

## *Progressive Religion ... Is Not an Oxymoron*

By David E. Roy

### **Bill Maher's *Religulous* – a Review**

On a Saturday last fall, Jan and I arrived to an empty theater about 15 minutes early for the 7:40 showing of Bill Maher's film, *Religulous*, on the one screen in all of Fresno showing this film. Gradually, however, the seats in the small room at the end of the multiplex filled up until it was perhaps two-thirds full. Not all that bad for Fresno when the competition is a silly dog film and the regular salad bar of murder and mayhem.

#### **A Delighted Audience**

Many in the audience were delighted with the film, laughing and even applauding at some of the scenes. Much to his credit, considering the cavernous openings to ridicule that some people gave him, Maher was respectful, most often only mildly disdainful.

While wholeheartedly engaged in the exchanges, Maher usually was low key as he pointed out the absurdity of numerous religious positions. His focus was primarily on Christianity, Islam, and Judaism, though he also had a great time in Hyde Park pretending to be a Scientologist.

#### **Maher at a Truck Stop Chapel**

Early in the film, Maher attended a truck stop chapel where he raised some issues about the factual accuracy of the New Testament. While one man got angry and left, others stayed and continued to listen and talk with him. At the end, they joined in a circle, laid hands on him and prayed for him. Interestingly, Maher thanked them not just for their Christianity but for being, in his words, "Christ-like."

#### **The Theme-Park Jesus**

Another of Maher's conversations was with a handsome, manly Jesus at a Christian theme park in Orlando, Florida (The Holy Land Experience). Though Maher didn't take up the issue of whether Jesus was really a strapping white male hunk, New Testament scholar Marcus Borg has suggested that Jesus was Semitic and probably no more than 5 feet tall (based upon the population size of the time). In addition, though well-versed in the Jewish scripture, he was most likely illiterate.

Talking with theme-park Jesus, Maher complained that the idea of God existing three persons was utter nonsense. Channeling George Carlin, Maher did a clever riff of God talking to himself as Father, Son, and Holy Ghost (there is an expanded version on the Daily Show). Theme-park Jesus came back with the idea that God-in-three-persons

is like water that can be liquid, solid (ice) or gas (steam); that God is in whatever form is necessary, depending upon the circumstance. This stopped Maher for a moment. Later he admitted he was impressed by the clever answer.

### **Other Stops on Maher's Journey**

Mahe's journey also included a visit to an Intelligent Design theme park (where dinosaurs and humans play side by side) and a gay-to-straight ministry. In these and other encounters, he is clear about his incredulity yet fairly gentle with the people he interviews.

His most intense outburst happened when he was attempting to interview one of the Jewish rabbis who represents an anti-Zionist movement. Maher, who grew up not knowing know his mother was Jewish (but did know his father was Christian), walked out in disgust after the rabbi would not stop lecturing long enough to have a dialogue.

### **Mahe Understands and Appreciates the Heart of Christianity**

Mahe confronted a "name-it-and-claim-it" preacher with the absolute contradiction between this man's message and the New Testament emphasis on helping the poor and shedding possessions to enter the Kingdom of God. The man pleasantly skirted the issue, assuring Mahe that the bible really does promise worldly riches for all true believers (i.e., those who *believe* in Jesus).

This exchange, as well as others, showed that Mahe has an understanding of and appreciation for some of the most fundamental Christian tenets, ones that seem to be radically obscured by the expressions of Christianity that Mahe explores – or, better, exposes.

### **Two Roman Catholic Priests: A Contrast**

The two Roman Catholic priests that Mahe interviewed clearly expressed a very different understanding of Christianity than most of the others seen on camera. The first one, Fr. Reginald Foster, a senior Vatican scholar, was a delightful, unpretentious man that Mahe seemed to bump into in front of the Vatican. The priest appeared to surprise Mahe when he agreed that Jesus would not be found in this sumptuous setting but instead among the poor.

The second priest, Fr. George Coyne, had been the director of the Vatican's astronomical observatory. Coyne lifted up the issue that the scientific worldview had not come into existence at the time the New Testament stories were compiled. Hence, the issue of factual truth, which underlies the tension between so-called biblical literalism and scientific inquiry, was not a concern in that era.

(I say "so-called biblical literalism" because, even in fundamentalist churches, there is a great deal of selectivity as to what is supposed to be literally true and what is understood as metaphor. No one, even in the most devote literalist, would suggest that Jesus was really a lamb of God, for example.)

I would have been more satisfied with the film if Mahe had at least raised the possibility there is an enormous wealth of biblical and theological scholarship grounded

in solid academic rigor that utilizes scientific research, among other tools, in a broad and protracted effort to illuminate the layers of meaning in the Christian bible. The two priests touched on this implicitly, but in the movie there was no explicit framing of the contrast between the unscientific literalists and the academically grounded non-literalists.

### **Maturing Beyond a Flat Bible**

Ironically, this leaves Maher in the same position as the literalists when it comes to the bible. Both he and they tend to see the bible as flat, as having no depth. I am not talking about deep meaning, but about meaning that results from going below the surface and searching for an understanding of why people would tell the stories and write the accounts they way they did.

For example, what moved the early story tellers and writers to proclaim that Jesus was the Jewish Messiah and then, to support their case, seek out all the metaphoric labels that, long before Jesus, had been assigned to someone who would, in the future, fulfill this role? What is the historical importance of assigning to Jesus a virgin birth, an immaculate conception, a bodily resurrection? A flat bible cannot answer these intriguing questions.

### **Maher's Fallacy**

This contributes to what I believe is Maher's fallacy at the end where he lumps all religions together as something to leave behind in growing up. The problem is not religion, per se, but how religious beliefs are used and distorted. Growing up might mean maturing to a more sophisticated religious understanding instead of giving up all religion altogether.

For example, New Testament biblical scholars agree that Jesus was about peace and affirming the reality of God's love as both a gift as well as *the* model for all human beings. These more sophisticated inspirations are intermingled with some distinctly primitive war-like prescriptions. It takes some maturity to know the difference.

### **The Evolution of God from a Tribal God to a Universal God**

In examining the Jewish bible, a vast number of scholars, Karen Armstrong among them, help us understand that the idea of a single God evolved over millennia. Much earlier, Yahweh was understood simply one god among many, a tribal god who demanded allegiance, who promised rewards for the faithful and vengeful punishments for those who strayed. This earlier god is the one for conquest, smiting enemies, striking down treasonous members of one's own tribe, but not the one for loving the whole of creation and every creature, every human being, on the planet.

### **Misuse of the Bible to Justify Oppression**

If the bible is approached uncritically, without reason, scholarship and intellect, it can easily become a tool that is used to justify much more primitively motivated actions that are fully challenged by the core of Jesus' actual teachings and ministry. The bible

has been misused in this way over the centuries to justify waging war, oppressing women, maintaining slavery and condemning gays and lesbians.

Any of these, when measured against the message of God's unconditional love for each and every member of creation and the requirement to love one's neighbor as oneself, should be seen as dead wrong – as evil.

### **Alternative Interpretations Not Pursued**

While Maher has fun exposing the logical nonsense of unchecked biblical literalism, he does not recognize that there are intellectually solid alternatives capable of giving voice to the ancient, on-going and deeply rooted hunger for higher, broader and all-inclusive meaning and purpose in a way that can bring humanity together instead of continuing to foment divisiveness. The two Roman Catholic priests pointed the way toward this new understanding, but Maher did not pick up on it.

### **The Failure of Clergy and Denominations**

Ultimately, however, this is not really Maher's problem to solve. The real question is why there are so many Christian Americans threatened by any suggestion that the bible is not flat, is not fully and completely the inerrant Word of God.

A significant portion of the blame falls on those clergy who know better but have avoided the difficult, painful, and sometimes hazardous work of bringing this knowledge to their congregations through preaching and teaching.

This blame extends to the church hierarchies that do not insist on this and that may not provide the backing for this that clergy need. It is a failure to have courage and be bold.

Documenting this in a movie would be quite interesting and illuminating, wouldn't it? Maybe Maher could do *Religulous II: Beyond the Virgin Birth*.