Introduction

Being a fan of Bill Maher’s comedy in general (watching many episodes of “Real Time” on HBO and seeing him perform comedy live at the Celebrity Theatre last year or so), but not necessarily being a fan of his religious point of view, I expected Maher to make some funny and perhaps biting commentary on religion. At the very least, I expected him to make some points against religion that were worth addressing. In my view, however, Maher did not raise many points that religious adherents have to take too seriously. Before continuing, I should probably address why I feel that a philosopher should be able to comment on a film that was made by a comedian, with the obvious intent of being an entertaining look at religion. The reasons are simple: First, Maher gives a monologue at the end that gives his view on religion, without jokes, wherein he explicitly states that we need to declare war on religion before it kills us. This claim (and others) can be assessed. Second, in many publicity interviews to promote the film, Maher said that he wanted to make this statement about religion, so this is not just a film analogous to Borat where we’re not sure if Maher is serious in what he is doing (to a significant extent, in between the jokes).

In my comments, then, I will first, detail some fallacies I believe Maher committed in the movie; second, I will mention some good points he raised; and finally I will conclude with an argument that Maher could have made, but did not make, that would have been much more sound in this debate.

The issue of God is a philosophical issue

In general, Maher just doesn’t seem to understand why the issue of God is a philosophical issue at all. For instance, Maher seemed to be extremely close to seeing or claiming in the film that the issue of God is non-falsifiable; that is, in many more than 2000 years, no one has been able to prove that God does not exist (in part due to the features or characteristics that God is supposed to have – immateriality or materiality but living very far away, etc.), and I have examined disproofs of God’s
existence and think they fail in their purpose as well. On the other hand, no one has proven to everyone else’s satisfaction that God does in fact exist. In short, the issue of God’s existence is a philosophical issue for a reason, so one needs to be careful to not make it sound like they have the answer (either way), if they are not able to engage the objections against their view and prove every other position wrong.

The implications of agnosticism and the Argument(s) from Ignorance

Moreover, Maher doesn’t seem to follow the implication of agnosticism. Namely, if your religious position is that you are not sure whether God exists (and you’re only “peddling doubt”, as Maher states), how can you mock anyone who believes anything about religion? This argumentative strategy commits the fallacy of Argument from Ignorance; namely, it concludes from a premise that states that one does not know something, that one side or the other side of an issue is true. For instance, no one has proven that the Loch Ness Monster does not exist; therefore, the Loch Ness Monster does exist. When explaining this fallacy to my students, I like to say, if you don’t know, what can you conclude from that? That you don’t know. Thus, Maher cannot conclude that someone who’s taken a stand that God exists is wrong, per se, from starting with the view that Maher does not know whether God exists. In addition, Maher commits the Argument from Ignorance fallacy again in his ending speech: How does no one else know anything about God, Maher asks? Because I (Maher) don’t know, and I’m pretty smart. But if you don’t know whether God exists or not, how can you claim that you know someone else does not know (or that knowledge of God is somehow impossible)? One last related point: How can Maher demand absolute certainty on the question of Jesus’ existence (and use that as an argument as to why we can question all of Christianity) on one hand, and then argue for the truth of evolution, even though science arguably cannot give us absolute certainty - only theories that submit themselves to testing from now until forever? To be sure, he cannot.
Other Fallacies committed

Moreover, he commits the Straw Man fallacy several times. The Straw Man fallacy is committed when one misrepresents an opponent’s position (or one’s opponent) in such a way so as to make their position ridiculous and easily attacked. Maher claims, for example, that religions sell an invisible God (not all believe that God is invisible), that they make up stories, knowing that they’re false. However, the whole notion of faith is that someone does not know if and whether God really exists, but believes in God for some other reason. In another instance, he claimed that religions are “selling certainty”; again, same point – if someone claims that they’re sure God exists, one can translate that claim into “I really have faith that God exists”, which is probably what most people mean when they say that they “know” God exists. Philosophy professors such as myself notice that non-philosophers use the word “know” all the time, not really being able to articulate exactly (1) what knowledge is or (2) what we really can know, and (3) they are not able to prove that they indeed possess much, if any, knowledge (at least in my 101 classes). But the largest commission of the Straw Man fallacy, in my view, was Maher’s argument at the end of the film, when he essentially claimed that all religions must “die” for man to live, because we’re all going to die from nuclear weapons (shown in the film) due to the fact that some (presumably a minority of?) religious adherents want the world to end soon in order to gain a speedier admittance to heaven. Another fallacy committed in the very same argument is Hasty Generalization (where one generalizes a conclusion from too little evidence); namely, he’s finding several extremists who believe (arguably) irrational things (e.g., to blow up the world and kill or restrainedly maim abortion doctors), and then concluding that every religion or adherent thereof holds these views and is therefore dangerous. Yet another fallacy was committed in his closing argument as well: The Black or White fallacy. This fallacy is committed when one ignores a plausible option and then argues against the options one does present in order to “prove” one’s desired conclusion. Thus, Maher’s last line in the film is: “Grow up or die!” That is, either
religious extremists will blow up the world with atheists and moderately religious people’s
tolerance or aid, OR everyone will grow up and we won’t die. Surely there are more options than
this.

I found other fallacies, but I will mercifully cease my criticisms for now and allow others in the
audience to pick them out and make their own assessment [Note: They now appear at the end of
this paper].

What about Buddhism?

As someone seriously interested in Buddhism, I also didn't appreciate that he said nothing about the
Eastern religions, especially because Buddha, for instance, purportedly said that you shouldn't believe
anything unless it accords with your experience and reason. There's a Buddhist sutra (or sermon)
with a possible follower of Buddha who charges, "You're going to make me give up my beliefs,
aren't you?" And Buddha purportedly responds, "No, you can still pursue my path without assenting
to everything I hold." This sounds exactly like the kind of view that Maher could get behind. But
Maher did not do a thorough job to defend his thesis.

What Maher may have gotten right

On the positive side (and not surprisingly, given that I’m a philosopher), I did think that Maher was
right that we really ought to question our religious beliefs at least to some extent. We should be able
to defend our view in some way against objections that people have toward our religions; in any
case, we have good reason to question what religion we’re following and give some reason as to
why we’re not following others. We can also ask if belief in God is rational, if God is knowable, or if
the issue of God is exclusively a matter of faith.
Moreover, I agree with Maher that Jesus was probably not (or would not be) a nationalist; that is, he wouldn’t advocate thinking that our country is better than others just because we’re America, given his statements about loving even one’s enemies, for instance.

Lastly, I agree that we’re not essentially a Christian nation and have not been necessarily founded as one, though even if we are a Christian nation, this point does and would not prove anything about the dangers or ridiculousness of religion, as Maher’s aim seems to be.

**Conclusion**

In sum, if Maher would have just said that *some* sects of some of the religions, mostly characterized by the word extremists, are very dangerous because they don’t care whether people have to die to make their “truths” come to fruition, and they advocate violence, and that this is unacceptable and we must fight these extremists, then this is a more fitting argument for him to make, at least as an agnostic.

Thank you for coming, and I look forward to hearing your reactions and comments.
**MORE FALLACIES:**

**Ad Hominem Abusive:** Maher says to the Trucker Chapel guys: It’s understandable that desperate people believe in God, but “you’re smart people”. Maher implies that smart people cannot believe in God. You’re either stupid or desperate if you believe in God. (This also implies that he’s also committing the Black or White Fallacy.)

**Weak Analogy:** Maher compares the belief in Santa Claus to God’s being able to listen to every prayer. If God is all-knowing, God would arguably and presumably know that you were going to talk to God and ask God for whatever, AND whether God would grant you your request or not, in advance of it happening.

**Inconsistency:** Maher said he’s peddling doubt and just asking questions during the film, but then in his last speech says, “but since there are no gods out there actually talking to us …”; this is not agnosticism, but atheism. Maher needs to make up his mind: he either believes that God (or gods) do(es) not exist, or is not sure whether God exists or not, and is open to the possibility.

**Weak Analogy:** Maher says in his last speech that if you’re a moderately religious person, you’re an enabler like a mafia wife, allowing or contributing to extremists killing others and destroying the world. However, a moderately religious person is not enabling the fringe groups, especially given our freedom of religion in America – what exactly are we supposed to do to those we consider fringe groups? We already have a law against killing, so what more can be done? Make religion illegal? Well, Maher still needs to prove that every religion (and how it is practiced) has violent tendencies, wants to destroy the world, etc., which is yet another example of Hasty Generalization.

**Straw Man:** Maher claims that religionists make their decisions based on irrationality (using chicken entrails instead of a compass) [beginning of last speech], where irrational beliefs are ones that can be proved wrong with evidence that all rational people accept. However, God is presumably a hypothesis that is in principle non-falsifiable (see “The issue of God is a philosophical issue” above) or non-rational (that is, faith is the kind of thing that will not change based on anything a person experiences in this lifetime; say aliens from other planets, the earth is not the center of the universe, and so on), so one cannot just say it’s irrational to believe in it – especially if one is truly an agnostic (which again commits the Argument from Ignorance).

**Black or White fallacy (CMD):** The Creationist Museum Director committed the Black or White fallacy – either you accept the whole Bible or one can question anything in it if, say, dinosaurs and people did not live on Earth at the same time.