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Introduction

*Star Trek, Religion,
and American Culture*

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Television programs provide one of the most popular forms of entertainment today. From *The Simpsons* to *The X-Files*, television shows amuse, shock, sadden, and excite us by turns. Television does more, however, than simply entertain. Television shows are cultural products, and as such, they reflect, reinforce, and challenge cultural ideals. As a pre-eminent forum for the expression of popular culture, television acts as a mirror and a model for society. In examining and coming to an understanding of the cultural messages and popular appeal of certain television shows, we come to understand something about the society that has created and sustained them.

Arguably, *Star Trek* is the most popular television show ever produced. To date the *Star Trek* franchise includes four television series and nine motion pictures.¹ The *Star Trek* phenomenon includes countless unofficial fan-generated novels, short stories, songs, poems, drawings, paintings, models, costumes, and videos, as well as officially sponsored merchandise including hundreds of novels, guidebooks, technical manuals, encyclopedias, autobiographies, comic books, collector cards, action figures, and games. There are hundreds of fan clubs and millions of self-

identified fans representing most of the countries of the world. The popularity, longevity, and creativity of *Star Trek* and its fandom is unparalleled in television history.

Nonetheless, as *Star Trek* fans everywhere acknowledge, *Star Trek* is “just a television show.” Like other television shows, *Star Trek* has been subject to the vagaries of producers, writers, and Nielsen ratings. It is thus difficult to generalize about the “intent” of the “authors” of *Star Trek*, or the viewpoint of the “readers”. Yet, it is also clear that *Star Trek*, like other television shows, has at various times been reflective, informative, and critical of American culture. Over the past thirty years, *Star Trek* has addressed a wide variety of issues, including war, capitalism, individualism, technology, race, gender, prejudice, and religion. As portrayed on television, such issues are representations of socio-cultural perspectives on broad human concerns. Television shows both shape and reflect the socio-cultural concerns of the times. Consequently, an examination of *Star Trek*'s treatment of these issues is an examination of the culture reflected, informed, and critiqued therein. This is particularly true of *Star Trek*'s portrayal and treatment of religion, within which these other issues are often contextualized. Although religion is the explicit focus of only a few episodes in each series and one of the motion pictures,² concern with religion and religious issues and themes represents a consistent subtext throughout the entire *Star Trek* franchise.

Analyses of the relationship between religion and television have previously focused almost exclusively on the issues of religious broadcasting and televangelism (e.g. Alexander 1994; Peck 1993; Schultze 1991). Such an approach is inappropriate to the study of *Star Trek*. With very few exceptions (Skill 1994), little attention has been given to the portrayal and treatment of fictional religion in television. With the notable exception of Kreuziger's work (1986), studies of science fiction rarely explore the issue of religion. Studies of *Star Trek* itself have focused primarily on the audience (Jenkins 1992; Bacon-Smith 1992; Tulloch and Jenkins 1995). Even in works exploring questions of meaning and metaphysics as portrayed in *Star Trek* (Richards 1997; Hanley 1997) the topic of religion is largely ignored.

The contributors to this volume suggest that the portrayal and treatment of religion in the *Star Trek* television series and films provides an important cultural commentary on the place of religion in society. Although no single coherent approach to religion appears in *Star Trek*, the series is nevertheless variously reflective of, informed by, and critical of societal attitudes toward religion. The portrayal and treatment of reli-

gion in much of the *Star Trek* franchise is negative: religion is often presented as superstitious, outdated, and irrational. An underlying and consistent theme of the *Star Trek* series is the presentation of rational scientific humanism as an alternative to religious faith. A newer theme, notably found in episodes from the *Deep Space Nine* and *Voyager* series, explores the potentially positive value of religion. Since the viability and popularity of *Star Trek* have spanned such a long period of time, it is inevitable that the series would begin to diverge from original assumptions in response to changing cultural attitudes. The recent potentially positive portrayal of religion within *Star Trek* both reflects and reinforces a particular cultural change.

Contributors to this volume further suggest that the *Star Trek* franchise reveals an ongoing exploration of powerful mythic and religious themes. Whether *Star Trek* is generally unsympathetic toward religion or not, the series and movies contain many religious and mythic themes, including themes of resurrection, sacrifice, immortality, faith, and the spiritual quest. *Star Trek* fandom itself also reveals many religious and ritual elements, from the adoption of *Star Trek*-inspired philosophies, ethical systems, and worldviews by fans to the ritual practice of pilgrimage in pursuit of *Star Trek*-inspired ideals.

This volume is organized into three sections. In the first section, contributors examine the explicit portrayal and treatment of religion in the various *Star Trek* series. What do *Star Trek* and *Star Trek's* creator, Gene Roddenberry, have to say about religion, and what does this reveal about changing American perceptions about the role, value, and place of religion in everyday life? The papers in this section explore the ways in which religion has been understood in the *Star Trek* franchise in relation to science and technology, scientism, and secular humanism. The changing dynamics of this relationship provide the focus for the following analyses. In her chapter "From Thwarted Gods to Reclaimed Mystery? An Overview of the Depiction of Religion in *Star Trek*," Anne Pearson suggests that the dismissal of religion in Classic *Star Trek* is primarily the result of *Star Trek* creator Gene Roddenberry's own humanistic values and personal rejection of organized religion. Roddenberry's views on religion are explored in this chapter, and their impact on Classic *Star Trek* is analyzed. Pearson also argues that there has been an increasing and positive interest in personal religion as portrayed in later *Star Trek* series. She suggests that both the death of Gene Roddenberry and a sustained and perhaps increasingly popular interest among North Americans in alternative forms of spirituality lie at the root of this shift toward a more positive por-

trayal of religion in *Star Trek*. According to Pearson, religious mystery now has a place in the *Star Trek* universe.

Robert Asa's chapter—"Classic *Star Trek* and the Death of God: A Case Study of 'Who Mourns for Adonais?'"—addresses what he calls the "paradoxical treatment of theism" in the original *Star Trek* series. Asa suggests that the explicit message of the episode "Who Mourns for Adonais?" mirrors the death of God theology in the 1960s. Classic *Star Trek* is shown to be reflective of the theological concerns of its time. As a result, *Star Trek's* cosmology is not only dismissive of religion, Asa argues, but haunted by it. Through a careful analysis of the Adonais episode, Asa argues that religious questions, themes, metaphors, and symbols abound in *Star Trek*, even when religion itself is explicitly rejected. This rejection is a result of a naive scientism that naturalizes religious issues and supplants traditional forms of religion in Classic *Star Trek*. However, as Asa argues, Classic Trek cannot escape the larger religious questions. As a result, he concludes, reports of the death of God in *Star Trek* may well have been exaggerated.

Gregory Peterson provides a detailed examination of *Star Trek: The Next Generation's* portrayal of religion in "Religion and Science in *Star Trek: The Next Generation*: God, Q, and Evolutionary Eschatology on the Final Frontier." The "naive scientism" noted by Asa in Classic *Star Trek* is, according to Peterson, an explicit and competing "religious" paradigm in *The Next Generation*. Peterson argues that the portrayal and treatment of religion in this *Star Trek* series reflects the conviction that science and religion are diametrically opposed ways of understanding the universe. Within the series, religious phenomena are explained (or explained away) by science, and science itself serves as the basis for a new, non-traditional, religious worldview. This worldview encompasses an "evolutionary eschatology" in which divinity and salvation are naturalized. The religions of non-humans are treated with respect only insofar as they do not conflict with this evolutionary eschatology. Peterson argues that this portrayal and treatment of religion perpetuates a philosophy that is fundamentally hostile to traditional forms of religion.

In "Deeds of Power: Respect for Religion in *Star Trek: Deep Space Nine*," Peter Linford suggests that this series attempts a more thoughtful exploration of religion than the earlier *Star Trek* series and than science fiction generally. This more thoughtful portrayal of religion is coupled with an explicit questioning of the 'sterile' scientific and technological world of StarFleet (and hence *Star Trek*.) Focusing on the character of Captain Sisko, Linford examines the explicit and implicit messages com-

municated through the treatment of religion in *Deep Space Nine*. He suggests that while the series makes a conscious and laudatory attempt to treat religion with respect, this approach nonetheless marginalizes and dismisses the faith of believers. Linford argues that *Deep Space Nine*, in positing a model of “local” religion, reinforces rather than challenges the idea that religion is something that societies and cultures outgrow. As a result, Linford argues, *Deep Space Nine* ultimately entrenches the dismissive view of religion with which science fiction in general and *Star Trek* in particular initially began.

In “(Re)Covering Sacred Ground: New Age Spirituality in *Star Trek: Voyager*,” Darcee L. McLaren and Jennifer Porter suggest that a shift toward a more positive portrayal of religion can be identified in the fourth *Star Trek* series. Addressing the apparent openness toward spirituality portrayed in *Star Trek: Voyager*, McLaren and Porter suggest that the issue of religious intolerance apparent in earlier *Star Trek* series is mediated in *Star Trek: Voyager* within the framework of the relationship between religion and science established previously within the *Star Trek* franchise. This mediation, they argue, occurs through the depiction of the spiritual experiences of two main characters: Commander Chakotay, the Native American First Officer, and Captain Kathryn Janeway, former science officer and head of the *Voyager* crew. Through the beliefs and experiences of these two characters, religion is introduced alongside science as normative, and as legitimately and appropriately “human.” McLaren and Porter argue that the approach taken to religion in *Star Trek: Voyager* is particularly “New Age” and that this form of spirituality is compatible with the *Star Trek* worldview in ways that more institutional, doctrinal forms of religion apparently are not.

The second section of this volume examines the religious and mythic themes that run throughout *Star Trek*. How does *Star Trek* deal with the powerful issues of life and death, suffering and sacrifice, meaning and purpose? How does *Star Trek*’s exploration of these themes both reflect and potentially inform societal attempts to deal with these issues? Chapters in this section address the mythic power and appeal of *Star Trek* and highlight the mythic and symbolic parallels between *Star Trek* storylines and themes taken from both Western religious tradition and the scientific and technological emphasis of contemporary North American society. In “Intimations of Immortality: Death/Life Mediations in *Star Trek*,” Jon Wagner explores the mythic mediations of life and death found within *Star Trek* episodes. Understanding myths as those narratives within which human beings encode issues of deepest ambivalence, Wagner

argues that *Star Trek* provides new narrative mediations of an old and pervasive contradiction: our desire for immortality versus the need to come to terms with inexorable death. Although traditional religious myths deal with this dilemma, modernism invites a mythology that frames such mediation in naturalistic terms. Science fiction, Wagner suggests, can confront this need by setting its narratives in a hypothetical, usually futuristic frame. Immortal beings, resurrected characters, alternate universe doubles, disembodied intelligences, holographic personalities, androids, and a host of other alternate life-forms transmute contradictions of life/death and mortality/immortality in *Star Trek* into other hypothetical oppositions that subsequently lend themselves to ambiguous mediation. By problematizing the boundaries separating person and thing, mortal and immortal, Wagner argues, *Star Trek* provides a rich corpus of narrative that addresses the pervasive themes of traditional theology and mythology.

According to Larry Kreitzer, in "Suffering, Sacrifice and Redemption: Biblical Imagery in *Star Trek*," the Bible forms an important source for some of the most pervasive themes found within *Star Trek* episodes and films. According to Kreitzer, the characters of Kirk, Spock, and McCoy often play out between them the themes of suffering, sacrifice, and redemption as modeled on biblical imagery. Focusing first on the original *Star Trek* episode "The Empath," Kreitzer reveals the striking parallels between this episode and the crucifixion and resurrection imagery of the Christ story and the suffering and sacrifice imagery of the story of the Suffering Servant (Isaiah 53). Kreitzer then analyzes the parallels between Christ imagery and the figure of Spock within the films *Star Trek II: The Wrath of Khan* and *Star Trek III: The Search for Spock*. Here too, Kreitzer suggests, the biblical imagery of suffering, sacrifice, and redemption come to the fore. Kreitzer consequently suggests that the prevalence of this imagery reveals a significant theological core to *Star Trek's* mythological world. This in turn, he suggests, reveals the ongoing fruitfulness of the Christian theological message. Theology and *Star Trek*, Kreitzer concludes, are perhaps much closer than we might have previously supposed.

Ian Maher addresses the human quest for meaning and purpose in his chapter "The Outward Voyage and the Inward Search: *Star Trek* Motion Pictures and the Spiritual Quest." Like Kreitzer, Maher suggests that there are recurring Christian religious themes to be found within the *Star Trek* franchise. Maher focuses his analysis on the eight *Star Trek* motion pictures to date. From the search of the V-ger probe for its creator in *Star Trek: The Motion Picture* to the mysterious encounter with the

force of the Nexus in *Star Trek VII*, Maher suggests that the films frequently focus attention on the transcendent. According to Maher, fundamental questions of meaning remain significant within the scientific and technological world of *Star Trek*. What is the purpose of life? What does it mean to be human? Where does humanity fit into the broader scheme of the universe? Is there a 'God' behind it all? In positing and attempting to explore these questions, Maher concludes, the voyages of the starship *Enterprise* can be read as a metaphor for the human spiritual quest.

In Jeffrey Lamp's chapter, "Biblical Interpretation in the *Star Trek* Universe: Going Where Some Have Gone Before," the parallels between themes found in *Star Trek* and issues found in biblical interpretation are explored. Lamp examines selected episodes of *Star Trek: The Next Generation* and *Star Trek: Deep Space Nine* to uncover three issues in contemporary biblical interpretation that contribute to the storylines. The *Next Generation* episode "Rightful Heir" is examined in light of its reflection of the search for the historical Jesus; the *Next Generation* episode "Birthright" is examined in light of its portrayal of the role of narrative in the religious life of a community, and the *Deep Space Nine* episode "Destiny" is examined in light of its portrayal of issues relating to the fulfilment and interpretation of prophetic revelation. Lamp argues that these episodes reflect concerns at the forefront of scholarly interpretations of biblical literature, as well as attempts by religious individuals to maintain the essential core of religious belief in the midst of an intellectual and cultural framework generally unsympathetic toward a supernaturalist worldview. The struggles of the characters in these episodes to hold personal convictions of faith in a hostile intellectual environment can be seen, Lamp suggests, as models for those in American society who seek a similar integration.

Finally, in the third section of this volume, contributors discuss the religious, mythic, and ritual aspects of *Star Trek* fandom. No examination of the *Star Trek* phenomenon would be complete without addressing the subject of *Star Trek* fans. Fandom is not religious in and of itself, and *Star Trek* is not a religion. Nevertheless, *Star Trek* fandom both reveals and participates in classic religious and mythic themes. Chapters in this section explore the ways in which *Star Trek* fans have found meaning and value in *Star Trek*, and the ways in which they express that meaning in their actions and lives. Michael Jindra examines the folk philosophy of *Star Trek* fandom in "'*Star Trek* to Me Is a Way of Life': Fan Expressions of *Star Trek* Philosophy." Jindra argues that *Star Trek* fans integrate the philosophy portrayed in *Star Trek* into their own lives in numerous ways. His chapter explores how *Star Trek* has been used as folk philosophy by fans.

How are North American and other fans getting meaning from *Star Trek*? What does the *Star Trek* fan phenomenon tell us about our society? Jindra suggests that for many people, *Star Trek* takes the place of previous metanarratives and mythologies, such as nationalism or Christianity, that have allowed people to make sense of their identity and place in history. In supplanting these previous metanarratives, however, *Star Trek* has nonetheless capitalized on themes and symbols dominant in Western religious and cultural discourse. As a result, Jindra concludes, the folk philosophy of *Star Trek* is firmly embedded within the context of fundamental American cultural themes.

Darcee L. McLaren's "On the Edge of Forever: Understanding the *Star Trek* Phenomenon as Myth," also explores the question of how *Star Trek* fans find meaning in *Star Trek*. According to McLaren, scholars and fans alike frequently refer to *Star Trek* as modern myth. It is consequently within the study of myth that insight into the worldview, beliefs, and practices of fandom can be found. What, McLaren therefore asks, does it mean to say that *Star Trek* is myth? McLaren suggests that myth operates on two levels: first, on the level of meaning, in which exemplary models for human action are communicated symbolically, and second, on the level of action, in which the meaning of myth is lived by those to whom the stories have a mythic dimension. *Star Trek* operates on both of these levels, she suggests, but it is at the lived, participatory level that *Star Trek* truly emerges as modern myth. At this level, fans learn to see new possibilities for human action, as modeled on the relationships found within *Star Trek*. As a result, McLaren argues, *Star Trek* is an "origin myth" of the future, in which now and forever become actively linked for fans as they seek to actualize in their present-day lives the futuristic vision of humanity found within *Star Trek*. According to McLaren, IDIC ("Infinite Diversity in Infinite Combination") becomes the paradigm for this model of transformative action. Fans seek to live this paradigm and, in doing so, live the myth. *Star Trek*, McLaren therefore concludes, is more than "just a television show," it is a myth for modern times.

In "To Boldly Go: *Star Trek* Convention Attendance as Pilgrimage," Jennifer Porter explores the ritual aspects of *Star Trek* convention attendance. It is in the convention context that the paradigm of IDIC truly becomes lived or embodied. Cultural ideals are likewise embodied, negotiated, and expressed in the convention context. According to Porter, traveling to attend a convention in search of this embodied meaning places the convention setting on a par with traditional pilgrimage sites. Furthermore, she argues, the meaning that fans find in *Star Trek* is shared and

reinforced at conventions, and convention attendees come to see themselves as living out *Star Trek's* ideals. Drawing upon the concepts of liminality and *communitas*, Porter argues that fandom convention attendance consequently represents, for some fans, secular pilgrimage. Just as pilgrims in conventional pilgrimage contexts experience a sense of liberation from everyday statuses and roles, so too do fans in the convention context experience a “place and moment in and out of time,” in which social boundaries diminish and egalitarian ideals become realized. In understanding convention attendance within the framework of pilgrimage, Porter concludes, new insights into *Star Trek* fandom and convention attendance are gained.

Star Trek continues to hold a place of importance within popular American culture. Since the series first premiered in the 1960s, *Star Trek* has reflected, informed, and often challenged prevailing social attitudes toward a wide variety of often controversial topics. Concern with religion and religious issues has constituted a consistent subtext within the *Star Trek* franchise. This engagement with religion is on-going: the more recent *Star Trek* series have made religion an explicit focus of concern. The reciprocal relationship between *Star Trek's* portrayal and treatment of religion and changing societal attitudes toward religion provides the focus for the current work. This volume of articles represents the first comprehensive attempt to address the topic of religion and *Star Trek*. As such, it raises issues of interest to scholars and fans alike.

NOTES

1. These include the original *Star Trek* television series (TOS) and the three spin-off series, *Star Trek: The Next Generation* (TNG), *Star Trek: Deep Space Nine* (DS9), and *Star Trek: Voyager* (VOY). The movies include *Star Trek: The Motion Picture* (1979), *Star Trek II: The Wrath of Khan* (1982), *Star Trek III: The Search for Spock* (1984), *Star Trek IV: The Voyage Home* (1986), *Star Trek V: The Final Frontier* (1989), *Star Trek VI: The Undiscovered Country* (1991), *Star Trek: Generations* (1994), *Star Trek: First Contact* (1996), and *Star Trek: Insurrection* (1998).

2. The episodes and even the movies which deal explicitly with religion are generally regarded by *Star Trek* fans as marginal. They are not believed to be in any sense key narrations in the *Star Trek* corpus. Yet, religious themes and symbols are wound throughout the episodes and movies, and as at least one contributor to this volume will argue, a new eschatology is proposed over the course of the four series.