

## THE INTERGALACTIC GOD: A STUDY OF RELIGIOUS IDEAS IN SPACE OPERA

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### Abstract

*Science fiction has been used as an exploratory medium to examine core human concerns like politics, economics, religion and culture. Space opera in particular has been employed to ask moral and ethical questions, often within the framework of a fictional religion. This research analyses two of the most popular and long-running science fiction space opera series – Star Trek and Star Wars, and attempts to study the ways by which their narratives approach and interact with religious themes. Both these series are seen as genre-defining works and reflect a wide range of religious sensibilities, from spiritual mysticism to scientific agnosticism. This paper studies the various aspects of religious thought, ideology, practice and iconography expressed in Star Trek and Star Wars and notes the contrasts apparent in their treatment of religious themes. It also explores how their significant impact upon popular western culture has not just created dedicated fan bases but has influenced real world scientific inventions and religious ideas. The expansion of the scene of action to other planets, alien cultures and future times enables a retrospective study of religion that contemplates the relationship between faith and scientific progress and the place of religion in an ever-expanding social consciousness.*

**Keywords:** *Science Fiction, Space Opera, Religion, Fictional Religion, Secondary-world Creation, Popular Culture*

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**H**umanity's collective search for a truth greater than itself has existed ever since members of the genus homo first picked up sticks and stones as tools to make their lives easier, developed a language and acquired a level of sentience that led them to question the nature of their reality. With the formation of human civilizations religious belief systems developed and for the major part of human history formed the basis of our understanding of the universe. Advancements in science and technology however complicated matters. At first glance religion and science are opposite to each other – one depends on faith to answer questions, the other on proof. However it can be argued that they ask the same basic questions – How did we come into being? Where do we come from? What is the purpose of life? The first religious ideas came into being when humans organized themselves into societies and civilizations and began to develop various belief systems which helped them understand the world they were living in. In the absence of the tools of modern science, natural phenomena acquired a mystical and divine status. Religions sprung up around the worship of fire, trees, animals, and of human-like embodiments of these forces of nature. As knowledge expanded many of these natural phenomena could be explained and quantified. Today our relationship with fire has changed considerably – we create and extinguish it easily and know its molecular structure and the chemical reactions involved. When we did not understand how reproduction took place, the birth of a child was a miraculous occurrence which culminated in the worship of the mother goddess. Now that the miracle of birth is well understood, the mother goddess is all but extinct. Therefore we can arrive at the conclusion that the advancement of scientific knowledge affects religious faith – challenges it and even harms it.

At the other end of the spectrum is the question of how religion affects science. From September 2017 a new curriculum has been introduced in Turkish schools which will remove any mention of evolution because it goes against the creationism taught in Islamic scripture. When Charles Darwin first published his *Origin of Species* in 1859 it created a crisis of faith in the Victorian population. A lot of people believed that rapid scientific progress would bring about a complete rejection of religion, but of course this did not happen. While at present the number of atheists and agnostics are at a recorded high in all of human history, religions continue to thrive and therefore continue to be in conflict with science. When Galileo Galilei in the 17th century proposed heliocentrism in opposition to the beliefs of the Catholic Church at the time, he was put on trial. Even today there are people who believe that the Earth is at the centre of the universe. Some also believe that the Earth is flat. The Flat-Earthers, as they are called, believe that NASA and other scientists are part of a conspiracy to conceal this fact and images of the Earth from space craft and orbital vehicles are faked. One of such images, which of course is not fake, is popularly called the Pale Blue Dot. This image was taken by the space probe Voyager 1 when it was about 6 billion kilometers away from the Earth. The Earth can be seen as a tiny dot, smaller than a pixel, in a sunbeam set against the enormity of space. Popular science writer and the one of the main scientists behind the Voyager mission, Carl Sagan said of this picture –

‘Look again that dot. That's here. That's home. That's us. On it, everyone you ever heard of, every human being who ever lived, lived out their lives. The aggregate of all our joys and sufferings, thousands of confident religions, ideologies and economic doctrines, ...every saint and sinner in the history of our species, lived there – on a mote of dust, suspended in a sunbeam.’ (*Pale Blue Dot: A Vision of the Human Future in Space*, 12)

This picture is not considered to be of much scientific value, however it helps us to contemplate upon our place in the universe. Space has metaphorically expanded. Once upon a time space was the ground beneath our feet and the sky above our heads, then we discovered that we lived on a planet revolving around a star, and finally we know now that

that star is just one of hundreds of billions of stars in our galaxy alone, which is among the hundreds of billions of galaxies in the known universe. In the face of this expanding space and knowledge we are forced to reevaluate our beliefs, ideologies, ambitions and dreams.

Since modern science became an accepted fact of life and came in conflict with established religious ideas there have been attempts by both religious and non-religious people to reconcile these two very divergent systems. A lot of interpretations of religious scriptures today try to explain various instances in the texts through a scientific approach. The vimanas in Hindu scripture are reinterpreted as description of UFOs. There are verses in the Bible that are also reevaluated in similar ways. There have been reinterpretations of various religious and cultural symbols that hint at extra-terrestrial life. The controversial Ancient Aliens theory which claims that aliens visited the Earth in ancient times is a case in point. These ideas have of course been dismissed as pseudoscience and conjecture by the scientific community, however this points to a recent trend in religious understanding that attempts to bring religion and science together. This is also seen in the creation of certain new religions that draw inspiration from elements of science, technology and even science fiction. The most famous of these is Scientology which claims that the human soul is of extraterrestrial origin and has lived through various lives on other planets and the pain of the physical world is a result of the activities in those past lives. This is of course very similar to the Hindu concept of reincarnation. There are a number of similar religions which base their belief systems around aliens and UFOs. There are others which take the route of parody while exploring the role of science in our spiritual lives. The Church of Google for example, is based on the idea that since Google knows everything and is present everywhere on Earth it is therefore both omniscient and omnipresent. Hence it is God. This is of course a joke and not meant to be a serious religion, but it shows how the idea of God has been redefined in modern, scientific and technological terms. Another interesting example of a parody religion is Jediism. It is a religion whose followers claim to follow the beliefs and principles of the fictional Jedi religion in Star Wars, which is one of the Space

Opera series that will be discussed in this paper. Therefore we see that not just science but also science fiction has had an influence upon modern religious consciousness.

Science fiction is defined as a type of speculative fiction. It bases its imagination upon scientific or pseudoscientific premises such as such as travels in space and time, encounters with extraterrestrial life and forays into parallel universes and other dimensions. An interesting and oft quoted definition of science fiction is by Pamela Sargent who 'dubbed it "the literature of ideas".' (*Science Fiction: The Literature of Ideas*, 1) Speculative fiction is distinct from realistic fiction because of the realm of possibility that the genre provides. It creates for its setting an imaginary world which is not governed by the rules and limitations of the real world. This allows the narrative to develop in a way that it can subvert certain conventions and therefore become a very important tool for allegory. The famous science fiction movie *Blade Runner* by Ridley Scott, which is based upon Philip K Dick's story *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep*, explores the role of artificial life forms in our society and their relationship with flesh and blood humans. Some of the questions that arise are – If artificial people are emotionally and intellectually similar to organic people, how exactly are they different or whether they actually are any different? Are they our own Self, or are they what we perceive as the Other? Is the Self and the Other mutually exclusive or are they the same? What in fact do Androids really dream of? These are questions that might be answered sooner than we think, what with Stephen Hawking constantly reminding us of the dangers of artificial intelligence. We have therefore with our imaginations inhabited spaces that are still closed to us on the physical plane. The plane of ideas however is vast and infinite and it is on this plane that speculative fiction and therefore science fiction reside. Space opera is a subgenre of science fiction and it is a term which was first used derogatively as the science fiction equivalent of soap operas that churned out the same kind of tired and melodramatic story. The battles in a space opera are glorious, the romances are epic, the political intrigue is intense. However some of the most popular works of science fiction especially in visual media are space opera, the most famous examples being *Star Wars* and *Star Trek*. What elevates such space opera series

from a soap opera reputation to a literature of ideas is that while they do contain all the original conventions of space opera, they also use the secondary universe they create to explore certain aspects of the human condition – love, death, morality, belief, etc. The study of religion becomes especially interesting in space opera because religion is an aspect of culture and space opera is all about the intermingling of cultures. These cultures are alien in that they are imagined cultures of species that not only exist within a different cultural context but also have entirely different fictional histories that reflect the development of their cultures. But at the same time these alien cultures are also intensely human because various aspects of their culture reflect various aspects of human culture. On the other side human characters in space opera are also sort of alien in nature, because while they retain their basic humanness they belong to an imagined or future universe. This allows the writers of space opera room to expand the idea of what it means to be human within a certain environment. This environment may be an ideal of the writer, a future utopia as in the case of Star Trek, or a galaxy far far away that is governed by entirely different laws of physics as in the case of Star Wars.

Star Wars is arguably the most popular space opera series of our times, enjoying both critical and mass appeal. Stretching over thirty years, seven movies (with two more on the way), a number of animated series and books, Star Wars has evolved to become a cultural phenomenon in the Western world. The narrative is highly serialized encompassing one long complicated tale spreading over generations and planets in a fictional galaxy. The central motif around which the plot develops is that of the Force. The Force in Star Wars is the fictional equivalent of religion, or at least a spiritual way of life. George Lucas, the creator of Star Wars, self identifies as a Buddhist Methodist and in many ways incorporates both the Christian faith and Eastern philosophies in the conception of a fictional belief system. The Force is described in the first movie *Star Wars: A New Hope* (1977) by Obi-Wan Kenobi who is the spiritual mentor of the protagonist Luke Skywalker – ‘The Force is what gives a Jedi his power. It’s an energy field created by all living things. It surrounds us and penetrates us; it binds the galaxy together.’ The Force is therefore for all

intents and purposes the God of the Star Wars universe. It is not however a personal god but a more pantheistic idea of godhood similar to the way some cultures venerate nature. The Force can be wielded by Force-sensitive individuals who can express it through psychic abilities like telekinesis, mind control, and extrasensory perception. These individuals are most commonly the Jedi and the Sith. The most important aspect of the Force is its duality, where the Eastern influences become most apparent. The Force has a Light side from which the Jedi derive their power and a Dark side from which the Sith derive theirs. Bringing balance to the Force is one of the most important means of conflict resolution in the narrative, which is in many ways similar to the concept of the cosmic battle between deities of Light and Dark in Zoroastrianism and to a lesser extent to the idea of yin and yang in Taoism. The monastic practices and ideology of the Jedi has undertones of Buddhism and Stoicism. The Force is explained in the prequel trilogy as being manifested physically through midi-chlorians which are microscopic organisms present in the bloodstream and which communicate the will of the Force to the individual. The birth of Anakin Skywalker or Darth Vader, one of the most iconic characters in the series, is through the concentration of these midi-chlorians similar to the Biblical concept of the virgin birth. The similarity of the iconic 'May the Force be with you' with 'May the Lord be with you' and messianic overtones in the idea of a Chosen One are other Christian influences in Star Wars.

Star Trek was conceived in the mind of screenwriter and pilot Gene Roddenberry and encompasses his utopian vision of the future of humanity. He famously said that 'religion is nothing more than a substitute for a malfunctioning brain' (*In His Name*, 39) and was an atheist who viewed organized religions as superfluous to the development of humanity. His idea of the 23<sup>rd</sup> century human society was revolutionary at the time that the first Star Trek series premiered in 1966. It challenged racist and classist conventions and most interestingly it upended the idea of human morality by envisioning a future that based its ethical framework not on religion but on logic and reason. The Star Trek franchise spans over seven television series and thirteen movies which expand Roddenberry's

worldview of an Earth that is free of religious conflict with the complete removal of religion from the public sphere. At the same time it advocates a tolerance of all things different, including alien cultures which also comprise their religions. While human religion is all but dead in Star Trek, a number of alien religions are explored; the most prominent among them are Vulcan, Klingon, Ferengi and Bajoran. The Vulcans practice a non-theistic religion like Buddhism, based around the concept of logic. They derive all their spiritual and mental strength from the application of logic and therefore suppression of all emotion. A highly emotional and destructive people in their past, Vulcans embraced the philosophy of logic from Surak who is the central figure of their belief system. The Klingons are conversely a highly emotional species whose central religious idea is the 'way of the warrior' similar to Viking practices. Their mythology details them having killed their gods and they have a rich concept of the afterlife. The Ferengi religion interestingly does not really correspond to a real-world religion, but seems in fact to be a parody of capitalism. The Ferengi practice the acquisition of wealth religiously – their holy book is called the Rules of Acquisition, their heaven is the Divine Treasury and their hell is the Vault of Eternal Destitution. The Bajorans have a highly organized religion that is perhaps most similar to real-world human religions. They have a clergy that controls and directs the beliefs of the people and are highly devout and ritualistic. Their gods or prophets, as they call them, are aliens who do not perceive time as linear and are hence prophetic and worshipped by the Bajorans for it. This is a set up that is often treated very different in Star Trek – humans find an alien culture worshipping a god who turns out to be a more powerful alien and who is then discredited as a false god. In the case of the Bajorans this trope is subverted not only to explore a different kind of ethical dilemma but to also illustrate the concept of tolerance and harmony between people of contrasting beliefs systems. This is the philosophical core that pervades all of Star Trek – a commitment to logic and reason without compromising inter-cultural harmony.

Both Star Wars and Star Trek have indelibly affected popular culture. Star Trek in particular is responsible for predicting various technologies and inspiring a generation of

astronauts and engineers. It is very common to find references to these series in daily life. They provide a window of imagination and introspection into what might be expected to be the future of the human race and the development of the concept of the Intergalactic God. Social scientists believe that religion is most probably here to stay and will persist in some form even in an increasingly non-religious future. Peace and harmony for the human race will depend in part upon the ability of religion and science to co-exist. In a lesser known space opera series, *Babylon 5*, the commander of a space station has to give a showcase of Earth religion to alien ambassadors. He does so by bringing forward a line-up of people from all religions including atheists. This line is symbolically infinite as it stretches beyond the confines of the screen and the episode ends before the line does. What space operas such as these propose is that God is who we believe him or her to be. As long as this belief is individual, not forced or manipulated, not used for personal or political gain – then perhaps this freedom, right and ability to choose is itself the Intergalactic God.

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