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Taira, Teemu

Eaghll, Tenzan; King, Rebekka

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Atheistic Documentaries and the Critique of Religion in Bill Maher's *Religulous*

Teemu Taira

Introduction

In one of the few overviews of atheism and film, Nina Power wrote in 2013 that "surprisingly little has been written about the relationship between atheism and film at the formal or conceptual level" (Power 2013, 727). This is still true. There are also few empirical, in-depth examinations of atheism in individual films. At the same time, however, there has been a rise of atheistic documentary films in the first decades of the twenty-first century. This is related to the increasing interest in atheism, particularly the rise of "new atheism," and the development of media technology. This chapter examines how atheistic documentaries represent religion and at the same time implicitly or explicitly imagine atheist and non-religious identifications as different from religious identifications. Although several recent documentaries will be referenced in this chapter, it will focus on the 2008 "comic documentary" *Religulous*, directed by Larry Charles and written by comedian Bill Maher. This chapter demonstrates how a particular representation of religion (and atheism) is constructed in documentary films through the selection of certain types of religious people, texts, places, and "experts" to signify what is considered typical for religion(s). Furthermore, the analysis proceeds to clarify how twenty-first-century atheistic documentaries, and *Religulous* in particular, have functioned to construct and solidify atheistic identities. It details the cinematic and comic means by which the construction is done and argues that the result is a very unique and modern understanding of both religion and atheism. In a fascinating way, these documentaries provide a case study of identity construction, detailing how religion and non-religion are imagined in contemporary cinema.

The cultural studies approach utilized in combination with perspectives from the study of religion is not new as such (Miles 1996; Wright 2006; see also Eaghll 2019). Margaret Miles outlined that in the cultural studies approach, film is "one voice in a complex social conversation, occurring in a historical moment" (Miles 1996, xiii) and it pays attention to "the social, political, and cultural matrix in which the film was produced and distributed" (Miles 1996, xiii). To pursue analysis in line with this basic idea, I shall introduce one concept that has not been at the center of religion and film.

The main theoretical concept that characterizes my approach is articulation. The term is used here in line with cultural studies scholars Stuart Hall and Lawrence Grossberg (Grossberg 1986; 1992; Slack 1996), for whom articulation is a concept that characterizes a process in which various contingent elements are connected with or linked to each other—and other elements are disarticulated at the same time—through signifying, affective, and material practices. Articulations construct (contingent and temporary) unity or identity out of available raw materials. Some articulations are resilient and some are not, but what matters is that the effectivity of practices, including cinematic representations, depends on successful articulations between elements. What these elements are depends on the context, but in the case of the identity construction highlighted in this chapter, religion—in addition to science, gender, race, and class—plays an important role. In

some cases, the elements are more or less equal, and in other cases one element can be more dominant than others, but this is an empirical question. Articulation is a useful concept when analyzing social processes in which collective identifications are imagined and constructed. In this study it is applied to the focus of the analysis, namely, how *Religulous* connects various elements within its representations to create an identity position and how the representations function as attempts to articulate the documentary film itself in relation to wider social struggles (e.g., atheist movements). Therefore, articulation is not limited to the analysis of film as an isolated text, but it helps us to study the particular "cultural moment in which the film originated" (Miles 1996, 23) and even its potentially continuing role in social formation.

Atheism, Film, and Documentary

There are not many films that emphasize the atheistic nature of their key characters, and few blockbusters have an atheist protagonist. One notable popular exception is *Inherit the Wind* (1960), based on the so-called Scopes Monkey Trial of 1925. However, there are several self-identified atheistic directors whose works have been addressed in studies focusing on atheism and film, such as David Cronenberg, Pier Paolo Pasolini and Dziga Vertov (Power 2013). They are not examples of criticism of religion but reflect a sympathetic approach to religion by atheists, as in the case of Pasolini's *The Gospel According to St. Matthew* (Il Vangelo secondo Matteo 1964). There are also popular films that have drawn accusations of blasphemy, such as *Monty Python's Life of Brian* (1979) and *The Last Temptation of Christ* (1988), but they do not deal with atheism as such.

It is notable that documentaries, rather than fiction films, have become a vehicle for popular atheistic criticism and identity politics in the first decades of the twenty-first century. Examples are *Atheism: A Rough History of Disbelief* (2004–7, also known as *A Brief History of Disbelief*), *The Atheism Tapes* (2004), *The God Who Wasn't There* (2005), *The Root of All Evil?* (2006), *The Enemies of Reason* (2007), *The Four Horsemen* (2008), *Faith School Menace* (2010) and *The Unbelievers* (2013). These documentaries address the question of how humans should live. Although most films do this at least implicitly (Miles 1996, 7), these examples are as explicit as one can be about what is not their favored worldview. None of them target specific groups but religiosity in general. Moreover, although the documentaries promote atheism, they do not describe the atheistic lifestyle in detail (i.e., most of them are primarily not documentaries about atheism and atheists but documentaries that are critical of religion).

These documentaries would not have been made without the existence of people interested in criticism of religion. Some of them refer to 9/11 and Islamic terrorism explicitly, and many address more mundane worries about the organization of education, for instance, in a particular country. Furthermore, certain people are interested in doing these documentaries, meaning that production has revolved around a small number of atheistic celebrities. For example, Richard Dawkins has been involved in more than half of the films mentioned earlier. In addition, the development of media technologies, particularly in terms of distribution, has facilitated their reach. Many of the documentaries have been broadcast on television, it is possible to buy them as DVDs and some can be watched via video-streaming services. Contemporary documentaries generally have potential for broad dissemination at very low cost, and their form is sufficiently entertaining. As Nichols (2017, 1) argues, "Documentary has become the flagship for a cinema of social engagement and distinctive

vision." These factors are relevant, but they only partially explain why the documentary format has become so important for atheistic representations of religion.

Documentaries are defined as consisting of nonfiction that makes claims about what the described phenomenon is like (Bonner 2013, 62). Although it is now commonplace both to question whether any representation can be coherent with the world outside of its representations and to challenge the dichotomy between what is made up and what is not, there is still (unspoken) agreement that the documentary film should be realistic in style (i.e., it is difficult to make a film in the genre of science fiction or romantic soap opera and get people to interpret it as a documentary). It is perhaps for this reason that the audiovisual options that atheists choose lean toward the documentary approach; if atheists wish to propose that religions are irrational and out of touch with reality, then documentary film is probably the most efficient and obvious choice.

Religulous—*A "Comic Documentary"*

Most of the twenty-first-century atheistic documentaries are stylistically and aesthetically quite conservative. *Religulous* follows a different style, as it breaks partly with the conventions of realism, borrowing from an approach that was made popular by American documentary filmmaker Michael Moore. What is typical for Moore's documentary films is an openly taken (political) position that utilizes emotional narratives. In one sense, documentary films can be defined and understood as always being about the argument that the filmmakers construct—they select, edit, and organize the raw material in a narrative form—but Moore is clear that he does not simply document a phenomenon or conform to an observational style; thus, he not only interviews people but also participates in the action seen on the screen, arguing for a certain position in a much more radical manner than what is typical for documentary films. In other words, Moore is an opinionated presenter rather than an anonymous and omniscient narrator (Nichols 2017, 4). He is often seen on the screen and in many cases the camera follows what he is doing, rather than documenting what is happening outside of Moore's own involvement. This has been called a reflexive mode, because the documentary reveals itself as constructed text, but Moore's style often overlaps with the performative mode, too, because the main character performs actions that constitute the main content of the documentary (Bonner 2013, 69–70).

A similar style has been adopted in *Expelled: No Intelligence Allowed* (2008), a documentary that defends intelligent design, directed by Nathan Frankowski and presented by Ben Stein, and in *Borat* (2006), written and produced by Sacha Baron Cohen. Given that *Borat* was also directed by Larry Charles, it is not surprising that a comparable style is adopted in *Religulous*. *Religulous* has been branded as a "comic documentary," suggesting that it is not conventional and does not fully adhere to the genre of documentary film. In addition, its name is a portmanteau word, consisting of "religious" and "ridiculous," leading people to expect an approach that laughs at religions, not with them.

The United States has been the most fertile ground for the content of *Religulous*. This is partly because of the examples it deals with. For instance, it highlights the debate between evolution and creationism, which is much more prominent in the United States than in Europe. Visits to religious theme parks, such as the Holy Land Museum and Creation Museum, reflect the American

context. During the year of its release, *Religulous* was the most successful documentary film in the United States, grossing over 13 million dollars at the box office. It was much less successful outside the United States, but its theater distribution was limited.[i] It has taken in almost 10 million dollars in DVD sales, and it has been widely available for free via video-streaming services. Overall, this suggests that people around the world have seen (and possibly enjoyed) it. Currently, *Religulous* is the 25th-highest grossing documentary in the United States.

One of the film's promotional images (also used on the DVD cover) demonstrates its content relatively well. In the picture, three apes are sitting next to each other, each wearing the accoutrements (hat/cap and necklace) of a different religion: Judaism, (Roman Catholic) Christianity, and Islam. One of the apes covers its eyes, one its ears, and one its mouth. The choice of symbols reveals that the main target of the film's criticism is "Abrahamic religions," although it deals with Scientology and Mormonism, too. The film pays little attention to Eastern traditions—due to their lack of relevance to the US audience, according to the filmmakers (French 2008)—despite the reference to the three wise monkeys embodying the principle "See no evil, hear no evil, speak no evil," familiar in Japanese culture and other parts of Asia. The intended meaning of the three monkeys in this context is feigning ignorance or a lack of moral responsibility, which the film attributes to religion.

The two slogans used in the promotion material were "The end is near," where "end" is crossed out and replaced with "truth," and "When religion gets ridiculous." The first plays with the apocalyptic phrase, known particularly in Christianity, suggesting that the motto is untrue and the film reveals the truth behind the false religions. The second simply breaks down the portmanteau word of the film's title and clarifies its approach of morally superior atheism dissecting religion.

Religulous can be divided into more than twenty encounters between Bill Maher and a variety of religious and anti-religious individuals. Several underline the irrationality and anti-scientific nature of religion, such as the interview with Ken Ham at the Creation Museum in Petersburg, Kentucky. Ham states here that the museum's purpose is to teach visitors that "the Bible is true, from Genesis to Revelation," after which he argues that dinosaurs and humans lived at the same time, as depicted at the museum. Some encounters underline the harmful nature of religions. This theme is perhaps most explicit at the beginning of the film, when Maher refers to Catholic child abuse, the Danish cartoon controversy, and religious suicide bombings to frame the context of the documentary.

The film merits a more detailed examination, however, as studying these articulation processes reveals how the atheist message and identity position are constructed in the film and further connected to atheist struggles.

The Construction of "Us" and "Them"

When inviting people to be interviewed for the documentary, Maher used a different title for the film. This was *A Spiritual Journey*, which prompts completely different associations than the final title. Nor did the production team mention Maher's name, because he might have been linked

to a disrespectful attitude toward religion. This is how Maher described the recruitment of interviewees:

> It was simple: We never, ever, used my name. We never told anybody it was me who was going to do the interviews. We even had a fake title for the film. We called it "A Spiritual Journey." [. . .] At the last second, when the cameras were already rolling, I would show up. So either they'd be seen on camera leaving the interview and lose face or they'd have to talk to me. (Goldstein and Rainey 2008)

Religulous does not describe what the atheistic lifestyle looks like, although it includes some of Maher's autobiographical aspects and in that way offers glimpses of what an atheistic life might mean in practice. It is primarily by representing religious others that it constructs a mirror image of the atheistic position. The statement about the strategy to find participants for the project is questionable in terms of documentary ethics, but the most important points for the purposes of this exploration are that the atheistic identity is predominantly constructed via its Other—religious people who were expected to have doubts about the documentary—and that the team was willing to use whatever material was gathered whenever the camera was rolling in order to present those people in the way the team wanted.

There are some moments, however, when the exposition of atheism is not done through the description of what it is not. For example, Maher talks about his family background and upbringing before starting his journey to the various locations where he meets religious people. Maher is a white man with a religiously mixed family background; his mother is Jewish and his father Roman Catholic. Maher is a relatively typical non-religious person in the United States, because sociological evidence shows that non-religious people are likely to be white men, and a religiously mixed heritage increases the likelihood of becoming non-religious—particularly when one of the parents is not religious (Zuckerman 2014, 93–94). Maher is far from typical, however. He is a known comedian and a critic of religion. Identifying as agnostic, he claims to preach "the Gospel of I don't know." At the same time, he proposes that religion is detrimental to the progress of humanity and that religion prevents people from saving the world. The implication is that saving the world is the task of non-religious people, because they do not worry about an afterlife and punishment all the time. Such comments are far from what Maher says about the "humbleness of doubt." The contrary attitude supports the overall message of *Religulous*: for those who are right, it is time to act. As Maher says at the end of the documentary: "This is why rational people, anti-religionists, must end their timidity and come out of the closet and assert themselves."

All this reveals that the main target audience for the documentary is not those who are committed to a religious position. It is those who are sitting on a fence, who are undecided, indifferent, or quiet about their views. *Religulous* is, therefore, part of a much wider atheist identity politics, which animates the phenomenon generally known as new atheism as well as a good number of secular organizations (Taira 2012; see also Cimino & Smith 2014). The message is the same as that presented in Dawkins's *The God Delusion*. In the preface, Dawkins writes that his "purpose is consciousness-raising" (Dawkins 2006, 25) and that his "dream is that this book may help people to come out" (Dawkins 2006, 27). Articulated in relation to atheist identity politics, *Religulous* is one of many attempts to construct an atheist "us" (and make people say it!) as opposed to a religious

"them," rather than simply being an attempt to make people drop their religious beliefs and identifications.

One of the typical ways to highlight the significance of one's in-group is to exaggerate its size. The documentary correctly mentions that at that time, 16 percent of the US population was non-religious. This figure was based on self-identification. The interpretation, however, reveals the problem. Maher suggests that these people do not believe in God and do not want to have anything to do with religion. This is in striking contrast with the existing research and surveys, in which a good number of American nones state that they believe in God or a life force and have a relatively positive attitude toward religion. The 16 percent is a group that does not have religious affiliation; this is different than not believing in God or not wanting to have anything to do with religion.

Another tactic is to be clear about the boundaries of the in-group. In practice, this means that religious moderates are considered enemies. Instead of building alliances with them, *Religulous* follows new atheists who emphasize that moderate believers provide justification and support for the view of religious radicals that belief without evidence is a virtue. This is made explicit only in the final monologue, where Maher states that "those who consider themselves moderately religious really need to look in the mirror and realize that the solace and comfort that religion brings you actually comes at a terrible price."

There are also secondary tactics by which the "we-ness" is constructed. One of these is an implicit assumption of the homogeneity of non-religious people, who are held to be a group without significant internal variety or differences. No one suggests this explicitly, but *Religulous*, like other documentaries and books, does not make the heterogeneity visible. The imagining of some kind of atheistic tradition has been typical of twenty-first-century atheism, but "there have been many atheisms with conflicting views of the world" (Gray 2019, 3). Another tactic is aesthetics. The documentary film's unconventional ("Moorean") stylistic choices include many occasions where the film crew's microphone and camera are in the picture. In Moore's documentaries this signifies a sense of urgency and action, but in *Religulous* the same choice creates the impression of a relaxed and sincere atmosphere. The overall effect is that the atheists seem relaxed and content with their views—they have nothing to hide—whereas religious people are uptight because they are challenged by what atheists know to be true. Altogether, these different tactics contribute to the construction of atheist identity as "normal," desirable, and even superior to a religious identity.

They Are Irrational, We Rely on Science

One of the main articulations that *Religulous* employs is the link between atheism and the natural sciences, while religion is associated with irrationality. These articulations are by no means unique to the documentary, and it could be argued that the film does not contribute anything new to them, but the repetition of this trope, including its medium, form, and style, is important.

There are moments where the text on the screen flashes biblical passages when American Christians claim something else. This creates the impression that religious people are so irrational and ignorant that they do not even know what their holy book actually says in regard to things they justify by referring to the Bible. There is also information on the screen about the large percentage

of scientists who are atheists, thus underlining the message that atheism and science go hand in hand.

While it is the case that scholars and top scientists are less religious than the general population, there are important nuances to be considered. At least in the United States, scholars working in the natural sciences are more religious than scholars in the social sciences and humanities. It is not that the practice of natural sciences or having a scientific view of the world is necessarily connected with atheism. It may well be that other disciplines and fields that see cultures and societies as human products are more eager to also see religions as human products (Bruce 2002, 106–117). The point here is that the relationship between religiosity and scientific education is complicated, but *Religious* presents it as straightforward, because it more generally suits the articulation that the film seeks to construct.

The documentary builds the articulation in many encounters between Maher and religious people that links science and atheism on the one hand and irrationality and religion on the other hand. Five successive encounters in the middle of the film exemplify this. First, Maher delivers a speech in Hyde Park, London, in disguise, preaching elements taken from Scientology. People laugh at him while taking other preachers seriously. This is quite a clever way to put Scientology on par with other religions, because so many people mock Scientology while being respectful of other religious views. Second, the crew travels to Salt Lake City to film on the premises of the Mormon Temple of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Mormons interrupt the production and threaten to call the cops. Maher's conclusion is that Mormon beliefs are "crazy even by the standards of big religions." Third, Jewish Rabbi Dovid Weiss is called an anti-Zionist, and there is a clip in which he seems to defend a famous Holocaust denier, Iran's then-president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. Fourth, another Rabbi, Shmuel Strauss, introduces to Maher all the ways in which Jews try to find loopholes in God's orders in order to be able to do things they are not allowed to do during the Sabbath. Fifth, in Florida Maher meets Jose Luis de Jesus Miranda of the Growing in Grace Ministry, who claims to be the second coming of Christ and a direct genetic descendant of Jesus. The overall feeling that the audience is supposed to get is that religious people are crazy, incoherent, and irrational, and having a rational conversation with them is nearly impossible.

The articulation between religion and irrationality is further enhanced by various stylistic cinematographic techniques. The interviews are edited so that religious people are rarely able to finish their sentence. Sometimes the comic effect is constructed by the following images: Al Pacino's character Scarface is associated with Jose Luis de Miranda's talking style and Miranda's testimony of meeting two angels is followed by cuts to a parade where gay people are wearing angel wings. If the interviewee laughs, it is sometimes edited to continue in an excessive manner and merged with other laughing voices, thus questioning the sincerity, innocence, and sanity of interviewee. While these techniques add to the comical effect, they also give a reason to contest the term "documentary" in this context. However, they are integral to the persuasion techniques of *Religulous* and the construction of "we" as rational and "them" as irrational.

One of the approaches to how documentary films construct identities is through the question of expertise. This is exceptionally pertinent in cases where the aim is to construct an "us" of rational people who rely on science. Who gets to represent expert knowledge about religion? On the basis of atheistic documentaries in general, it appears that comedians and the natural scientists are

the primary experts on religion. Comedians are not presented as scholarly experts as such, but they are the ones who seem to know what religion is really like. Furthermore, the natural scientists are presented as scholarly experts, no matter whether religion is their main research area or not.

In *Religulous*, the only expert that conducts any research on religion is the neuroscientist and neurotheologian Andrew Newberg, who has only a minor role in one scene. Mostly speaking here is Maher, who wishes to hear from Newberg that brain scans provide evidence that religious people are crazy. It is interesting that the chosen expert is representing neurotheology, rather than any established approach in the academic study of religion, because within the study of religion neurotheology has not received much positive appraisal (Day 2009; Geertz 2009).

If the construction of expertise in *Religulous* were an isolated case, it could perhaps be ignored as an exception, but it is not: in twenty-first-century atheist discourse, it is typical that people in the humanities and social sciences whose careers are based on studying religion are not considered relevant experts. This is true of atheistic best sellers and most of the atheistic documentaries. In some cases the indifference regarding expertise, or a very selective approach to expertise, leads to problematic claims about religion and its relation to different issues.

Constructing Religion: Harmful Beliefs about the World

Religulous suggests that religious people and religions as belief systems are harmful in different ways. Very few atheistic documentaries try to clarify which parts of religion are harmful and which may be beneficial. Rather, they tend to follow Christopher Hitchens's view that "religion poisons everything" (Hitchens 2007).

According to *Religulous*, religious people are dangerous. In the opening sequence in Megiddo, Israel, Maher states that religion is dangerous and detrimental to the progress of humanity, because religion values belief in something without evidence, as well as the certainty that comes with it. In the final sequence Maher is back in Megiddo, explaining that, according to many Christians, this is the place where the world is supposed to come to an end. He concludes that it may very well come to an end because of religion.

This articulation is repeated in the other encounters. Maher visits an almost empty Muslim gay bar in Amsterdam, an exceptional and exotic place, to convey the message that Islam is intolerant toward homosexuals and being Muslim and gay is a dangerous position. After that, Maher interviews Mohamed Junas Gaffar in Amsterdam's Taibah Mosque. After the interviewee claims that Islam is about peace, there follow clips about Islamic hate speech and suicide bombings in Jerusalem, indicating that Muslims are both dangerous and hypocritical. This is linked to the idea that religion is ancient or premodern and does not fit with the modern world: when Gaffar's mobile phone starts ringing—with Led Zeppelin's "Kashmir" as a ring tone—Maher comments: "Oh, that twenty-first century always busting in."

In the world of *Religulous*, there is nothing to learn from religious people and they do nothing to improve the conditions that atheists live in. In this regard, it differs from some popular voices, such as Alain de Botton (2012), a Swiss atheist, who wrote a book about what religious communities do well and what atheists might learn from them.

The importance of science for the construction of atheism has already been underlined, but it is mirrored in the construction of religion as a system of propositional beliefs about the world. While people do hold such beliefs about the nature of the world, framed in relation to what we call religions, it is another matter to assume as an uncontested fact that this is why certain lifestyles are appealing to some people or that such beliefs have a significant role in people's lives, as presented in these documentaries. It is not an easy task to give a plausible general account of how people approach their "religious" beliefs. The answer depends on the selected theoretical framework. For example, pragmatism suggests that people have practical reasons to commit themselves to certain beliefs and the life paths that the beliefs are attached to. The problem with contemporary documentaries critical of religion is that these options are not explored and they are silent on the fact that their framework is also contestable. Rather, the propositional nature of religious beliefs is highlighted with the presumption that they can never be defended. This is suitable, because then the propositional claims of the natural sciences can be juxtaposed with religious claims—and through this comparison it is obvious that religion cannot compete with science (Taira 2015, 120).

It Is All about the Choices

The people whom Maher meets in *Religulous* represent stereotypical adversaries of atheists: a creationist, a radical Muslim, and a religious scientist. According to the standard narratological view, the use of such stereotypical characters based on caricatures brings the viewer to the intended moral perspective, at least until the film comes to an end, because following and enjoying the film is partly based on accepting the implied reader's perspective. In the context of *Religulous*, we are drawn to be critics of religion when watching the film, unless we consciously and continuously resist such a position. *Religulous* is based on caricatures, and this is so evident that no one expects a balanced view.

The shooting locations are relevant, too, as they seek to reflect a sort of ethnographic approach to the topic. Most are in different parts of the United States, while some are in Europe or the Middle East. This can be seen as an attempt to provide rigor to the collection of evidence and the following position: as you can see, I have traveled to many places and religious people in all of them were nuts!

More interesting is to explore gender, race, and class. If *Religulous* is to be believed, both religion and its criticism are male-dominated enterprises. Throughout the whole documentary, Maher interviews only one woman—a tourist guide in a theme park. It may be easier to laugh at religious men, and it is definitely easier to make religion look dangerous if the interviewees are men. A further implication is that men are represented as leaders in religious communities and women as quiet or silenced followers. *Religulous*, and many other documentaries, are happy to present both religious authority and criticism of religion as a male affair.

The most vocal and celebrated critics of religion are typically white. They tend to see themselves as defenders of minorities. The situation is more complex, however. The contemporary debate between atheism and religion has been criticized for being about white Western men talking to each other (Beattie 2007), and especially in the context of Islam, women are seen as needing protection from white Western men. Tina Beattie (2007, 64) compares the contemporary atheist

gaze directed toward veiled women to Saartjie Baartman, also known as the "Hottentot Venus," a South African orphan who was placed naked on display in England and France in the nineteenth century. In this sense, when white Western atheist men are trying to save dark-skinned (religious) women from their men, we are not far from what Gayatri Spivak (1999, 303) has called the cultural imperialist exploitation of feminism. The othering gaze embodied in the discourse of "the West and the Rest" (Hall 1992) has been shown to apply to the representations of religion in popular films where the main protagonist is considered a rational, white Western man who constructs the positionality of his own identity by distancing himself from the irrational and/or exotic religious other (Taira 2019).

The class aspect is never made explicit in *Religulous*, and it is rarely interesting for contemporary atheist critics of religion. It is as if the world would become perfect by erasing religion from it. John Gray's (2019, 20) comment on contemporary atheists as "unthinking liberals" points in a similar direction: as if without religion all people would think alike—like liberals. There are examples, however, in which religious leaders are represented as rich hypocrites who spend donations on expensive clothes. This could be understood as a potential reference to the class issue, but it is not made explicit. Social justice is not a theme that the film touches upon, possibly because it might force people to see division in the ranks of atheists, too.

In sum, *Religulous* does not counter, challenge, or deviate from typical contemporary representations of atheism or atheist imaginations of religion. It repeats, re-distributes, and strengthens the existing articulations of atheism and thus contributes to the maintenance of the currently dominant form of atheist identity.

The Continuing Impact of *Religulous*

Religulous was commercially successful, and its reception among film critics was moderately positive. A typical review gave three or three-and-a-half stars out of five. Most critics thought that the documentary was funny in spite of offering a one-dimensional representation of religion. The life of *Religulous* has continued in social media. The Facebook page of the film announced on October 4, 2013: "*Religulous* opened 5 yrs ago today; still religious people in the world (damn!) but to thousands who told me they quit, congrats and Thank YOU!" The comments reveal some of the functions that the film has had. Some testify that the film changed their lives and some accuse it of intolerance. Yet, for others, the film worked as an entertaining extension of new atheism. This range of views is not surprising. Some found it helpful for their identity construction, some thought it was an attack against their identity, some shrugged their shoulders, and some have tried to make others watch it. What is relevant is that *Religulous* has been articulated in relation to the wider atheistic struggle against religion. It was associated with new atheism when it was released, spreading similar ideas through the unconventional genre of the "comic documentary," and its influence continues to the present day. There was no tenth-anniversary update, but the Facebook page is still active in 2020. Posts highlighting the irrationality, harmfulness, or silliness of religion are frequently made there.

Conclusion

This exploration has suggested that atheistic documentaries tend to represent religious ideas as irrational and harmful. This deceptively simple popular representation is related to an implicit assumption about atheism and atheists. Atheists are presented as rational people who base their views on scientific evidence and are morally superior. This dichotomy is needed for the construction and articulation of atheist identity in popular discourse, and it may also motivate people to act on behalf of atheism.

In analyzing *Religulous* in detail, the intention has not been to defend any religious position or judge criticism of religion. Such a popular documentary film can be regarded as data to be studied by scholars, in order to determine how the atheistic identity position is constructed through imagining its Other, "religion," how those representations are articulated in relation to each other to form a rather unified view about atheism and religion, and, further, how such views are articulated in terms of wider social processes to be part of atheistic identity politics. Such an approach is by no means limited to atheistic documentaries, because similar imaginings and representations are part of all sorts of cultural products, but it is necessary to pay close attention to the particularities of the medium without decontextualizing the product from the surrounding society.

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[i] https://www.the-numbers.com/movie/Religulous#tab=summary; http://www.boxofficemojo.com/movies/?id=religulous.htm, accessed May 26, 2019.