

SCIENCE FICTION AND SALVATION: SHIFTING MODES OF RELIGION AND SCIENCE IN POPULAR SERIES

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One of the most influential of human phenomena is religion, which shapes both societies and individuals. Over the last forty years, science fiction has presented us with a changing view of religion, just as the role of religion has changed within the larger culture. This essay will explore how various widely popular science fiction series (both television and film) have viewed the role of religion in American culture. As we shall see, the views of religion in science fiction has shifted over the years, from religion being seen as a bar to scientific and social achievement and integration, to religion being a pivotal part of both society and a vision for the future. I argue that this shift reflects a larger cultural debate of science versus religion, which is now active throughout the wider culture.

When science fiction is at its best, it serves to give us a meaningful reflection of human beliefs, modes and foibles. By abstracting current topics and debates into alien worlds, races, and eras, we can sometimes gain a clearer view of highly charged issues without the usual biases. Science fiction offers its fans a variety of approaches to the human condition, including insights into cultural phenomena and behaviors. The recent increase in the frequency of salvific themes in popular science fiction series is a reflection of this cultural debate of science versus religion, abstracted from the familiar details and battlefields into outer space – an outer projection of our culture’s own inner conflict. This paper traces the trajectory of this debate between science and religion as it has played out in popular science fiction series. The majority of focus will be on the many-lived *Star Trek* universe, as with five series and ten motion pictures over a forty year span, *Star Trek* alone spans the entire era in question. Next we will consider the *Star Wars* film series, as the two trilogies span some thirty years of American culture. Our exploration will be rounded out with brief discussions of religious themes in *the Matrix* film series and the resurrected 80’s science fiction television series, *Battlestar Galactica*. Through these (and other) science fiction narratives, we, as a culture, are revealing and exploring the limits of our conceptions of both

science and religion, and the relations and conflicts between these two primary strains in American culture.

In the 1950s, mainstream America mimicked *Ossie and Harriet*, seeking cultural security and comfort after the shattering experiences of World War II. The Second World War had turned the traditional culture and social roles upside down, as women replaced men in the factories, while all able-bodied men went off to fight, and social barriers between the races and classes fell before the war effort. Upon the troops' return, America sought to return to an increasingly elusive conception of "normal," by a return to tradition and the old established ways. But the trauma of the Holocaust and the dawning Atomic Age stubbornly refused to be subsumed into the modes of the past, and ultimately, women and minorities refused to return to their narrowly-defined traditional roles. Science fiction, which has arguable been around since Dante or at least Poe, began to question the adequacy of traditional social roles, including the role of religion in an increasingly technological world. Movies such as *The Day the Earth Stood Still* and *The Invasion of the Body Snatchers* invoked alien perspectives to question humanity's wisdom in the handling of its new-found powers, using the abstraction of science fiction to raise critical questions of socially and politically difficult issues.

In the post-World War II era, science seemed unstoppable, with effective answers to all of life's burning questions, where religion had little to no universal solace to offer a war-weary world.¹ Medical miracles such as penicillin and transfusions were reliably more effective than faith healings, and the promise of technology to solve other age-old problems of the human condition made reliance upon religious beliefs a quaint personal comfort at best, and a hindrance to progress at worst. After the Second World War, religion seemed to serve more to separate and agitate humanity than to unite them in peace. As horrific as it was, the atomic bomb had effectively stopped the war, and the use of atomic power seemed to promise American political supremacy, unlimited energy sources and world peace for a time – the ultimate technological fix. In such a world, religion seemed irrelevant to the new-found human powers that could either destroy or create, as we saw fit. Scientific achievements like walking on the moon and the eradication of polio took on quasi-religious overtones, and it seemed for a while that nothing was beyond human ingenuity. With the increase in travel and immigration, the introduction of Asian belief systems breathed a new direction into American religions, abstracting internally away

¹ Allitt, 2003, p. 133.

from an increasingly externally controlled world. In the face of such unprecedented power wielded in the hands of a few frail humans, personal faith seemed the only response left to the masses of powerless individuals. Average citizens could only pray that world leaders had the foresight and wisdom to avoid a nuclear Armageddon. The rise of multiculturalism was an added threat to the traditional ways of American life and belief, further sparking a return to fundamental beliefs for comfort and structure in a rapidly changing world.

Therefore, there were two conflicting movements fomenting in the middle of the last century in America – 1) the movement towards greater reliance on science and away from reliance on traditional forms of religion for answers to life’s problems; and 2) the movement embracing faith as the means to control and ameliorate the fears and dilemmas of a post-nuclear world through divine intervention and a return to traditional values and beliefs. These two conflicting movements – towards science on the one hand, and towards religion on the other, are still with us today and some say have grown even stronger and more pervasive. Science fiction, by its very nature, is an embodiment of the heart of this conflict, as it is born from the optimism of scientifically perfected humanity and utopia, versus an apocalyptic vision of a godless future, where religion is obsolete and a blind science runs amok, without mercy or recourse from a human-created nuclear nightmare.²

God-Busting and the Triumph of Reason - *Star Trek* and Religion

In the 1960s, *Star Trek* creator Gene Roddenberry broke new cultural ground with his view of a peaceful and integrated universe. In this universe, race, creed or color was no barrier to equality and exploration, quite a different view than the reality of 1964 America. As the creations and descendents of writer and philosopher, Gene Roddenberry, the many successful *Star Trek* series and movies reflected Roddenberry’s humanistic views. In a 1991 interview with David Alexander in *The Humanist*, Roddenberry stated,

“...*Star Trek* is my statement to the world. Understand that *Star Trek* is more than just my political philosophy. It is my social philosophy, my racial philosophy, my overview on life and the human condition.”³

² Disch, 1998, p. 71.

³ Alexander, 1991 p. 14.

It would also be safe to say that the *Star Trek* universe also reflects Roddenberry's religious philosophy. In the same interview, Roddenberry recounts his early rejection of religion as a teen, in the form of his mother's belief in the Baptist sect of Christianity, due to its many inconsistencies and logical discrepancies.⁴ Roddenberry goes on to say that he believed that an unquestioning belief leads to ignorance and even violence.⁵ This view is reflected in most of the *Star Trek* series and movies (with one notable exception, *Deep Space Nine*, which I shall examine later in this section). In most cases, religion is seen as, at best, something kept private, or at worst, something done by primitive alien races that hinders proper social progress.⁶

In Roddenberry's vision, the future is primarily a technological utopia, in which social ills, such as poverty, disease and discrimination, have been eliminated through the triumph of rationality and humanist positivist values. The citizens of the United Federation of Planets inhabit a man-made utopia, where true equality is born through human social progress. In such a universe, there is no strong need for the balm of belief to relieve the sting of current deprivation and suffering through the promise of a happy afterlife in paradise, eliminating the need for salvation from evil or an "opiate of the masses." In keeping with the technological prophecies of the early-to-mid-twentieth century, *Star Trek* presents the optimistic view that all the perennial ills suffered by humanity can be alleviated and eliminated through the 'magic bullet' of technology. As Counselor Troi tells a time-traveling Mark Twain in "Time's Arrow, Part 2," all the historical social ills were eliminated with the abolition of poverty and disease. Yet, Roddenberry's view was attenuated and conditioned by current social discourse.⁷ Cultural views of religion extant in American culture have changed, and *Star Trek* has been sensitive and responsive to this change.

In the *Original Star Trek* series episode, "Who Mourns for Adonis?" we are told by Kirk that humanity has outgrown the need for ancient gods. Originally broadcast in 1967, this episode reflects the extant cultural and Roddenberry's humanistic views that humanity alone is sufficient to meet all challenges, without the need of divine aid or protection. In this episode, the Enterprise crew encounters a powerful alien who presents himself as the ancient Greek god, Apollo. It is Apollo's ardent desire that the crew resume the ancient ways of pagan worship, which Kirk and

⁴ Ibid, p. 6.

⁵ Ibid., p. 16 – 17.

⁶ Kraemer, Cassidy, and Schwartz, 2001, pps. 10 and 30.

⁷ Kraemer, Cassidy, and Schwartz, 2001, p. 11.

the others naturally refuse to do. The only acknowledgement made of human religious beliefs in the episode is Kirk's throw-away line that "we find the one god more than sufficient." Nothing is said about what precisely the crew does believe in, but it is made obvious by their refusal to worship Apollo that he is not it. The treatment of Apollo is particularly interesting, as he is portrayed as a powerful alien, and his "godhood" more a reflection of superior technology and evolution than evidence of true divinity. We find this same attitude towards religion and various "deities" reflected throughout the Star Trek genre. When Apollo is eventually destroyed, as all false gods must be, it is done through destroying his technology, housed in Apollo's temple, not through some sort of spiritual or cosmic battle. Although Kirk expresses some remorse at Apollo's destruction, ("Would it have hurt us to gather a few garlands?"), it is apparent that the whole crew is in agreement that the worship of Apollo and others of his ilk would have been an evolutionary step backwards. While some quaint enjoyment and historical curiosity might have been satisfied by a return to ancient modes of worship, such beliefs and religions are not only unnecessary, but may actually be harmful – a theme we see played out again and again in Star Trek.

The episode, "The Apple," looks at the question of godhood and worship from another angle. In this storyline, the Enterprise crew happens upon a paradisiacal planet inhabited by a primal people who live to serve their godform, *Vaal*. Upon examination, Vaal turns out to be highly sophisticated piece of ancient technology, which maintains and protects the perfect environment for the "People of Vaal," who, in turn, feed Vaal with indigenous mineral fuel. In this idyllic setting, there is no death, disease or sex – this last item is simply more than the Enterprise crew can stand. Dr. McCoy is particularly outraged by the lack of social progression, despite Spock's insistence that this is a "viable society," in that Vaal's people are happy, healthy and well taken care of. Yet, Kirk and the Enterprise crew find it necessary to violate the Prime Directive (which forbids all Federation personnel from interfering in the development of all pre-warp societies), in order to free the people of Vaal from their perceived bondage to the machine-god. Vaal is destroyed, releasing the people to evolve and presumably have sex. McCoy and Kirk are pleased by the fall of yet another false god, but the people of Vaal are devastated and terrified at the imposed loss of the only life and source of security they have known. There is a hanging implication at the end of the episode that the people of Vaal's fear and suffering will be soon relieved by dawning sexual fulfillment and "normal" social evolution – which, of course,

includes death, disease and violence, things the people were unacquainted with before the Enterprise's visit.

Similar to Apollo, Vaal is an artifact of superior technology and therefore, in the eyes of Kirk and the others, merely a pretender to the throne of divinity, not worthy of humanoid devotion and worship, regardless of the cost. There is an attitude of "we know best" for the inhabitants of Vaal's planet. The wider implication is that human reason and experience, even the experience of suffering and death, is preferable to an artificial paradise, bolstered by human service (bondage) to a false god, no matter how benign or pleasant. This attitude was parallel to that taken by many Americans during the 1950's and '60's – that human rationality and self-reliance was "better" than reliance on beliefs, customs, and the state, regardless how beneficial, comforting or ancient. This view cut against both the ancient religion of Buddhism (the dominant religion of Southeast Asia) and Communism, both of which militate against American individualism and consumerism. Wrapped up in the disguise of progress and evolution, this view cleverly camouflages a subtle racism and nationalism, which seems to imply that any other social form than Protestant Christian democratic capitalism is morally wrong and in need of correction, regardless of the cost. Yet, Roddenberry's stated humanistic beliefs are contrary to this manifestation of human limitation, leading me to assume that Roddenberry was unconscious of these subtleties of motive and intention.

Although the crew of the Enterprise is comprised of members of different races and belief systems, in reality, we saw no reflections of those alternative beliefs enacted in the crew. Uhura's blackness had no aspect of the African perspective. Chekhov's Russian-ness was reflected only in his accent and brash boasting, but carried not a hint of Communistic or even Russian ideology. Sulu's Japanese heritage was completely hidden from view.⁸ It can be argued that Roddenberry purposefully left out these cultural differences to make a point – that in the utopian future, these differences make no difference. But along with the lack of discrimination goes the lack of diversity. The homogenous culture embodied by the Enterprise crew is that of white, Anglo-Saxon Protestants, regardless of the crews physical makeup, including the WASP attitude of cultural and intellectual superiority. Despite Roddenberry's self-conscious efforts to eradicate divisive social ills, he could not escape his own unconscious early cultural programming.

⁸ Bernardi, 1998, p. 39 – 40.

This theme is further played out in another 1967 episode, “Bread and Circuses,” in which Kirk and the Enterprise find a modern-day Roman planet, complete with televised gladiatorial battles. Kirk, Spock and McCoy seek to rescue survivors from a downed Federation merchant ship, only to find themselves battling for their own survival, with the help of some noble runaway slaves, called “followers of the sun.” It is only at the end of the episode that we discover that the “sun” the helpful and loving slaves worship is actually the “Son” – the “Son of God,” that is – early Christians, in other words, are the saviors of the Enterprise crew. It is particularly interesting to note that this episode was written by Roddenberry himself, long a history buff. In some commentaries, it is said that the “followers of the Son” was a bone that Roddenberry threw to appease the censors and Christians in his audience in the middle of the second season.⁹ However, it is interesting to note that the Christian ideal of love and freedom was contrasted to the Roman ideal of strength and self-sufficiency, and ultimately, the Christian ideals triumphed.

In the film *Star Trek V: The Final Frontier*, we see another example of Roddenberry’s cynical view of religion. In the film, Spock’s long-lost brother, Sybok, exhibiting miraculous healing powers, commandeers the Enterprise and embarks upon a quest to the center of the universe to find God, disregarding the many objections of Kirk to a religious quest. Upon arrival, Sybok and the Enterprise crew discover what seems to be the fulfillment of millennial longings as they encounter a being that appears to embody the age-old stereotypes of all cosmic deities. But soon the new-found god begins making demands. When challenged by Kirk, the god of Sha Ka Ree, (Vulcan’s Eden-like planet), turns violent and vengeful. Once Sybok realizes that he has been deceived by a false god, he sacrifices himself so that the Enterprise may escape and ultimately destroy what turned out to be an imprisoned cosmic criminal. Like in the *Original Series* episodes, “The Apple” and “Who Mourns for Adonis,” we see the similar pattern of the unmasking of a false god through superior human reasoning. Unanswered questions are: where did Sybok’s healing powers originate, if not from a divine source? If the god-form encountered was a condemned prisoner, who/what imprisoned this cosmic creature and for what crimes? And the ultimate unanswered question is whether or not a true deity actually exists at all.

In 1987, Roddenberry debuted *Star Trek: The Next Generation*, which was set some eighty-five years in the future of the *Original Series*, and reflected many technological and social

⁹ Kraemer, Cassidy, and Schwartz, 2001, p. 9.

developments of the late twentieth century.¹⁰ Yet, religion was still treated with skepticism at best and scorn at worst. In the *Next Generation* episode, “Devil’s Due,” we see an inverted apocalypse story, in which a peaceful agrarian planet, Ventax II, becomes violent in anticipation of the arrival of the planet’s equivalent of Satan, a powerful and attractive female called “Ardra,” who has come to collect upon a contract she supposedly made with the planet a millennia before. Ardra claims to have made a bargain with the ancient Ventaxans, in which she would save their planet from internal warfare and pollution for one thousand years, in return for which the Ventaxans sold their descendants into bondage. When Ardra makes a claim to ownership of the *Enterprise* and makes a play for Piccard, the captain’s ire is aroused and he ultimately unmasks her as a high-tech con artist. We see once more theological claims being revealed as fraud.

The *Next Generation* episode, “Who Watches the Watchers?” puts an interesting inversion on the now-familiar religious skepticism. In this episode, the *Enterprise* crew comes to the primitive planet Mintaka to rescue an anthropological team in a “duck blind,” whose holomitter had broken down, revealing their position to the local Bronze Age proto-Vulcan natives, potentially a severe breach of the Prime Directive, which prohibits Federation interference with pre-warp societies. Problems arise when one of the natives is injured and transported to the *Enterprise* for critical medical treatment. While barely conscious, the Mintakan, Liko, sees Piccard giving commands and mistakes the captain for an ancient deity known as the “Overseer,” whom Liko mistakenly credits with bringing him back from the dead. Upon being returned to his home, Liko begins to convince his fellows to worship Piccard as their discarded god, the Overseer. When a disguised Troi and Riker are taken hostage while trying to rescue a missing Federation anthropologist, Piccard is forced to intervene. Piccard beams the proto-Vulcan leader up to the ship and tries to convince her that he and the *Enterprise* crew are simply more advanced mortals, and not divine beings. While the leader is finally convinced, Liko is not, and ends up shooting Piccard with an arrow to prove Piccard’s immortality. It is only when the Mintakans see Piccard lying in the dirt bleeding do they finally accept their error. Although Piccard never masquerades as a false god, the issue is essentially the same, simply inverted – the natives would make Piccard into a false god on evidence of the *Enterprise*’s advanced technology, and it is up to the captain to disabuse them of their theological illusions.

¹⁰ Kraemer, et al, 2001, p. 11.

Piccard and the Enterprise crew often run into seemingly omnipotent entities, such as Q or Ardra, but these powerful beings are either frauds or merely more evolved biologically, such as “the Traveler.” Astounding, perhaps, but hardly worthy of worship or divine status.¹¹ In the *Star Trek* universe, the question of the true existence of divinity goes unanswered and unproven, without the representatives of humanity making any definitive stance about god and religion.

The creation of the spin-off series, *Star Trek: Deep Space Nine* brought about a dramatic shift in the way religion was portrayed and experienced in the *Star Trek* universe. Religious and salvific themes are introduced in the very first episode of *Deep Space Nine*, “The Emissary.” In this episode, a Cardassian space station in orbit around the once-occupied planet Bajor is being turned over to Federation control. The new Federation commander, Benjamin Sisko, is deeply conflicted about his future in Starfleet, as he holds Starfleet (and Piccard in particular) responsible for the death of his wife and mother of his thirteen year old son at the hands of the Borg. After beginning to whip the space station into shape, Sisko and his crew discover a stable wormhole nearby. While exploring the wormhole, Sisko is “taken up” by “the Prophets,” a multi-dimensional race of aliens who live outside of space and time within the wormhole, and are worshipped as gods by the Bajorans. The Prophets appear to Sisko as familiar people from his life, and help him to heal from his deep emotional wounds. In return, Sisko teaches the prophets about linear existence, and is hailed as the Prophets’ emissary – a religious figure on the planet Bajor. The result is a non-believing Starfleet commander serving as an icon for a planet of oppressed believers (fondly known by some fans as “Space Jews”).

A particularly fine example of this emerging fusion between religion and science is found in the season five *Deep Space Nine* episode, “Rapture,” in which Sisko gets zapped by a malfunctioning holosuite and begins to have visions, which result in his finding the long-lost sacred Bajoran city of B’hallah, just as Bajor is on the eve of being accepted into the Federation. But we discover that these visions exact an increasingly high price from Sisko: Starfleet’s presiding admiral expresses fear and concern over Sisko’s increasing obsession with his visions. These visions lead Sisko to oppose Bajor’s induction into the Federation, and almost cost Sisko his commission in Starfleet. Eventually, the visions come to threaten Sisko’s very life, which he is more than willing to sacrifice to fulfill his destiny. But when he falls unconscious and is unable to protest, Sisko’s eighteen-year-old son, Jake, overrules Sisko’s previous ban on a

¹¹ Kraemer et al, 2001, p. 49 – 55.

medical treatment to remove the brain anomaly which caused the visions to occur in the first place.

At the end of the episode, Sisko expresses a deep sense of regret and loss, despite forgiving his son's understandable actions. In this story, we see that the visions were originated by science (the holosuite accident), causing a mystical but dangerous rejection of science, that ended with science reasserting itself in the ultimate removal of the visions through scientific means (science giveth and science taketh away). The visions were a biological threat, which needed science to correct, even though Sisko felt the visions to be more precious than physical existence.

Although uncomfortable with the position at the beginning of the series, as the story arc progressed, Sisko again and again defends his religious position, fulfills prophecy and experiences visions. By the conclusion of the seven season series in 1999 – the very cusp of the millennium, we find out that Sisko was not only chosen by the Prophets to be their emissary – the new Bajoran savior, but that he was, in fact, half Prophet, as one of the Prophets had manipulated his human mother to ensure his birth, rendering him both fully human and Prophet, in a future-day echo of the Trinitarian debate of Christ's divinity and humanity. By the final episode of the series, Sisko takes on the full responsibility and weight of an avatar and sacrifices himself to save Bajor and the universe from the Pah Wraiths (the Bajoran equivalent of the demonic hordes of Satan).

In *Deep Space Nine*, religion not only taken seriously, it is genuinely portrayed as salvific – Sisko's visions reveal truths both cosmic and terrestrial, the Prophets actually do care and act to save the people of Bajor. Sisko is initially skeptical, but by the end of the series, he, too, is a true believer. It is interesting to note that this series was created after the death of Roddenberry, although the plans were in the works prior to his death in 1991. This shift in attitude towards religion paralleled a national shift to the right, as conservative evangelical ideologues and the Moral Majority became more vocal and ascended to political power in Congress. Yet, true to Roddenberry's and *Star Trek's* original belief system, prophecy, religion and revelation are still held with suspicion and some measure of skepticism, like the rationalist philosopher John Locke, always demanding physical evidence for the claims of faith.¹² Regardless of the burden of proof placed on religions in the Star Trek franchises, religion became more visible in the Star Trek

¹² Kraemer et al, 2001, p. 30.

universe as conservative religious groups began to organize and exert political pressure as we all approached the new millennium, paralleling many strong beliefs in prophecy and revelation in the general population.

When the franchise released its fourth incarnation, *Star Trek: Voyager*, in 1995, the producers saw fit to return to Roddenberry's original stance towards religion as something other species do. Once more, revelation and prophecy are treated with suspicion, with the notable exception of the character, Chakotay, a Native American, whose totem beliefs are generally accepted, but vague and rarely expressed. *Star Trek: Enterprise* rarely even broaches the subject at all, in the same sort of "don't ask, don't tell" kind of attitude towards religion shown in *the Original Series* and *the Next Generation*.

Star Wars – The Movements of the Force and Faith

In the first trilogy of the *Star Wars* series, we find that, like in the *Star Trek* franchise, faith is held suspect (as evidenced by Han Solo's claim that a good blaster at his side is preferable to faith in the Force and the ancient religion of the Jedi), but it is Luke's faith that ultimately saves the day – in *Star Wars VI: A New Hope*, Luke uses faith to target the destruction of the Death Star, and in *Return of the Jedi*, it is Luke's ultimate faith in his father's (Darth Vader) redemption that finally prevails over the corrupt and evil Emperor Palpatine. Yet, Luke's faith in his Jedi training proves to be foolhardy when he prematurely leaves Yoda's instruction to go rescue Han and Leia, ultimately burdening him with the truth about his father and the loss of his own hand. And it is misguided faith that is the ultimate undoing of Anakin Skywalker, as he puts his faith in Palpatine's authority to keep the interstellar peace, instead of in the process of democracy.¹³ The underlying theme here is the need for *appropriate* faith, yet the overall tone is optimistic – that faith plus hard work can achieve miracles.

The first trilogy is optimistic and hopeful of dawning of new era of freedom from tyranny, while the prequel trilogy is more pessimistic and cynical, as it centers on the abuse of power and the manipulation of faith – cautionary tale. In the prequels, the evil Senator and would-be emperor Palpatine exploits the noble motivations of others to love and protect with fear in order to quash the opposition, and to garner more power for himself, thereby turning good into

¹³ Long, 2005, p. 206.

evil, and democracy into tyranny through a manufactured need for security. It is Anakin Skywalker's desire to protect his beloved Padme and to defend the Republic which Palpatine uses to turn Anakin into his minion, Darth Vader.

When the first *Star Wars* trilogy was released, the United States was still recovering from the hangovers of Watergate, the war in Viet Nam and, after that, the Cold War with the Soviet Union. The first trilogy affirmed the power of individual faith and efforts to overcome the monolithic powers that controlled everyday life, and thus was a welcome message to the public alienated by enormous power structures beyond the comprehension and influence of the common person. But the second trilogy was much more complex in the way it revealed and confronted the human frailties that were eventually shown to have been the downfall of the Republic. As such, it speaks as a cautionary tale to our own time and culture about the dangers of the concentration of power and the unavoidable corruption of absolute power.¹⁴ In the prequel storyline, it is blind faith that too narrow defines its beliefs that allows the perversion of good motivations and intentions into evil acts that turns potential saviors into villains.¹⁵ An unexamined belief, it seems, is potentially worse than even an unexamined life, for as the philosopher William Clifford would tell us, unexamined faith has an unlimited potential for damage and corruption.¹⁶ This is a potent message sent to believers of all stripes, especially during times of a national crisis.

It is interesting to note that the second trilogy, while hailed as superior by some critics, fails to hold the same enduring appeal as the first trilogy. Several reasons can account for this: the first *Star Wars* trilogy was breaking totally new ground, not only in special effects, but also in its genre. Lucas' intentional use of mythic motifs appealed to the cultural consciousness with unparalleled success, while still holding to traditional science fiction and action/adventure themes. The idea of the Force played on concepts common to Eastern religion (such as the Tao), but were only then being introduced widely to Western audiences. Also, the first trilogy was overwhelmingly optimistic and individualistic in attitude. What red-blooded American doesn't love a story about rebellion against unjust tyranny and oppressors? And the first trilogy is primarily a redemption story, about the rise of Luke Skywalker and his role in the eventual salvation of his fallen father, Anakin Skywalker/Darth Vader.

¹⁴ Decker, 2005, p 175.

¹⁵ Long, 2005, p. 206 – 207.

¹⁶ Clifford, cited in Long, 2005, p. 206.

But the second trilogy follows the downfall of a hero, detailing how even the best and brightest of humanity can become misguided and corrupted, even while presumably keeping true to and seeking to protect their faith and loved ones. The second trilogy built upon the conceptual groundwork of the first trilogy, so such ideas as the Force and the Jedi knights no longer has the impact of newness they once held in the 1970s. It explores in much greater detail how the Dark Side of the Force operates on human weakness, instead of inspiring the great deeds we saw performed in the first trilogy. Even heroes such as Obi-Wan are seen as committing grave errors in judgment with unexpected dire consequences, where even potential avatars are diverted by fear and ambition. In our current political and cultural climate, the second trilogy seems a timely and needed warning, yet it is not as uplifting and inspiring as the optimism of the first trilogy. Thus, the prequel presents a darker view of humanity, the loss of autonomy and the slippery slope into emotional bondage to a too narrow definition of truth.

Although there are many non-human players in the *Star Wars* universe, it is primarily a human story, as it is the actions and beliefs of humans who determine the fate of the Republic and Empire, not wookies, ewoks or even robots, even though these do contribute greatly to the overall momentum of the story. It is Anakin/Darth and Luke who complete the mythic arc of the fallen hero redeemed by the conquering son. It is Palpatine and Obi-Wan who fall into error through their own hubris and misguided beliefs. It would seem that Lucas is warning his present-day audiences against the dangers of the insidious mixture of blind faith in authority and fear.

The Matrix – Escaping through Faith and Consciousness

In the three *Matrix* movies, we find both strong non-theistic Buddhist themes, as well as a central core of belief in prophecy and revelation. These two themes would give the *a priori* appearance of contradiction, as Buddhism rejects the need for divine intervention to achieve salvation, but these two conflicting themes actually work together in an intriguing way. What common people experience as ‘reality’ is revealed to be an manufactured illusion to be overcome by both physical and metaphysical means. Humanity must awaken to the true reality of their literal bondage to the machines in order to be saved, but this is salvation without enlightenment or deity. Neo is the prophesized savior of humanity, in whom Morpheus believes explicitly and for whom he is willing to make the ultimate sacrifice. As the One, only Neo’s consciousness can transcend all the way back to the source and liberate all of humanity from slavery to the machines. Yet, transcendence is reserved only for Neo, the One, paralleling the supreme status

granted the Christian savior. While Neo is not the only One to have ever existed, as he is an emergent part of the Matrix himself, Neo is the only One to succeed in bringing an end to the Matrix and in bringing about a new era of equality and peaceful co-existence with the machines.

Morpheus and the people of Zion are dependent upon prophecy and revelation (in the person of the Oracle) to help bring about the final apocalyptic battle to end the Matrix, in a familiar Judeo-Christian stance towards god and religion. But Neo must depend only upon his own consciousness, taking it upon himself to transcend his own humanity, taking on the role of both a Christ and a Buddhist seeker after Nirvana. Like both Christ and Bodhisattva, the liberation Neo seeks is not only from the burdens of his own mortal coil, but rather, to save all of humanity from the evils of servitude to illusion/sin. For the people of Zion, especially Morpheus, Trinity and Niobe, it is their trusting faith in prophecy and Neo that preserves and saves them, not the cool rationality of Commander Locke, which demands empirical proof before committing to belief.¹⁷

The juxtaposition between faith and personal development of consciousness accounts for much of the wide appeal of *the Matrix* franchise in the United States. Drawing on the same instincts as two major world belief systems (Buddhism and Judeo-Christianity), almost all approaches to religion are included – not just the mainstream Christianity that made Mel Gibson’s *the Passion of the Christ* so widely popular, *the Matrix* also appeals to non-theists of several stripes, be they atheistic material reductionists, who would contend that only physical reality exists, even if all of humanity is being massively deceived, in echo of Descartes’ Evil Genius, who would deceive him into believing in physical manifestation, or true believers in the redemption of humanity through the actions of a chosen savior and human faith. Like Descartes, Neo’s salvific response is through conscious awareness: I think, therefore I am. When Neo defeats Agent Smith and ultimately destroys the Matrix, he transcends both death and evil, but the question of afterlife (or reincarnation) for the other humans is left at best unexplored. The salvation of humanity is literal and physical from the Matrix.

The first *Matrix* movie premiered just before the turn of the millennium, at the crescendo of apocalyptic speculation, further enhancing its appeal. The second and third movies were released after the year 2000, and did not hold as wide an appeal as the first, due in part, I surmise, to the passing of the immediate threat of an anticipated millennial Armageddon.

¹⁷ Jaworski, 2005, p. 156 – 157.

***Battlestar Galactica* – Prophetic Salvation from Persecution**

The original short-lived series, *Battlestar Galactica*, debuted in 1980, around the time of the Iran Hostage Crisis, during which we saw a failure of government to rescue the American hostages in Tehran. Fears of a Middle Eastern war ran high, but, with only a few years since the close of the war with Viet Nam, few Americans had an appetite for another war. Simultaneously, Reagan drew upon the Religious Right and the emerging Moral Majority and evangelical movements to ascend to power. The first *Battlestar Galactica* drew on many mythological themes and godforms, but placed them in a humanistic setting. Like the *Original Star Trek* series, although religion was in the general environment, it was rarely directly addressed, if at all. Many character names were drawn from Hellenistic pagan gods, and the names of the colonies drawn from Ptolemaic astrology, but the myths behind the names were never explained or addressed. The name of the Colonial Fleet's commander, Adama, was reminiscent of the Judeo-Christian first man of *Genesis*, Adam, but again, no theological connection was ever made. The fleet was following prophetic scriptures to find an ancestral home of humanity called Earth. This goal was proclaimed by Adama and generally accepted by all except the villainous Baltar and a few power-hungry individuals. The murderous Cylons, whose unprovoked attack caused the humans' flight towards the safety of Earth, are unfeeling war machines of unknown origin, to be mowed down wholesale without a second thought.

The second *Battlestar Galactica* series, created in 2004, articulated much deeper mythic underpinnings, revealing a quasi-Hellenistic cultural foundation similar to our own. The pagan god names are used as character nick-names, and not proper names, presumably used to invoke the ancient powers of faded godforms. We see a renewal of the ancient Colonial religion, as the apocalyptic destruction of Caprica and the other colonies force a crisis of faith on the fleeing humans. In an attempt to give the few remaining humans the hope to carry on, Adama lies to the fleet and says that he knows where the planet Earth of scriptural prophecy is, vowing to lead the fleet to safety. The civilian government is led by former Education Secretary and cancer patient, now President Laura Roslin, who sees herself as fulfilling a pre-ordained role from prophecy – that of the dying leader who would lead her people back to Earth. Relying heavily on faith, scripture and her own visions, Roslin inspires the fleet, while providing uncanny guidance and courage. Her devotion to prophecy leads her into direct conflict with Commander Adama, who

had only used the religious reference as a ploy to control the despairing refugees; Roslin invokes the same religious beliefs in earnest, more often than not finding them to be accurate, if unexpected.

In the second series, the villains, the Cylons, are the creation of humanity, having shucked off their mechanical slavery to humans. Although the handiwork of mankind, the Cylons had a deep belief in God and Providence, and act to exterminate humanity in the pursuit of this belief – a very different take on Artificial Intelligence than is usually put forth in American media. Usually, AI is depicted as godless and coolly rational. It is a radical break with sci-fi tradition to depict AIs with any form of deity-based religious faith, as we saw in *The Matrix* series, where even the mystical Oracle is a pragmatist, not a true believer in divine providence. In the second series, the Cylons, as the “children of humanity,” see themselves as fulfilling the prophecy that humanity has abandoned, making humanity ripe for destruction and replacement, in a complex set of religious beliefs. In this, we see a melding, if not an emerging harmonization of science and religion. According to series producer, David Eick, the missing link between the Cylons and humanity is love – that elusive human quality at the center of all established traditional religions.

In the current series, the religious themes are constantly challenged by the humans and unconditionally accepted by the Cylons. By the time of this writing (in the middle of the second season), Adama is finally forced to accept Roslin and her religious input, as it has been proved to be the salvation of the fleet time and time again. Alone of all the series, *Galactica* embraces religion and mysticism from two different directions – from both the Cylons and from humanity. It would seem that the only hope of survival and redemption to be found for humanity will be the result of the faithful following of prophecy. It is particularly interesting to note that one of the executive producers for the current *Battlestar Galactica* series is the same co-Executive Producer of *Star Trek: Deep Space Nine* – Ronald D. Moore. Both *Galactica* and *Deep Space Nine* have strong salvific and prophetic themes throughout, and the most obvious common denominator is the influence of Moore’s production. As the only series still in production examined in this paper, it will be very interesting to see how the prophetic religion versus secularity themes in *Battlestar Galactica* play out in the rest of the series, as I feel this may well be an accurate reflection of some of the current science versus religion debates currently extant within our own society.

All of these series, whether on film or televised, evidence a shift away from primary reliance on science and technology, as science has failed to fulfill its nineteenth century promise of ultimate salvation. The void left by the retreat from science is being filled by an increasing belief in religion, with the realization that when technology fails, all that is left is faith.

It has been noted by religious studies scholars that fundamentalism and evangelism are common reactions to the many challenges of modernity. This is articulated as a return to traditional values because: a) secularity and humanism have not provided the promised relief from human suffering such as hunger, poverty and disease; and b) improved communications and expanded media access and exposure now challenges previously isolated audiences, forcing a crisis of faith for many. We see this enacted in both in the current Middle East conflicts and within our own culture, with the debate over evolution and intelligent design, as well as such topics as school prayer and religious displays on public property. America was originally settled by peoples seeking religious freedom from state-imposed religions, but now, we find some of their descendents invoking the powers of a Christian majority to justify the imposition of a state-mandated religion. This debate is well-reflected in the genre of science fiction, which has traditionally grappled with cultural issues often too hot to handle without the distancing techniques of projecting the conflicting sides onto alien peoples and cultures.

In the last forty years, we have seen a definitive shift in the attitude taken towards religion and religious themes in science fiction series from one of skepticism to the current tentative acceptance and embracing of religion as the primary means of hope, salvation and redemption of humanity, which has paralleled a societal shift away from an ideological devotion to science and more towards traditional religious and mystical beliefs. Science fiction often functions as both a pressure valve and future vision, and we can see it still faithfully fulfilling this function as shown by the broad and enduring popularity of the science fiction series discussed in this essay. Optimally, we can hope for a future harmonious combination of science and religion, both in our culture and in our media. But this may be difficult to achieve, as the encroachment of modernity upon traditional societies tends to radicalize them into fundamentalism, in which compromise with secular visions is seen as heresy, and science is seen as conflicting with traditional religious values and beliefs. Perhaps science fiction will once more fulfill its age-old function to provide us with the self-awareness to confront our future, with the transcendental values of love, compassion and consciousness witnessed in more recent popular

science fiction series to help show us the way to transcend our current conflict between science and religion.

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