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### *Chasing Amy, Dogma, and Red State*

#### How Kevin Smith's Spirituality Speaks to Generation X

*John Kenneth Muir*

*Dogma* is a lot more accessible than any sermon. This movie has a real chance of getting young people talking about faith. If the Inquisition were around, they would undoubtedly brand Kevin a heretic and light him on fire.<sup>1</sup>

—Actor Ben Affleck on Kevin Smith's controversial religious fantasy, *Dogma* (1999)

In the introduction to my 2002 monograph, *An Askew View: The Films of Kevin Smith*, I compared New Jersey's independent filmmaker to Woody Allen and noted specifically that Smith appears to be “the only young writer-director working today who asks the deeper questions about love, religion, and sex in a way that makes audiences laugh.”<sup>2</sup>

Although the two directors undeniably share an ideal of personal, “slightly exaggerated”<sup>3</sup> comedy, they also boast important contrasts. Allen is a senior citizen boomer, Smith a forty-something Generation Xer. And they diverge radically in terms of *specific* sentiments about religion. Allen is famously an atheist, and Smith, perhaps somewhat less famously, might accurately be described as a liberal Catholic.

In broadly understood terms, liberal Catholicism is that contemporary branch of Catholicism that came into existence following the Second Vatican Council, or Vatican II of 1962–1965, which permitted Catholic scholars to grapple with and debate issues of modernity, including the ban on birth control, religious freedom, and anti-Semitism. The fruit from Vatican II has also been defined as “an assertion of individual conscience that could stand up against the authority of even the Pope.”<sup>4</sup> Additionally, it has also branded a form of religious progressivism. Although many scholars now believe liberal Catholicism is undergoing a reevaluation, the form promised and continues to promise a more personal, more individual brand of faith.

Uniquely, the widely understood shape of liberal Catholicism adheres closely to the context of Generation X, as Smith's contemporaries are often described in the press. Born between the years 1960 and 1980, Generation Xers stereotypically remain independent, resourceful, self-sufficient, and well educated. They often do not commit to just one career or vocation over the span of their professional lives, and work to live, not live to work. More trenchantly, members of Generation X reveal considerable disdain for many of the established pillars of traditional American society and culture.

To wit, this generation's faith in government was affected negatively by the Watergate scandal of the early 1970s. Its belief in technology was shaded by catastrophic events such as the Three Mile Island incident, the Challenger disaster, and the Chernobyl accident. Even Generation X's belief in patriotism and nationalism was compromised by the moral quagmire of the Vietnam War.

As for religion, Generation X came of age exposed to the likes of 1980s televangelists Jimmy Swaggart and Oral Roberts, who, to describe the matter charitably, appeared to practice a "do what I say, not what I do" approach to Christianity. In 1987, Roberts made a notorious solicitation on television for \$8 million, noting that if he failed to receive the princely sum, God would surely take him "home." In 1988, Swaggart was charged with the solicitation of a prostitute and wept crocodile tears for his sins on broadcast television. Neither example provided a positive or uplifting example of organized religion. Accordingly, in his 1999 film *Dogma*, writer-director Smith has Rufus, the apocryphal Thirteenth Apostle, note that God is unhappy with those things that man has done in his name, and rattles off examples such as "war, bigotry" and yes, "televangelism."

So in short, all the authorities that previous generations of Americans had so admired and relied upon in issues of governance, science, war, and faith are suspect to members of Generation X. Sometimes, they are actually *criminally* suspect.

Growing up in suburban, blue-collar New Jersey and attending parochial school at Our Lady of Perpetual Help, Kevin Smith was surrounded by a Catholic worldview. He has remembered, on occasion, the lessons of Sister Theresa, a favorite teacher who very much impressed him and who introduced him to one of his favorite films: Fred Zinneman's *A Man for All Seasons* (1966).<sup>5</sup> Although George Lucas's *Star Wars* (1977) is widely heralded as the wellspring of inspiration for much of Smith's cinematic humor and allusions, a case might also be forged that his cinematic template is actually *A Man for All Seasons*: a movie that debates man's approach to religion on Earth and is rich with vibrant, intelligent dialogue.

In emulating the cerebral, engaging dialogue of *A Man for All Seasons*, Smith has peppered his three most serious and meaningful films—*Chasing Amy* (1997), *Dogma* (1999), and *Red State* (2011)—with his Generation X-based, liberal Catholic viewpoint on religion, which he describes, importantly, as a personal experience. In particular, Smith has noted often that he is "into Jesus" and also that his philosophy, expressed in films such as *Dogma* (1999), is simply, "Faith good; religion not good."<sup>6</sup>



Would you burn this man at the stake for heresy? Kevin Smith (a.k.a. Silent Bob) in *Jay and Silent Bob Strike Back* (2001).

Although this directorial statement of principle reads as almost boiler-plate Generation X philosophy, it has been persistently misunderstood by older, well-established, conventional men of faith, such as the Catholic League of Religious and Civil Rights' William Donohue as an attack on religion and faith, not as a new and, indeed, sympathetic viewpoint on the topic. Other prominent Catholics who have spoken

out against Kevin Smith and his films—likely without seeing them—are New York’s Cardinal John O’Connor and “America’s mayor,” Rudolph Giuliani. Smith is a magnet for controversy because he speaks and writes as openly and candidly about his faith as he does sex or bodily functions and, for the older generation, this is, in the vernacular, simply “too much information.”

In terms of his skeptical generation, Smith clearly does not stand alone in either his support of faith or disdain for organized religion. A recent study in the *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* reported, for example, that Generation Xers of religious affiliation are considerably less likely than their Boomer parents to separate from their faith. In other words, Generation X is inherently mistrustful of authority and religious Gen Xers have, therefore, personally *tested and questioned* their ideas of faith. And in general, the rest of the Gen Xers have lined up behind them in their conclusions. A personal exploration is thus followed largely by affirmation, not repudiation.

By questioning organized religion, then, Generation X seems to actually *strengthen* the personal case for faith, and that is the fundamental element underlining the Kevin Smith cinematic equation. He uses irreverence, movie allusions, and scatological humor to make faith approachable and then, finally, a positive social or cultural value. Smith and his generation also widely reject the divisive social teachings and historical mistakes of the Catholic Church, while focusing instead on the explicit messages of Jesus Christ. This new (and liberal) approach conforms perfectly to the “solitary goal” of Vatican II and the 1967 *Populorum Progressio* of Paul VI: “[to] carry forward the work of Christ himself.”

### “HE’S NO EXAGGERATOR: THE DUDE’S A CATHOLIC”

On first blush, the romantic comedy *Chasing Amy* does not appear to carry any weighty message regarding Catholic religion or faith. The film depicts an emotional episode in the life of a New Jersey born-and-bred comic-book artist, Holden McNeil (Ben Affleck), who falls hard for another comic-book artist, gorgeous Alyssa Jones (Joey Lauren Adams). This duo is soon a couple, but McNeil manages to wreck a “true love” relationship by obsessing on Jones’s (considerable) previous sexual experiences.

In particular, Alyssa is an avowed lesbian, though her acceptance of Holden’s advances and history suggest, at minimum, she’s bisexual. Uniquely, it’s the *heterosexual* promiscuity in Alyssa’s past that Holden can’t seem to parse and which drives him to alienate and eventually forsake the one woman in the world who accepts him and loves him as he is. Holden finally loses Alyssa by attempting to up the ante in terms of his sexual experience, inviting Alyssa to participate in a ménage-a-trois with his best friend.

But, in affecting and moving terms, Alyssa refuses to compromise her values (and the truth of her personal journey) even for the man she loves so much. She’s been



there, learned that such sexual activity doesn't nurture her soul, and, accordingly, won't go back. She is resolute.

Writing in the *New York Times*, Terry Teachout recognized that *Chasing Amy* is "strewn with allusions to Roman Catholicism" and that the "morally serious"<sup>7</sup> Alyssa characterizes some crucial aspect of Catholicism—namely, the desire for *divine grace*. In particular, Teachout points out that Alyssa accepts and takes responsibilities for her sexual past and missteps, and describes herself in the language of sin, notably, as "sated." Teachout writes, "Alyssa is transformed by her love for Holden in a way directly analogous to the operation of divine grace. The outward sign of this transformation is that she abandons without a second thought her promiscuous ways, firmly refusing to return to them even for Holden's sake."<sup>8</sup>

As I wrote in *An Askew View: The Films of Kevin Smith*, *Chasing Amy* seems to actually concern the idea of erecting a new morality, and perhaps even a new spirituality, out of the ruins of an old and corrupted one. *Chasing Amy* portrays Alyssa not as an unrepentant sinner, despite her experimentation with homosexuality and overt promiscuity, but as someone who has known sin, experienced sin, and overcome it. By contrast, Holden is overcome with envy and jealousy and, in the end, is untrue to his very self. Consequently, he loses the one woman he loves because he can't stomach the idea that Alyssa is more sexually experienced than he is.

The film, thus, depicts Alyssa as a step or two further down the road of self-knowledge, enlightenment, and true spirituality than her would-be boyfriend. She has made mistakes, paid for her mistakes, and knows where she's headed. Smith presents the character of Alyssa as noble—possessed of "grace." In particular, she seems to know *sanctifying* grace (a permanent thing of the soul) through her difficult moments of *actual* grace, the survival, essentially, of a premarital sexual life without love. Alyssa's journey is thus representative of the very message of Catholicism and Jesus: that original sin exists in all men, but there is also the universal possibility of redemption.

In *Rolling Stone*, critic Peter Travers wrote that *Chasing Amy* appears designed to "piss off a lot of politically correct people,"<sup>9</sup> and to that tally, he might have added religiously correct people as well. Notably, the film doesn't blast or disdain homosexuality or promiscuity. Rather it derides the sins of envy and pride. Indeed, Alyssa seems dramatically possessed not only of grace but also of the virtues of humility and prudence. On the first account, she admits that she has made mistakes and erred. On the second, she demonstrates good judgment by backing away from Holden's plan, which she knows, in her soul, is wrong for her.

What *Chasing Amy* appears to state, in the final analysis, is that it is acceptable to be gay or to be promiscuous if you are true to yourself, if you possess the quality of grace. As you might guess, this nontraditional take on such social concerns is one that does not please conventional Catholics. Genesis 19 and Leviticus have been widely interpreted as statements against the practice of homosexuality, yet Smith doesn't conform to doctrine dealing with the subject. He's much more interested in the people in his story and what they learn about their own souls, rather than

in condemning whole cloth an alternative lifestyle. Unexcavated in the debate is an important and relevant question: Is the hatred of homosexuals that seems to appear in the Bible the result of the organized religion that rewrote it or a fair assessment of God's feelings on the matter?

Though anathema to the old guard, Smith's approach tends to please Generation X Catholics, who seek a less judgmental, less draconian approach to matters of spirituality and who have largely accepted premarital intercourse and same-sex love as part of today's human landscape.

### "GOOD LORD, THE LITTLE STONER'S GOT A POINT"

If matters of religion were pursued obliquely though meaningfully in *Chasing Amy*, that approach would change dramatically with Smith's 1999 magnum opus, *Dogma*. The epic fantasy-comedy, which critics termed "edgy but God affirming,"<sup>10</sup> represents Smith's dedicated attempt to make faith and spirituality approachable in a world where man's organized religion is monolithic, impersonal, and fallible.

*Dogma* recounts the story of the Last Scion, Christ's great-great-great niece Bethany Sloane (Linda Fiorentino), who is recruited by several (Christian) supernatural forces, including the voice of God, Metatron (Alan Rickman), the Thirteenth Apostle, Rufus (Chris Rock), and a muse, Serendipity (Selma Hayek), to save existence itself.

A demon, Azrael (Jason Lee), plans to exploit the actions of two renegade angels, Bartleby (Ben Affleck) and Loki (Matt Damon), and a loophole by the Catholic Church called "plenary indulgence" to undo all of God's creation. Bethany is an abortion clinic worker, and in the course of her quest is assisted by two stoner prophets, Jay (Jason Mewes) and Silent Bob (Smith).

Catholicism itself is represented by the character of Cardinal Glick (George Carlin), who is avaricious in his marketing desires and has launched a new PR campaign called "Catholicism Wow!" showcasing a reboot of Jesus known as the Buddy Christ.

The synopsis above only begins to scratch the surface of *Dogma's* labyrinthine plot. One sequence involves a creature called the Golgothon, who was born at Golga (or Cavalry), where Jesus was crucified. Those who died there had "their excrement . . . released as their bowels opened up and all that shit flowed into the pit."<sup>11</sup> The details of the script, and their adherence to Catholic mythology, are staggering and reveal that Smith is knowledgeable about the details of his faith. Even this fact is something that his critics are reluctant to grant him.

What they complain about most vociferously in *Dogma* is the association of a Christ relative with an abortion clinic, the notion that as a married couple Joseph and Mary would have had sexual intercourse together, and that God is, in fact, a female (in the film, Alanis Morissette). Again, some of the arguments against the film seem foolish. Bethany, after all, is characterized in the film as a faithless woman, one who, in the course of her heroic quest, discovers the place of God in her life, and



The Catholic Church gets a “hip” upgrade with Dogma’s (1999) Buddy Christ.

in all Creation. Her arc is one of growth, redemption, and enlightenment, so why on Earth is it a problem that at the outset of such a journey she should be employed at an abortion clinic? In terms of Mary and Joseph, lifelong celibacy defies what we already know and understand of all human beings. It’s weird and alienating to

suggest that married people do not, occasionally, engage in sex. So what's the problem acknowledging Joseph and Mary's essential humanity?

Logical debate aside, details such as these were considered inflammatory and incendiary by many men and women of religious conviction.

But as Smith often reported, "*Dogma* is for people who believe in God and think of themselves as spiritual but are confused and demoralized. This movie is not for the converted. It's for the disenfranchised. It's for the people who turn on the news at the end of the day and see stories about priests molesting kids, war in Ireland, and conclude, 'Well, that's what religion does for people. That's what God does for people.'"<sup>12</sup>

This viewpoint is given voice in the film by a villainous angel, Loki, who restates what he sees as the central religious critique of a poem appearing in Lewis Carroll's *Through the Looking Glass*, that "Organized religion destroys who we are by inhibiting our actions, by inhibiting our decisions, out of fear of some intangible parent figure, who shakes a finger at us from thousands of years ago and says 'Do it, do it and I'll fucking spank you!'"

What Smith seems to rail against in Catholicism is not the good works of Jesus or the concept of faith, but the often-contested idea of the Church as official arbiter of social values, one that imposes fear and hatred to support an antiquated belief system that, among other things, despises homosexuality.

In other words, *Dogma* goes right back to the Smith-stated paradigm, "religion bad; faith good." This thought reverberates through the film, which points out human weakness. The real crime of the film, perhaps—in the eyes of Church-affiliated critics—is that it very specifically points out the weakness, vice, and even criminality of the Catholic Church. It acknowledges the fallibility of "man-made doctrine"; the film was, therefore, met with hostility by those with a vested interest in the hierarchy—not because Smith was heretical, or anti-God, or anti-Jesus, but because he had dared to look at man's church and see that, like all of us, it is woefully imperfect.

That Smith criticized *them* seemed to be the very fact that so infuriated the Catholic league, an act of outright vanity. And yet, Smith had also accounted for this critique in the text of *Dogma*. The muse, Serendipity, notes in the film that she has "issues with anyone who treats God as a burden instead of a blessing." She further adds, "You people don't celebrate your faith. You mourn it." Many critics actually pinpointed this particular line as the film's central thesis. Writing in *America*, Richard A. Blake wrote that in *Dogma* Smith "has created a profoundly spiritual film, but he does not speak the church language of those of us who have absorbed several decades of dull, unimaginative sermons and ponderous ecclesiastical abstractions. *Dogma* takes aim at an audience that has not yet learned to take the suffocating face of religion as the norm."<sup>13</sup>

For some, Smith's film was not cause for celebration either, but dismissed as, conceptually, a cardinal sin.

### “FEAR GOD”

Although *Dogma* proved Smith’s highest-grossing film and appeared on several critics’ lists of “the ten best films of 1999,” the film’s controversial nature saw Smith and his family land in some considerable physical danger. Smith and his wife reportedly received bomb threats after his film, and *Dogma* was routinely picketed and protested in numerous cities. On one famous occasion, Smith joined the protests himself, railing against the very film he had made. His brazen act was not only courageous, it also pointed out a critical flaw of those objecting to the film. Most of those protesting *Dogma* had not only *not* seen the film but had no idea at all who Kevin Smith was, let alone the fact he was a Catholic.

In large part, Smith won the battle for the hearts and minds of the media and the movie-going populace in the *Dogma* public relations wars. As *Catholics in the Movies* established:

On the whole, the Catholic League essentially functioned to prove Kevin Smith’s point that Catholics take their faith too seriously and ironically to raise publicity and profitability for the film. . . . Yet the controversy also framed the film within a Catholic discourse. Smith used the opportunity to label himself “a practicing Catholic,” discuss his church-going habits and Catholic upbringing, and use his Catholic identity to counter the Catholic League’s objections.<sup>14</sup>

In a modern world where the pope is not infallible, the Catholic League was not infallible either. In the best tradition of liberal Catholicism, Smith had explored issues of his faith, and validated that faith, even if in doing so he made the religious establishment look foolish—not to mention antiquated—in terms of social issues and incompetent in the leveraging of PR techniques.

Some ten years later, Smith’s film career had seen even more ups and downs. His love story *Zack and Miri Make a Porno* (2008) did not live up to financial projections, and his mainstream thriller, *Cop Out* (2010), was reviled by critics as a kind of creative selling-out. Accordingly, Smith returned to his low-budget, independent roots, and, fueled by anger with and disdain for Hollywood, created his most caustic and most stylistically successful film, the religious horror film *Red State*.

If *Dogma* playfully nudged and chided organized religion for dividing people over social issues such as abortion, premarital sex, and homosexuality, *Red State* represented a frontal assault. The film tells the story of three sex-crazed high school students who take a wrong turn in their Internet search for sexual escapades, and end up in the not-so-tender custody of Aben Cooper (Michael Parks), a fire-and-brimstone fundamentalist priest who reads the Bible much too literally.

In *Red State*, the Aben Cooper figure boasts a real-life precedent, Westboro Baptist Church pastor Fred Phelps, who, with his rabid followers in tow, pickets funerals for gay soldiers with signs that read “God hates fags.” Among Phelps’s targets over the years have been Fred Rogers, Billy Graham, Stephen Colbert, and President Obama



**Fire and brimstone, courtesy of Preacher Abin Cooper (Michael Parks) in *Red State* (2011).**

(that is, the Anti-Christ). At one point, Phelps claimed that the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, represented God's punishment of a morally degraded United States.

Once more, a Kevin Smith film comments on the fact that so much of organized religion today seems to focus on those things morally righteous individual people and organizations dislike about evolving American culture, rather than celebrating the joyous and inspiring tenets of faith. In other words, where faith trumpets love and forgiveness and redemption, much of organized religion screeches about hate, thus dividing neighbor from neighbor.

More specifically, *Red State* examines the hatred roiling in modern America, violence encouraged by the eliminationalist rhetoric on the far-right fringe of the political spectrum. This form of rhetoric insists that those who believe differently from God's chosen—inevitably fire-breathing Southern fundamentalists—aren't merely wrong but actually deserve to die for their beliefs. In the body of the film, it is clear that Cooper actually tempts sinners to their death, entrapping them with promises of sex and lust. In that sense, he is no longer a man of God but a devil. Instead of lifting people up, he seeks to destroy those who don't meet his approval and literally cast them down to hell for their sins.

Dominated by blazing visuals and boasting a hand-held immediacy that rivets one's attention, *Red State* once more showcases Kevin Smith's strong moral and Catholic leanings. Here, Smith's point involves the "tribal" component of religion. We



**Love of God or the love of the Hatred? The Congregation is roused in *Red State*.**

see Aben's people heartlessly murder "sinners" without batting an eye. But then they deeply mourn the loss of members of their own flock. To these religious-minded people, some people are clearly more "human" than others, and more deserving of love and empathy. Only those who believe exactly what Aben believes will be saved. Everyone else deserves death—even though they too possess families, hopes, and aspirations.

Is such exclusionary behavior at all . . . Christian?

What *Red State* truly concerns is the inability of many people among the religious right to empathize with those who don't happen to agree with their extreme points of view. It's easier to kill these folks and remove the "threat" than to attempt to live side by side with those they disagree with. Why are some Christians so convinced of their moral superiority that they deem it right to kill for their beliefs and diminish other beliefs? Is there a difference between certainty of belief and faith? As the film's protagonist, Keenan (John Goodman), notes, "People just do the strangest things when they believe they're entitled. But they do even stranger things when they just plain believe."

In America today, we see candidates such as Michele Bachmann and Rick Perry seeking election to high office because, they broadcast so proudly, God told them to do so. In the last decade, we have also seen an international war launched (at least in part) on the basis of God's desire for such a war, apparently spoken to one man, President George W. Bush. What Kevin Smith's *Red State* obsesses on is this idea

that some people—usually on the right wing of the spectrum—mistake their value system as having originated directly from God.

Once one believes this fallacy—that God is literally whispering in one's ear—all those who oppose the great cause become not just infidels but dedicated enemies of God Himself. The certitude of God's ear can very easily makes monsters out of men, as we see in *Red State*. Critic Cathleen Falsani writes that "*Red State* vividly reminds us that some of the most insipid acts of evil have been perpetrated by people who believed they were acting on the side of goodness, righteousness and God."<sup>15</sup>

Humorously, Aben Cooper's sense of certainty about his fire-and-brimstone brand of Christianity is also the very quality that eventually undoes him and his bloody, violent cult. He hears what he believes (and thus "knows") are the trumpets of heaven, and makes a very bad choice based on his certainty. His understanding of this event leaves much to be desired, but it showcases the blunder of thinking in absolute certainties. Is it not supreme arrogance to believe that God speaks to us and that only we can interpret His plan?

*Chasing Amy*, *Dogma*, and *Red State* form the corners of a very unusual film trilogy. The films of Kevin Smith travel from grace to faith to absolute condemnation of religious certainty. Smith's trajectory in this trilogy seems to echo the arc of our very turbulent times. America is more divided in 2013 than ever before by issues of faith, and Smith both sees and laments the division. But, importantly, he doesn't see faith as the problem. In the tradition of the liberal Catholic and the Generation Xer, he blames the messenger: the Catholic Church, and organized religion as a whole.

In probing the matter of spirituality, Smith answers his own question in the affirmative.

"So isn't it possible to be a guy who makes movies chock-a-block full of dick and fart jokes and still have faith in God?"<sup>16</sup>

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