

Bishop's article for Nov./08 RLN

"Religulous" -- a response.

At the beginning of October, I was interested to read a movie review of Larry Charles's movie *Religulous*, starring Bill Maher. As I read the review of *Religulous* (an obvious contraction of religious and ridiculous) and particularly the description of the movie as being a "ground assault" on religious faith, and the reviewer's conclusion that this movie "may just be one of the most important movies made in years," I decided that it was worth going to see.

The premise of this "quasi-documentary", created in the Michael Moore style (*Bowling for Columbine*, *Fahrenheit 9/11*, and *Sicko*) of apparently-naive, satirical, confrontational interviews, is to show the irrationality of the world's religions (and religion, in general) and to promote the reasonableness of the "I don't know" position about all things spiritual and religious.

There is much that is painfully true about this movie's critique of how Christianity, Judaism, Islam, Mormonism and Scientology are practised and understood by many believers in our world. If nothing else, it is certainly a strong presentation of evidence for the need for a whole lot more theological education to be going on amongst both religious leaders and members of those religious groups. And it is also true that the movie's writers and producers have done their homework – Bill Maher is armed with some piercing truths about the Bible, and specifically the Gospels and their presentation of Jesus' teaching, which exposes the hypocrisy, inconsistency and, Maher's central point, - the irrationality, of religious belief.

I noted with interest the reaction of the packed theatre audience. There were some comical moments – I found myself laughing at some of the ridiculous things interviewees would say. In the closing minute of the film, Bill Maher makes his "evangelical pitch" against religion and in favour of rationalism – even suggesting that the future safety of the world may depend on agnostics like himself. That kind of climactic ending did manage to elicit applause – but only from a small minority of the audience. I purposely watched faces as we exited and in most cases they carried what appeared to be a blank expression – looking as though they were not quite sure what to do with what they had just experienced.

As I reflected on the film and its representation of religious faith, several things came to mind. First of all, as any good lawyer knows, it is always possible through strategic questioning to make a perfectly good, reasonable witness look bad, if not silly, in front of a jury. This film carries this out in spades – by its interplay of historical news reel footage, printed comments added under characters on the screen, and very careful editing. One of Maher's interviewees complains that Maher is making his argument too black-and-white – that the reality is more complex. I agree entirely with this comment. In one scene, Maher makes a derogatory comparison about the use of religious vestments. They seems funny, even silly, in his framing of it, but as you reflect further, you realize that he has just dismissed an aspect of hundreds, if not thousands, of years of important, meaning-laden symbolism present in most cultures of the world.

His use of each religion's holy books is very inconsistent – though, sadly, indicative of how some religious followers use those sources. On the one hand, he is well-versed in the latest historical, critical scholarship (ie. none of the New Testament writers were eyewitnesses of Jesus of Nazareth) and yet on the other, he claims that religious people read their Holy books as though they were dictated directly by

God, and nothing in them should be questioned. And of course, many Christians do not read the Bible in that way – nor is this the kind of instruction that most religious leaders receive from training institutions.

Maher exposes a common, modernist distortion of religion – particularly in the West. Maher assumes an individualistic approach - treating religions as huge collections of individuals who have come together to follow certain teachings and try and impose those on others. There is absolutely no recognition of the “collective communities” (ie. churches) of religion, or how those communities engage the world around them. And even the approach of analyzing “religions” using a single, rationalistic, template is flawed. It assumes that religion functions more or less the same way in all human beings and in all cultural contexts.

This last point exposes what is probably the greatest limitation to Maher’s “thesis.” He assumes that a purely “rational” approach to life is always superior – the only safe and decent way to understand ourselves and others. Sadly, it is precisely this rational, modernist, “if we all just used our heads we could make this a better world” approach that has proved itself inadequate in the last half of the 20th century. It is this understanding of the created order that the emerging post-modernist culture stands against. In the end this movie makes the poignant observation that a significant minority (the movie claims it’s 16% in the USA who are of ‘no religion’) are basically good, well-intended people who care about the world, do not feel a need for religious belief, are concerned that much of the world’s conflict involves religiously-motivated struggles, and are asking that they be accorded the same respect as anyone else in their desire to live a rational, non-religious life. And as I thought about it – it was probably about 16% who applauded at the end of the movie – satisfied that they had finally been heard and recognized. But I suspect many of the rest of us, practising and non-practising, left the viewing with only the sense that a deep and profound part of who we are as human beings had been insensitively “made sport of”, with nothing of hope, wisdom or “inspiration” having been offered in return.