


 A photograph of Bill Maher, a middle-aged man with light hair, wearing a dark suit, white shirt, and dark tie. He is standing behind a dark podium, looking slightly to his right with a thoughtful expression. His hands are clasped in front of him. The background is dark with some blue lighting and blurred text, possibly from a stage or studio setting.

Golden Rules

Bill Maher may be one of the nation's most outspoken cultural critics, but a part of him is still that innocent boy from River Vale. **BY PATTI VERBANAS**

THE RULES FOR LIFE, according to Bill Maher, are really quite simple: Treat your fellow man as you wish to be treated. Be humane to all species. And, most importantly, follow your internal beliefs — not those thrust upon you by government, religion, or conventional thinking. If you question things, you cannot go too far wrong.

Maher, the acerbic yet affable host of HBO's *Real Time*, author of *New Rules: Polite Musings from a Timid Observer*, and a self-described “atheist” (“I don’t know what happens when I die, and I don’t care”), recently released his first feature film, *Religulous*, a satirical look at the state of world religions. Here he gets real with *New Jersey Life* about faith, his idyllic childhood in River Vale, and why the best “new rule” turns out to be an old one.

What discovery surprised you the most upon completion of your movie *Religulous*?

Religion is even more absurd than I thought it was — and I had thought it was pretty absurd before we began. If people start with an

unshakable belief in something absurd, it's amazing how convoluted their minds become, how they will work backward to justify it. We make the point in the movie: Whenever you confront people about the story of Jonah and the whale — a man lived in a whale for three days — they always say, “The Bible didn’t say it was a *whale*. The Bible said it was a *big fish*.” As if *that* makes a difference.

What do you want viewers to take away from this film?

I want them to have a good time. It's a comedy. Beyond that, I would hope that the people who came into the theater who are already sympathetic to my point of view would realize that there's millions of people like that — who I would call “rationalists” — and they should not be so shy about expressing their opinions and taking part in the American debate. If *Religulous* is a rallying point for these people to speak up, that would be a great benefit.

If not religion, what *should* we be devoted to?

The Golden Rule is a good start: Treat your fellow man as you

would like to be treated. As we go through life we should be attempting to divest ourselves of all the selfish addictions that we accrue — money, ego, materialism, sex — all the things that distract us from finding what is in our inner self.

Tell us what it was like growing up in Bergen County. Do you ever go back home?

I like to say I had the last *Leave It To Beaver* childhood in America. I was in River Vale from when I was born in the mid-'50s until the early '70s, when I went to college. It was an innocent childhood, and that was perhaps what was flawed about it. The problems of the world were at bay. There was very little diversity in the town when I grew up. Luckily, I grew up in a liberal household. My father was a newsman, so it's not like the world didn't exist. We heard about it and talked about it at the dinner table. I was a delivery boy for the liquor store when I was a senior in high school. It was a very exciting job at the time — [lowers voice] I got to bring people liquor. I still visit the area. My sister lives in Park Ridge, so yes, I do get back at least three times a year.

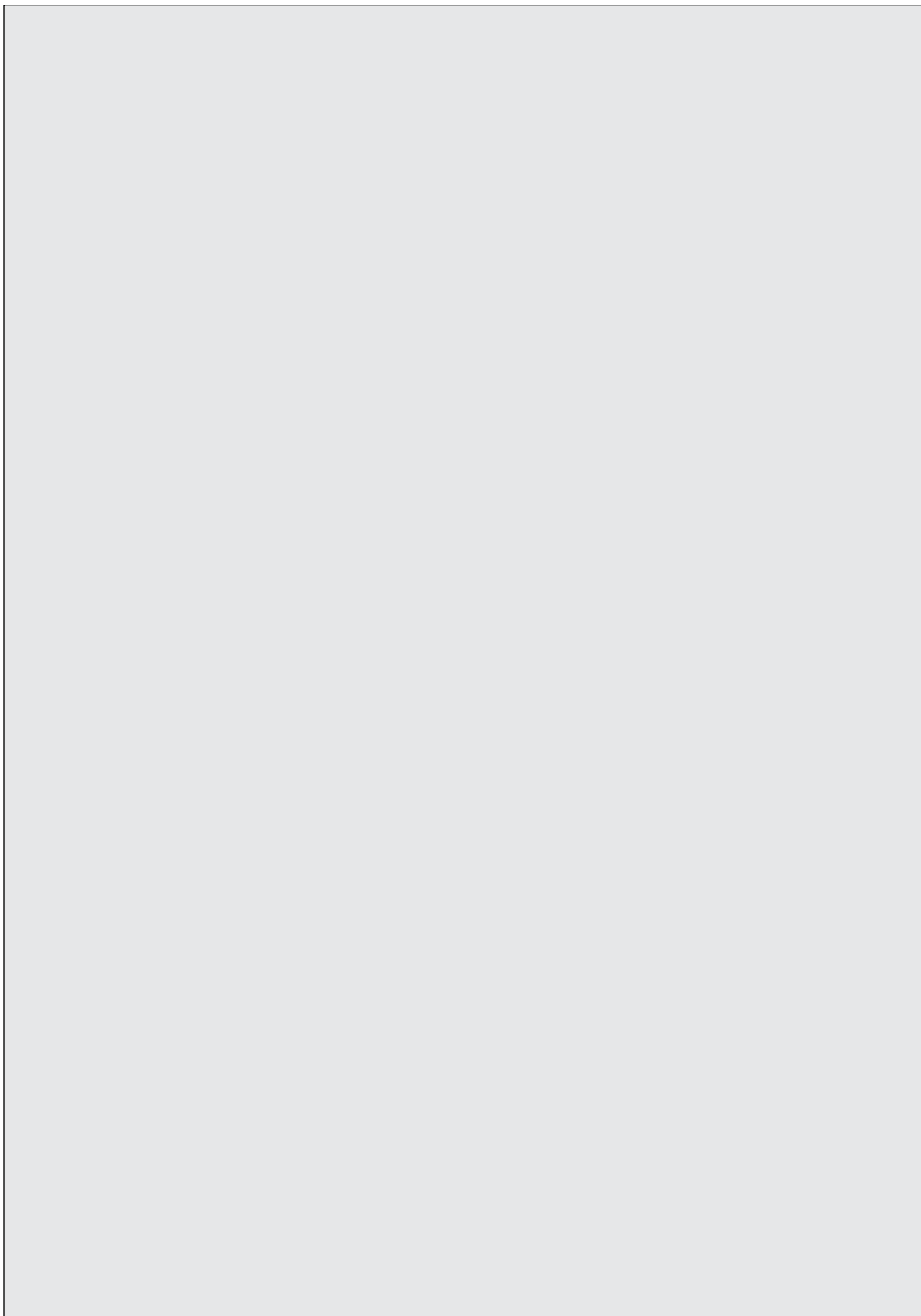
What constitutes a hero, and who today are yours?

When I was a kid my heroes were Mickey Mantle and Roger Maris — I wouldn't take off the Yankees uniform for quite a while. But now, definitely George Carlin is a hero of mine. He never pulled a punch. He was brave and got braver. That's the kind of person who I admire — someone with a sense of courage and integrity.

Tell us about your passion for animal advocacy and your role on the PETA board of directors.

I take my lead from PETA [People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals]. I don't pretend to be as active or knowledgeable as they are. Or, quite frankly, as brave. I couldn't take it looking at the horror stories that they see every day. When they ask me to write a letter or do an ad campaign or show up at a press ➡

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conference, I'm always happy to help out. I love animals. Some people don't feel a sense of horror when something happens to an animal, but I do. It's possible to change laws, and that's what PETA does. They lobby, and sometimes they are successful. They get people to stop experimenting so that they can come up with a perfume. Or they get

circuses to change the way they treat the animals. And, of course, the biggest case of animal abuse is factory farming and the horrible way that animals are treated. Did you know that a chicken lives only six weeks from the egg to your dinner plate? The chickens are hardly out of infancy when they start shooting them up with steroids

and growth hormones, which then get into you.

In this media-infused society, how can Americans become educated and form their own opinions on issues rather than just allowing the information to be fed to them?

Well, of course, they can watch *Real Time* [laughs]. You set me up for that one. In general it's a mind-set. The information is there. It's an astounding paradox: We live in the Information Age, but in many ways it seems so hard for people to get information. Why do something like 12 to 15 percent of the American public still think that Barack Obama is a Muslim?



Bill Maher outside Vatican City in *Religulous*.

It's amazing that ignorance remains so stubborn. We have information now everywhere. It's so easy to find answers to these questions. People are sheeplike because they are lazy and they are used to being pandered to, and the educational system has declined and let them down. It's a very conformist society.

What has been this year's most unsung issue?

That would be the U.N. report that said eating meat is far worse for global warming than all the cars' and planes' emissions. It is an astoundingly big story that the press completely glossed over.

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Bill Maher at the launch of PETA President Ingrid Newkirk's book, *Let's Have a Dog Party*.

I bet you you'd be hard-pressed to find one person in 100 on the street who is aware of it. What the report was noting is a combination of the pollution caused by factory farming — the methane that comes from the cows — and the deforestation. The amount of land it takes to grow a pound of meat as opposed to grain is enormous.

How do Americans go wrong in determining whom they should vote for?

Americans are anti-intellectual. They don't want to vote for someone who is smarter than them — which is ridiculous. You should absolutely want to vote for someone who is *way* smarter than you. But "elitist" is a dirty word in American politics. If you said to someone, "You're having brain surgery. Would you like an elite doctor?" Well, you know, they'd probably say yes. Americans vote based on narratives — storylines versus issues and policies. They're not ashamed about it, and the media doesn't make them ashamed about it. **NJL**

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