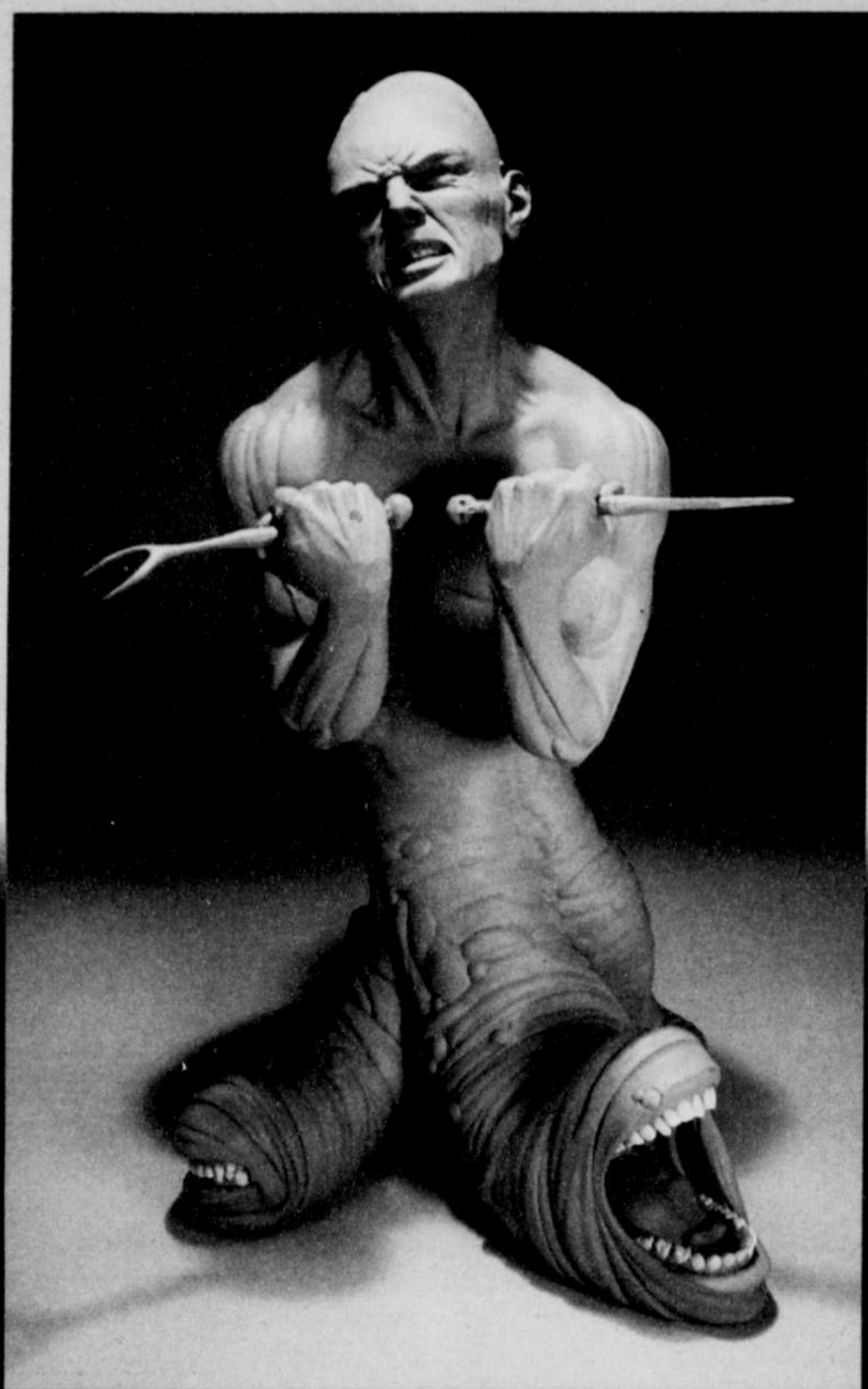


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Losing His Religion

Bill Maher would rather laugh with the sinners

Bill Maher is a brave man. Not only does he flaunt his political incorrectness regularly as the host of HBO's *Real Time with Bill Maher*, but now he's taking on fundamentalist wackos in *Religulous*, a documentary coming out this fall.

Jim Radosta: How do you feel about the Democrats' stance on gay marriage—basically equal rights across the board but without the M word. Is it chickenshit, or is it politically prudent in order to get elected?

Bill Maher: Well, both. I would say the same about a number of issues with the Democrats—the drug war would be in that same category of “Yeah, when I’m in a certain mood, I get very angry because I wish they would stand up.”

I wish we really would have a left wing in this country. We have a hard-right wing, which is the Republican Party, and we have a centrist party, which is the Democratic Party. We don’t have anybody saying: “Oh, we should actually cut the Pentagon budget. We should have a single-payer health care plan like Canada and take profit out of it altogether.”

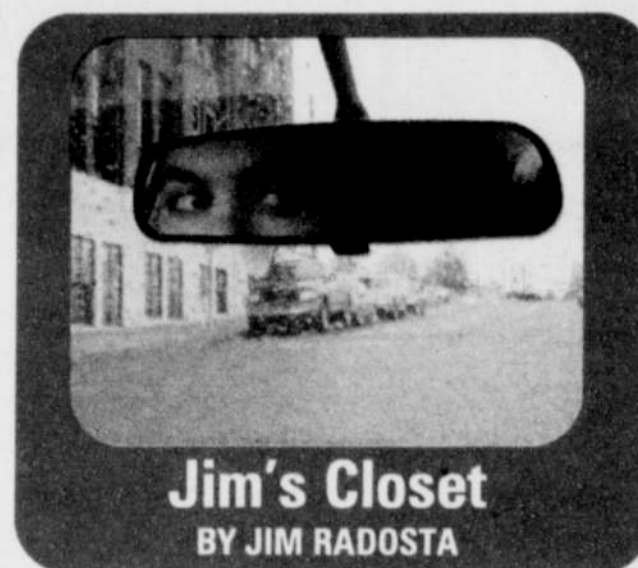
But I guess that’s the country we live in, so the choice becomes: Do you want to stand up for things that might basically elect John McCain, which would be even worse, or do you want to kind of shut your mouth up about certain things while the election is going on, in the hope that we can elect somebody more progressive and that, when they get into office, then they’ll be able to effect change that we all think is in their heart—even if they don’t say it.

JR: What do you think will be the fallout from last month’s same-sex marriages in California? Could it become a wedge issue like Massachusetts in 2004?

BM: Oh, very much so. Yeah, I mean, they’ll use whatever they can. They’ve used that before and—let’s be honest—the only thing Republicans really have going for them this year is fear...fear of terrorists coming over the ocean and fear of immigrants coming over the border and fear of homosexuals coming over your back.

When you look at it, they really do not have an issue. And when you don’t have an issue, that’s what you’ve got to go to—it’s negativity and fear. Why this is something that inspires fear in people—that’s something I will never understand. [Laughs] You know, the old thing about if gays get married, then it somehow threatens heterosexual marriage? It just so doesn’t track on any level, but then again, any sort of homophobia doesn’t really track on any logical level. It probably comes largely from religion; if it wasn’t in the Bible, they would not really have any leg to stand on—not that I consider that much of a leg.

JR: You interviewed some gay Muslim activists in *Religulous*. What was that filmmaking process like, and have the death threats started to roll in yet?



BM: Oh, no. It was fun. It was a great experience. We traveled to the Middle East and to European capitals and then, of course, through the South of the United States and Salt Lake City. It really covered the waterfront, and it was fascinating.

We went to probably the world’s only Muslim gay bar in Amsterdam and interviewed the two guys who run it. Of course, they were the only two guys in the bar that night. [Laughs] So I wonder how large the gay Muslim population is, even in Amsterdam.

JR: Has it been difficult to “come out” as a celebrity atheist?

BM: First of all, I like to call myself a “rationalist” because I think the word “atheist” has a negative connotation; people right away kind of freeze up, and also it implies a level of definitiveness that is one of my main criticisms of religion itself. I’m not sure there’s not some God or some force. You know, what I say in this movie, and I’ve been saying on TV for 15 years, is “I don’t know, and as long as I’m on earth, I can’t know, so I don’t really care.” My interest is in leading an ethical life for the sake of it—not because somebody is gonna save my ass in the next world, which I’m not even sure there is one.

But we do try to make the point in the movie that the number of atheists and agnostics in this

country, if we want to use those terms, is now I think something like 16 percent—which doesn’t seem like a lot, but for minorities, it’s huge. It’s a bigger minority than almost any other minority, like blacks, Jews, homosexuals, NRA members, Hispanics—all those are very powerful minorities with powerful lobbies. And yet the rationalists—nothing.

So it’s not that the numbers aren’t there; it’s just that the organization

isn’t there and the will to stand up is very lacking—the will to stand up and say: “Hey, you guys are the crazy ones who believe in the talking snake. We’re rational.” 10

BILL MAHER performs 8 p.m. July 12 at Arlene Schnitzer Concert Hall, 1037 S.W. Broadway. Tickets are \$37.50-\$67.50 from the box office or Ticketmaster.

Arts and Culture Editor JIM RADOSTA needs your feedback. E-mail him at jim@justout.com.



Bill Maher