



Movie review Serious Man

Written and directed by Ethan and Joel Coen, Starring: Michael Stuhlbarg (Larry Gopnik), Richard Kind (Uncle Arthur), Fred Malamed (Sy Ableman), Sari Lennick (Judith Gopnik), Aaron Wolff (Danny Gopnik), Jessica McManus (Sarah Gopnik), Adam Arkin (divorce lawyer) 105 minutes, rated R, comedy, drama, 2009.

BY DOUG HODGKINSON

You will find this same story in the Book of Job in the Old Testament told with a similar Comic/Ironic style. Apparently it is both autobiographical and self-mocking for the Coen brothers, reflecting on their upbringing in a wealthy suburb of Minneapolis, St Louis Park, MN.

The prologue to the movie is done entirely in Yiddish and takes place in a shtetle in Poland. An angry woman stabs a dybbuk (evil spirit of a dead man) with an ice pick or wait... maybe it's just an old rabbi who manages to stagger away in the night! Does the dybbuk wait 150 years to seek some evil revenge or is it just Larry Gopnik's inability to manage the pressures of his life?

Larry has some pressures. He teaches physics at the university and is awaiting tenure. Someone is feeding the tenure committee damaging and false information. A student he fails for not being able to do the mathematics required of the course attempts to bribe him for a pass and then threatens legal action. His brother Arthur, a once brilliant mathematician but now going mad, sleeps on Larry's couch, monopolizes the bathroom and gets evicted from casinos for counting cards. His son Danny attends Hebrew school, but listens in class to Jefferson Airplane and finds his bliss in toking up. At his bar mitzvah he is so stoned that it is touch and go whether he will be able to sing his bit of torah. His daughter Sarah wants to deny her heritage and get a nose job. And, the jewel in the

crown of all his troubles (or is it?) is that his wife Judith wants Larry to move out to The Jolly Roger motel and get a divorce in order to marry their smarmy friend Sy.

In all his puzzlement and pain Larry seeks the advice of the rabbis (three of them!) of his synagogue. Two of them offer only the most fatuous advice and the senior rabbi never sees him because he is "busy." "He doesn't look busy," says Larry. "He's thinking," says the secretary. All around him his friends and those he consults professionally are puzzled by his plight and have no helpful response to his questions of faith "Does God care what is happening? Does God cause it? Is there something he should do? How could he become a more serious man?" As a physicist and somewhat observant Jew he is caught between his own

knowledge of the principles of indeterminacy (here it is worth googling Schrodinger's Cat) and his religious tradition. As a physicist, he is well aware that his precise mathematics and quantum theory provide no 'final solution' (you should pardon the pun!) to what is 'real'. On the other hand, neither are the traditional sources of religious wisdom helpful. We root for Larry to become a "mensch" and to step up to take control of his life. I mean, does he really have to pay for the funeral of the wealthy s.o.b. who was taking away his wife? Is this all the work of a vengeful God who has some mysterious purpose in mind? Do his dreams and nightmares provide clues to God's purposes for the future? Is it all just random bad luck and poor management?

The story of Job is often taken to be a parable of the virtues of patience and firm faith in God, no-matter-what! In the end Job gets a new wife and twice as much stuff as he lost in the tests that the satan devised for him. Normally, such a view is seen to be an ironic comment on life, as if the Narrator turns to the reader and offers a very broad nudge, nudge, wink, wink.

A Serious Man is a modern retelling of the story of Job. Larry and Judith are reconciled. Danny passes his bar mitzvah. Larry gets tenure. Life goes on. Well...except that Danny's school is about to be engulfed by a tornado and Larry's physician phones to say he'd like to see Larry, "right away" about some x-rays...

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You wanted to know I'm a new Anglican. Can you tell me a little more about the Church?

BY PETER DAVISON

Q: I'm a new Anglican. Can you tell me a little more about the Church?

A: Our name is obviously derived from our English roots. Until 1955 we were still called

"The Church of England in Canada," which left the impression we were for British immigrants only, so we became "The Anglican Church of Canada." Our demographics have changed, and we now reflect a greater linguistic and cultural diversity.

Theologically and liturgically, we have been a "big tent" church. For quite a long time we were divided into "high" and "low" church groups. The "high" group was more Catholic in its theology and liturgy, while the "low" group was more Protestant and less sacramental. Today there is a broad consensus liturgically. Most

parishes use the (1985) Book of Alternative Services, and eucharistic vestments that were controversial fifty years ago are pretty much the norm. This stems from the liturgical renewal of the fifties and sixties, which was an ecumenical movement. Today, Anglicans, Roman Catholics and Lutherans in particular use a common lectionary for Sunday readings, have similar colours for the liturgical seasons (blue for Advent, white or gold for festivals of our Lord, purple for the main penitential season of Lent, and red for Holy Week, Pentecost and commemoration of martyrs), and their clergy wear similar vestments. Many of us feel comfortable worshipping in each other's churches.

Some of this consensus, however, is giving way to different styles of "doing church." In an increasingly secular society people feel a need to know more about their faith. Seminaries welcome students to study theology without any thought of ordination,

and programs like EFM (Education for Ministry) are designed to help laypeople exercise their own ministries by giving them a solid grounding in the Bible, Church History, Issues and Choices in Theology, and the art of Theological Reflection. A growing number of parishes combine traditional worship with informal services and contemporary music. With a better informed and more active laity, clergy-focused ministry is giving way to a more collaborative style. One of our challenges today is to remember our own long history of accommodating quite different ways of being Anglican. Globally, we number eighty million people, of whom most are in the southern hemisphere. Cultural differences influence approaches to theological issues, and these have led to some serious tensions — but this is true of most Churches these days. The tensions have a lot to do with significant changes over the last fifty years, with some feeling we haven't gone far enough, and others wanting to

turn the clock back to an often idealized past. Canadian Anglicans have experienced the following changes over the last five decades: 1959-62, Book of Common Prayer revised (the last really conservative revision in the Anglican Communion). The sixties quickly lead to a demand for more contemporary forms of worship, and ecumenical collaboration. 1963, the Anglican Congress in Toronto moved Anglicanism from colonial church to global communion: widespread questioning of traditional theologies. 1967, General Synod permitted the remarriage of divorced persons: 1968, children begin to be admitted to holy communion without confirmation: 1971, a new joint hymn book with the United Church, but Church Union talked collapse shortly afterwards: 1976, ordination of the first women to the priesthood; the debate on homosexuality and same-sex blessings got under way: 1985, Book of Alternative Services published: 1993, the Anglican

Church of Canada apologised for abuse in residential schools: 1994, the first woman bishop in Canada: 1998, new hymn book (Common Praise) is published: 2001, full communion with Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada: 2002, Diocese of New Westminster authorised limited same-sex blessings: 2008, Lambeth Conference of bishops revealed split over sexual issues.

The rapid secularisation of the Global North has turned formerly "Christian nations" into pluralistic societies and "mission territories." Meanwhile, Christianity grows in the Global South, whose churches are increasingly inclined to flex their muscles. Anglican tradition, however, has given us a long history of learning to see conflict as constructive, and to accommodate considerable diversity. I believe we are well placed to play a key role in the ongoing life of the Christian church, both in Canada and internationally.

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