Real Time With Bill Maher*, has teamed up with *Borat* director Larry Charles to make a documentary about religion. The film takes the duo to religious sites of significance or curiosity throughout the United States, Europe and the Middle East. In each location, Maher interviews or butts heads with ordinary believers and religious scholars alike and provides commentary on what he feels are the dangers and absurdities of religious belief.

As with the earlier *Borat*, *Religulous* is most amusing when it reserves its contempt and ridicule for the most deserving individuals. One watches and shakes one's head at Mark Pryor, Democratic Senator from Arkansas, as he squirms to think of the answers least offensive to the religious right as Maher asks him about evolution and the Ten Commandments.

Pryor is not convinced, he explains, that humankind would have arrived at the belief that killing another person was wrong if God had not written it out for them in the Ten Commandments. Maher tells Pryor, "It worries me that people are running my country who believe in a talking snake." Pryor responds, astoundingly, "You don't have to pass an IQ test to be in the Senate."

Maher gives interview subjects like Pryor more than enough rope with which to hang themselves. But to mock a pandering Congressman or a preacher raking in profits from DVD sales is one thing; treating ordinary believers with a similar attitude is another matter altogether. In these cases, Maher's superior cynicism too often strikes one as callous and mean-spirited.

The tour continues. At a Christian theme park in Florida, actors portray various characters and reenact significant events from the Bible. An actor portraying Jesus is led each day, streaked with fake blood, to his crucifixion amid audiences who applaud the performance. During the crucifixion filmed by the *Religulous* crew, an airplane flies overhead as the impersonated Jesus is raised to the cross, lending an extra touch of absurdity to the proceedings.

During a trip to the Creation Museum in northern Kentucky, the film crew photographs the much-talked-about exhibit of a dinosaur with a saddle across its back. In the offices of this multimillion-dollar facility, Maher interviews Ken Ham, the founder of Answers in Genesis, an "apologetics ministry" that aims to defend Christianity and the Book of Genesis in particular from attacks by scientists. Ham describes the animatronic displays of children coexisting with dinosaurs in his museum as the "wow factor."

While some of this is amusing and some of it not, the film takes on a very different tone as it moves out of the US, shifting gears from Christianity to Islam.

Maher interviews right-wing Dutch Parliament Member Geert Wilders about his "hard line" approach to Islam. Wilders, an anti-Islam and anti-immigrant chauvinist who released his own film in April 2008 demonizing Muslims and equating their religion with fascism and Stalinism, tells Maher "Islam is, according to me, a violent religion, the Koran is a violent book, and Mohammed was a violent prophet." Maher does not challenge him.

Wilders was among those defending and republishing the anti-Mohammed cartoons printed in the right-wing journal *Jyllands-Posten* in 2005, a political provocation meant to intensify anti-immigration sentiments in the Netherlands. Maher has also defended the publication of the bigoted cartoons in the past and does so once again in *Religulous.*

In the second half of his film Maher reveals a particular hostility to Islam, noticeably different from his views towards other religions. There are no light-hearted jabs about "talking snakes" here, only depictions—whether through the use of jokes or other means—of Islam as a violent religion for terrorists.

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This is not the first time in his career that the comedian, an outspoken supporter of President George W. Bush's Israeli policies, has attacked Islam from the right. *Religulous*, with its sympathetic ear to Geert Wilders, is ultimately adding its voice to the demonizing of that religion and its adherents. There's nothing healthy or "enlightened" about this approach. And there certainly isn't anything funny about it.

As the film's title suggests—combining the words "religion" and "ridiculous"—*Religulous* sets out to mock and denounce. Religion is ridiculous and even more so are its believers. This doesn't offer much. If anything, it turns the religious a step further into their religion.

No effort is made to examine the social conditions under which religion retains its hold over wide layers of the population. The absence of a means by which people can make sense of the social chaos surrounding them, the decline of liberalism and the betrayal of workers struggles by the trade unions over the course of decades has left the door open for religious fundamentalism to take hold and strengthen its grip. This is an important piece of the puzzle without which one can't begin to grasp the full picture.

A greater understanding of religion and its social function is necessary, no less in satire than in science. Bill Maher's impressionistic views on the matter have led him into very backward territory.

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