



DUDEISM

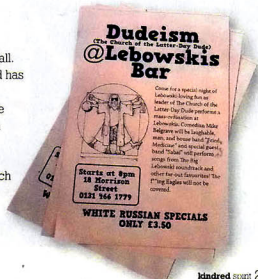
THE MELLOWNESS OF BEING

Iconic dropout The Dude from cult film *The Big Lebowski* has inspired the world's slowest-growing religion. **Boston Rockberry** takes it real easy at the Dudeists' 'Relaxolution Day' in Edinburgh with the movement's leader, the Dudely Lama

Traditional religions have had a tough time of it in the last few years. Already eroded by apathy and materialism, a new 'atheism fort' 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 Lama' (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 majors 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 Duedeist 'Relaxolution Day'. Placards are made at the very last minute and the slogans are only written on them as dressing-gown wearing Duedeists 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



Above: Duedeists' Relaxolution Day involves plenty of rug-sitting. Below: The Dudely Lama officiates for two couples at a Duedeist 'wedding'. Opposite page: A Duedeist makes his point.

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

entire group (but not the film crew) through the cordon preventing access to the bus-loads of troops arriving for the tattoo. The soldiers notice that the messages paraded along the road include 'Bongs not bombs' and 'Make rug not war'. Thinking the demonstration is aimed at them, several bang angrily on the glass of the coaches, like dogs bouncing off the windows of a car unable to reach their enemy.

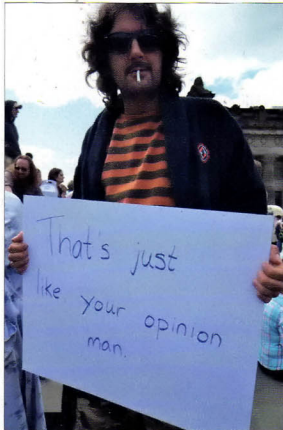


'F*** it Man, Let's Go Bowling'

One straggling Dudeist is well lubricated by beer and becomes detached from the group, like a young antelope singled out for the kill. A military policeman confronts him about his placard which advises 'Fuck it man let's go bowling', and tensions momentarily rise as he is ordered to hand it over. Rather disingenuously, the officer tells him 'there has been a complaint', before later admitting 'Okay, I'm making a complaint, put the board down'. He does, however, show restraint when the angry Dudeist throws the placard into the street inches from him.

This is the exception, a rare flare-up between the anti-establishment and 'the man'. The sit-in outside the steps of the cathedral is entirely good-natured, with one passer-by shouting 'They should hand this place over to you', as a recently married Dudeist suddenly finds he has a talent for public speaking – asking the masses to join him in the path to 'Taking it easy'.

Later, at the Lebowsky Bar orientation event, Dudeists spill out onto the pavement, dancing to live music and again waving their placards, but this time to bemused locals who have popped out



The Dudely Lama Confides

On the second day with His Dudeliness, Oliver admits to me, 'I tell people I had this kind of inspirational experience, when I was watching the film. I'm not even sure that's true. Maybe it's just something I say'. He further confides that pot doesn't agree with him: 'How ironic is that? I'm the

"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 polite 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.

guy promoting this film as the answer to man's problems and I can't even handle a joint. I'm not that keen on White Russians (the emblematic drink of the film) either. The first one's okay but after that it's like getting drunk on milkshake. They're just too sweet.'

Oliver plays with the quotable lines of the film and toys with its visual iconography. He owns the original dressing gown worn out and about by the Dude in the film. At the same time, he wants to move away from any trend towards a 'treckle' style fantasy re-enactment club. For Oliver, the characters and screenplay are not sacred, they are just vehicles for the message.

Oliver tells me that he isn't sure if he will carry on leading the religion for very long. 'I want to run it as a benevolent dictator for a while, without a council or whatever, so that I can give it some sort of form and direction, without any interference. Then, I don't know. I'm a guitarist so I'd like to set up another religion called 'Guitarism' you know, like the 'Way of the Guitar'.

So What's the Message, Dude?

So what does Dudeism offer, and what does it demand of its followers? For Oliver it is a sort of modern Daoism, a non-theistic religion that preaches the need to resist both the seductive and coercive forces of conformity, so that the true self has room to be expressed. He is keenly aware of the irony that many Dudeists are trying to mirror the lifestyle of The Dude and conform to the character's personality traits. He hopes that this is just an early part of the process, which will be transcended by more emphasis on the underlying 'Dude energy', which has manifested through many great Dudes in history.

Part of the message is that you are absolutely okay in yourself, just as you are, without the need to achieve or prove anything at all. In fact not only is it okay, it is highly attractive. This is paralleled by finding people around you loveable too, even if, as in the film, one of your best friends is a total victim and the other is filled with anger and greed. But anybody could just come out and say 'you need to take it easy and be accepting'. By itself that would just be trite and irritating; but the magic of *The Big Lebowski* is that it puts flesh on the bones of these simple ideas by embodying them in a likeable and credible character.

Oliver hopes that the recently published *Abide Guide*, which he co-authored with Wayne Eutsey, will give the religion some focus and direction. At the same time, a parallel process of creative de-focusing is ongoing at Dudeism.com, where many voices expound their versions of the world's first open-source religion.

For anybody who wants to get involved, the religion of Dudeism is inviting people to define and refine it. Refreshingly open for a religion – perhaps uniquely so. ●

Find out more

www.dudeism.com Find out how to get ordained as a Dudeist priest, or read *The Dude De Ching*.

www.dudespaper.com 'A lifestyle magazine for the deeply casual'.

The Abide Guide: Living Like Lebowski, O Benjamin and D Eutsey (Ulysses Press, £8.99), amazon.

All photographs in this article and that on page 5, bottom left, are courtesy of Dom Holt: dom@domholt.com

