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Beautiful Dreamers: A Documentary Asks “What is God”?

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It's hard to argue with “God is love.” That's what we hear from a chorus of voices most of the way through Peter Rodger's *Oh My God*, an “epic” documentary (in press release language) that will appear in theaters around the country this month. Those words come first from, of all people, Ringo Starr, complete with southern California sun on the flowering tree behind him. Then, over the reedy echoes of a female cantor, a handful of others from around the world say the words too, each in their colorful natural habitats, accompanied by the whirling of dervishes. “God,” they say again and again, “is love.”

God is a lot of other things too. Over the span of three years, Rodger traveled through 23 countries asking religious leaders, celebrities, ordinary folks, and spectacular landscapes, “What is God?”

For Seal—the singer not the animal—God is “infinite energy.” A bearded jihadi, given enough time, successfully locates the verse in the Qur'an in which he says God condemns Jews and Christians to Hell. A well-polished imam in SoCal contradicts him. For a cynical Mexican student, “God is money.” A “God-conscious” American woman in a white sari oversees the care of mangled patients at a hospital in India. Maasai tribesman in Kenya sacrifice a goat to God for rain, to the disapproval of a collared Christian priest. There's a healthy helping of English atheists, each with particular and charming ways of scoffing off the notion entirely. “God is a word,” one of them explains. And then the silence of all eternity passes through snowy Himalayan vistas.

It is true. God is an idea that people think about really differently. This God is a complex creature.

Where Can I Buy This God?

None of this, in *Oh My God* at least, falls short of ravishingly beautiful. Rodger ensures that people answer his question only in the most stunningly picturesque of settings. He then captures them with the intensity of contrast and color, combined with frenetic editing, that we usually see for thirty seconds at a time in car

commercials (much of Rodger's previous film work, I knew before I wrote that, has been in making car commercials). "Where can I buy this God?" I almost find myself asking. Maybe that is just what my life needs—some colorful religiosity for a change.

Along with this spectacular fluttering of images comes an equally remarkable original soundtrack by composer Alexander van Bubenheim. I'm still not sure if it's fitting that Australian aborigines appear to the sound of electronic beats or exiled Tibetans to bluesy guitar licks over a synth choir. In almost no case is there any organic correspondence between sound and sight, yet, received together, the fit is each time eerily perfect. It suits the barrage of juxtapositions across great gulfs of language and place. The common conversation topic unites the most disparate voices. How can one not begin to suspect that perhaps we are all—Hollywood stars and *sadhus*, *jihadis* and Tibetans—possessed with the same God?

Peter Rodger, incidentally, has been traveling the world and making it look beautiful in his blood. He is the son of the eminent British photojournalist George Rodger and grew up watching his father capture life through a camera. One wonders if the Rodger family's social network is represented in the famous and semi-famous characters who are the film's authorities. Colorful African tribes, like the ones we meet in *Oh My God*, and all the rest of its remote exotica, were among his father's specialties. Fortunately, Rodger's comfort with his craft pays off constantly in the magnificence of the images.

Glossy vistas, however, fall in stark contrast with the intensity of the director himself. He is on a quixotic quest, as the film's Web site puts it, to get to the bottom of the "My God Is Greater Than Your God" syndrome that plagues contemporary geopolitics. When we encounter the filmmaker it is usually in grainy footage framed by a black border that seems to be indicative of his mood. Once we even see him talking from his bed in a lonely hotel room, his eyes dark and stormy. His presence feels a bit like teenage angst—you know it's good for him, but you also know you'll like him better after he's through it.

A Question More Interesting Than Its Answer

Over the course of the film, Rodger's commentary offers a cluster of vague questions about the nature of the divine and, eventually, a sequence of tentative conclusions about why people believe all this stuff in the first place. Fear? Is God a policeman? A scapegoat? His discoveries, if anything, fall into the spiritual-but-not-religious sensibility that has been ascendant in popular culture for the last half century or so. Religion, with all its tribalism and corrupt leadership, is pretty much bad. God, or spirit, and the power of individuals to decide for themselves, are good. As he crosses the border between Kenya and Tanzania, at one point, he discovers, having felt no tremendous existential shift between the two, "Boundaries are drawn by Man [he always capitalizes Man] and not by God!" Tell that to the God of Moses at Mount Nebo.

As if the nature of God weren't perplexing enough, Rodger isn't even sure that the Almighty exists. "Did Man create God, or did God create Man?" he asks in his director's statement. No scientific evidence is offered—no lab coats and barely any "experts" in the matter, besides the inevitable expertise of everyday life presented by the peculiar cast of characters. In the end, there's very little ending for me to give away. "It's up to you to come to the solution," says Rodger's narration.

"Great," you might say. "I'm just where I've started." *Au contraire*. This is 93 minutes of marvelously conclusive evidence that the question may be more interesting than the answer.

How about that question, anyway? That matter of "God"? Do we have to have this fixation on "God" to begin with? The idea of a single, capitalized, omni-everything divinity isn't always and everywhere. When Christian missionaries traveled the world spreading their gospel in the early modern period, they were amazed at the kinds of confusions that would arise about their assertion that something called God might exist.

Most of us assume that when you ask about God, you're asking about the person/principle who/that is the "ultimate concern" of daily existence. This isn't necessarily the case. To Aristotle, for instance, God was important, though pretty much an afterthought compared to the much more pressing matters of politics, ecology, and rhetoric. Asking him about God would be like asking Pope Benedict about the sun. He'd answer your question, but he might wonder why you bothered asking. I wonder how many of Rodger's interlocutors might have felt that way.

Worse, one could even draw out post-colonial implications, reading *Oh My God* as a measure of the progress that monotheism's conceptual imperialism has made around the world. Best not to go there. Bringing down the cruel weight of history on Rodger's shoulders feels unfair to his good, if also intensely vexed, intentions.

Perhaps a focal point other than "God" would have been better, something more concrete. Health? Wealth? Wisdom? We all have opinions about these things. But, after all, the filmmaker is hunting after God for a reason. It is a word with particular currency among some of the persons who appear to be screwing the world up for all of us. And it is the same word by which billions of people carry on in the hope that they might teach it, in turn, to their children's children in peace and dignity.

If *Oh My God* is propaganda of some kind, it is likely the kind of propaganda we need. Despite a terrible title and more eye-candy than thoughtful substance, I really hate to complain about a work that captures such a shimmering diversity of perspectives and does so in an optimistic-enough fashion to inch our species one more millionth of an inch toward lasting peace and harmony.

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