Traditional religions have had a tough time of it in the last few years. Already eroded by apathy and materialism, a new ‘atheism’ front has come along in a full-blooded attempt to finish things off once and for all. Well over one hundred years ago, Nietzsche wrote ‘God is dead. God has been killed by science.’ Could it finally be coming true?

But before the wake begins, new forms of organised spirituality are evidently emerging from the ashes of the old. I have just spent two days in Edinburgh with the messiah of one such religion, a man known to most of his 120,000 ordained ‘Dudeist’ priests simply as ‘The Dudely Lema’ (real name Oliver Benjamin).

Dudeism is based on the ‘teachings’ of the 1998 cult film The Big Lebowski, in which Jeff Bridges plays The Dude, a 60s drop-out who never dropped back in. Dudeist mythology has it that Oliver went through an epiphany whilst watching the film in Thailand, where he was then living. As we chat together in the back of a taxi, his first account of this profound realisation was that the core set of spiritual values
for which he had been searching 
were contained right there in this 
Cohen brothers movie, but without 
the cultural and historical baggage 
of the mainstream Eastern religions.

The Dude takes it easy as he 
jars on the simple pleasures 
of bowling, White Russians and 
staying mellow. It isn't hard to see 
the appeal of this character—a 
man who has neither respect for 
nor fear of authority, and a loyal 
friend who is slow to judge but 
always ready to offer help. Bridge's 
character aspires to nothing; he is 
a study in authenticity of being, a 
misfit who shows up the absurdity 
of fitting in.

The Way of the Dude

The Dudely Lama has loosely 
arranged a Dudeist 'Relaxolution 
Day'. Placards are made at the very 
last minute and the slogans are 
only written on them as dressing-gown 
weaving Dudeists mass at Edinburgh's 
mound. The fringe is a happy complicity of 
eager-eyed, entertainment-hungry visitors 
along with an offbeat mix of events and 
 happenings.

The placard-waving hippies gain plenty 
of attention from curious passers-by as 
his Dudeliness slips confidently into 
full proselytising mode, explaining to 
the crowd that he is about to perform a 
'mass' wedding (actually it's two couples) 
according to the powers he has bestowed 
upon himself. The fly-on-the-wall film crew, 
which follow him everywhere, lap up 
the drama.

Things turn yet more surreal as the 
group marches in procession towards 
Edinburgh cathedral. The police allow the 

Above: Dudeists' Relaxolution Day involves plenty of rug-sitting. Below: The Dudely Lama 
officiates for two couples at a Dudeist 'wedding'. Opposite page: A Dudeist makes his point.
"For Oliver, the Dudely Lama, Dudeism is a sort of modern Daoism"

for a bit of shopping at the Sainsbury's across the road. One particularly enthusiastic Dudeist, Roy, cannot be separated from his 'Bongs not bombs' sign, waving it with ever-increasing enthusiasm at motorists and shoppers, as if it were the only message that could save mankind.

A heavily built local joins in the happening, yelling the messages of ‘peace’ and ‘taking it easy’ at football-match volume. It seems comically discordant with the mellow vibe of his fellow priests. When he crosses the street to ‘protest’ outside Sainsbury’s, the police and patient security guard eventually senses that he has to justify his existence and asks if he could shout his message of goodwill a little further from the entrance.

Outrage threatens to break out for a second time before a fellow priest calms things down and takes him back across the street to the bar, which was bound to exert a certain pull on him sooner or later anyway.

Owww...