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Review of Bill Maher's *Religulous* - Part 1

Review by Jeffrey Stueber

Around September of last year, there was an interesting occurrence in the world of media. The movie *An American Carol* ridiculed the American left while the movie *Religulous* criticized religion – all religions. One could, if one wished, get theatrical whiplash after viewing this unique potpourri of left and right thought.

Obviously Maher (comedian Bill Maher who starred in the movie) cannot really understand or really care to believe the tenets of any religion when, at the beginning of his movie, he states that “I certainly honestly believe religion is detrimental to the progress of humanity. It’s just selling an invisible product; it’s too easy.” The question, he says, of what happens when we die “freaks” us out so that people who are otherwise so rational about everything else will accept any religious tale and cling to it. Some even believe on Sunday they are drinking the blood of Jesus. This lack of skepticism engages him in his search of why people believe as they do, but he’s not so much searching as looking to debunk. His product, he says, is the gospel of “I don’t know” and this is the antidote to the overt lack of skepticism inherent in the religious people he interviews.

Maher interviews Francis Collins, head of the human genome project, who is one of the few scientists who are Christians. Maher wants to know why Collins is a believer at which time Maher dismisses the existence of Jesus: “What evidence I’ve never even heard anyone propose that there’s evidence.” Collins retorts that the New Testament reads like a collection of eyewitness testimony and Maher makes a statement that, I believe, provides a look at his intellectual inadequacies: “Would that stand up in a laboratory as absolute full-proof evidence that something happened?” Of course there are different ways of gaining evidence of various occurrences and in the physical and biological sciences one can and should invoke the findings of the laboratory. The circumstance is different regarding historical occurrences where the unanimity of testimony plays a part (such as in the testimony of those who lived during Nazi Germany attesting to the reality of the concentration camps). After the interview with Collins, Maher is seen musing over why no gospel mentions what Jesus did as a young man – to suggest, I would guess, that the Gospels are faulty for not mentioning this.

If, however, Maher would have been willing to do research outside his interviews, he could have consulted Gary Habermas’ *The Historical Jesus*. **1** What I have found is that the Gospel writers, extra-Biblical writers, church fathers, and even those who wrote the Gnostic Gospels are unanimous in their testimony that Jesus existed and it is only today some people believe otherwise. (Oddly, even former atheist Antony Flew never denied the existence of Jesus in his debate with Habermas – only the fact Jesus rose from the dead. Apparently Maher hasn’t consulted with Flew.)

One of Maher’s problems with the Bible is that it is a product of human invention and therefore faulty and often his way of approaching the discussion is garbled. For instance, his first engagement occurs at the Truckers Chapel in Raleigh, North Carolina, where he asks a few parishioners why having faith – which he defines as belief without evidence – is a good idea. Here is Maher’s first volley in his quest: “Aren’t you ever bothered by many things that are in Christianity that are not in the Bible like original

sin, the immaculate conception, the virgin birth – is only in two of the Gospels – the popes. Are you worried that these things came not from the founders, the people who wrote this book, but from – and this is indisputable – from men, from human beings who came after them.” However, the idea of original sin is strongly suggested by the redemptive nature of Jesus’ death on the cross which was not to save Adam and Eve but to save all men.

This is something innate in humans. The *Global Concise Bible Dictionary* defines sin as “a corruption of human nature that makes man hostile to God, captive to baser passions and desires, and unwilling to submit to God’s known will.” ² Without an innate tendency to not do God’s will, but instead rebel against Him, there is really no need for a savior. Edward Oakes, Associate Professor of Religious Studies, states that “it is not necessary for the Bible to mention the name of a doctrine for it either to be true or for it to be located there in so many other words” and cites theologian Reinhold Niebuhr as saying “The Truth is that, absurd as the classical Pauline doctrine of original sin may seem to be at first blush, its prestige as a part of the Christian truth is preserved, and perennially reestablished, against the attacks of rationalists and simple moralists by its ability to throw light upon complex factors in human behavior which constantly escape the moralists.” ³ As far as the virgin birth, Matthew used the Greek word *parthenos* (which is the normal Greek word for “virgin”) in reporting the pregnancy of Mary and so this is indeed in the Bible contrary to what Maher claims. ⁴ It is indisputable that the popes are not mentioned in the New Testament and he scores a debater’s point for this, but lumps this with other Biblical tenets that are clearly there.

He repeats his assumptions about the Bible’s authorship in his interview of John Westcott (a former homosexual) at Exchange Ministries in Florida. Maher says nature made gay people while man wrote the Bible. Of course the faulty assumption here is that because something occurs in nature or is made by nature that it is good. One could just as well argue that rape (or the desire to rape) occurs in nature and rapists are made by nature. Are they therefore morally good? Also, nobody has ever suggested that men did not write the Bible and so his objection is a red herring. Does the mere fact men wrote the Bible mean they could not and did not relate correct historical facts even if they had spiritual experiences? We do not suppose that because humans wrote other books they cannot relate accurate historical facts. Who else would have written it but humans?

Of course Maher has strong criticisms for those who do not accept evolution and states that scientists overwhelmingly line up for evolution. Maher has obviously overlooked William Dembski’s edited *Uncommon Dissent* which is subtitled “Intellectuals Who Find Darwinism Unconvincing” and the “dissent from Darwin” web site ⁵ in which signers of a statement that questions whether random mutation and natural selection can produce life’s complexity must hold a Ph.D. in a scientific field such as biology, chemistry, mathematics, engineering, computer science, or one of the other natural sciences or hold an M.D. and serve as a professor of medicine. Maher also doesn’t grasp the political, religious, and philosophical reasons evolutionists often have for believing in it. It was Richard Dawkins who announced that Darwin made it possible to be an intellectually fulfilled atheist and the Humanist Manifestos that acknowledged this fact at least two times. *LSI*

End notes

1. Gary Habermas, *The Historical Jesus: Ancient Evidence for the Life of Christ*, Joplin: MO, College Press, 1996)
2. Lawrence Richards ed., *The Global Concise Bible Dictionary*, (Toronto, Fleming Revell, 1991)
3. Edward Oakes, “Original Sin: A Disputation,” *First Things* (Nov. 1998)
4. *Ibid*
5. <http://www.dissentfromdarwin.org/>