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## Keeping the Faith

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# Keeping the Faith

## **Abstract**

This is a review of *Keeping the Faith* (2000).

Edward Norton made a huge splash in the movie world when, in his 1996 debut *Primal Fear*, he showed his ability to elevate ordinary thriller material with electrifying acting. Since then, he's been doing prestige work, from singing and dancing for Woody Allen in *Everybody Says I Love You*, to portraying dark corners of the psyche in *American History X* and *Fight Club*. So why did he choose for his directorial debut a romantic comedy with a broad slapstick frame? Probably to do a favor for his friend, screenwriter Scott Blumberg. But given Norton's huge reputation as an acting talent, *Keeping the Faith* inevitably becomes a test of his ability to elevate light comedic material from behind the camera, as well as in front of it.

The movie's premise reads like the opening to a bad joke—a priest and a rabbi open a bar—and Blumberg acknowledges that fact by bookending the plot with scenes of Norton's character, Father Brian Finn, pouring out his tale of woe to a bartender. Seems Brian and the rabbi, Jake Schram (Ben Stiller), were childhood friends with a girl named Anna (Jenna Elfman). After Anna moved away, Brian and Jake grew up and took their respective vows, doing their best to shake up their stodgy faiths with new ideas. Now Anna's back in New York as a high-powered corporate merger expert, and her old friends are wrestling with some more-than-friends feelings for her, as they prepare to turn abandoned loft space into an interfaith nightspot.

Like the two lead characters who juggle spirituality and worldly concerns on a daily basis, *Keeping the Faith* has a split personality. On the one hand, it's a wacky comedy with pratfalls, sight gags, and of-the-moment cultural references. Much is made of Brian's clumsiness with the incense and Jake's queasiness at circumcisions. On the other hand, however, it is a straight-faced and rather earnest exploration of what the clergy owe to their God and their congregation. When Jake and Anna begin an affair, Jake wants to keep it secret both from Brian, because it might spoil their friendship, and from his synagogue, because he might be cast out for his trait romance. These considerations, and the heartache and embarrassment they cause, are not at all treated in a light comic style. And although that change of tone causes the film to exhibit signs of schizophrenia, Norton's decision to treat the problems of his characters seriously—as seriously as the characters themselves do—is refreshing. Even if Brian and Jake's crisis of faith is more about symbolism than concrete religious belief, at least there is an acknowledgement that these things ought to matter to these people, and that therefore they ought to matter to us.

Norton has a long way to go as a director. But he does get great performances from Stiller and Elfman, something not every director has been able to do. And he deepens the bantering script by concentrating heavily—too heavily for the audience's taste, in all probability—on the threat to the characters' identity posed by Anna and her promise of conventional romantic love. Although they are

able easily to integrate all kinds of cultural phenomena, such as pop music and topical comedy, into their vocations, Jake and Brian struggle with the task of integrating love and sex in anything but traditional guises. Norton perceptively shows how threatening those deep feelings can be to the self-identity of religious professionals, however progressive. While unable to elevate either the comedic or the dramatic side of the story to unexpected heights, Norton nevertheless manages to communicate his enjoyment and engagement with both sides. A little technical training, and he just might have a second career.