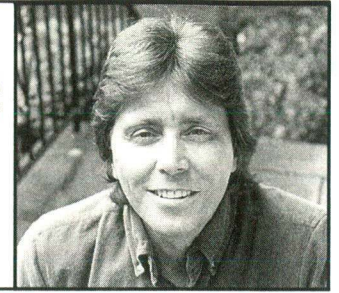

'Star Trek': Humanism of the Future

Note: Permission to publish photographs with this article was denied by Paramount Pictures, which deemed association with FREE INQUIRY "too controversial."

—EDS.



Kenneth Marsalek

For the past twenty-five years, the science-fiction television series "Star Trek" has captivated millions of fans with its hopeful view of humanity's future. Its positive vision stems from the philosophy of its creator, the late Gene Roddenberry, who presented a humanist message in the context of a fictional future.

"Star Trek" has enjoyed several incarnations. The original series ran for three seasons beginning in 1966. It has been translated into forty-seven languages and still airs over two hundred times a day across the United States. It depicted the voyages of the starship *U.S.S. Enterprise*, with Captain James T. Kirk; Mr. Spock, the half-Vulcan, half-human Science Officer; and Dr. Leonard ("Bones") McCoy. An animated series aired for one year in 1973. *Star Trek—The Motion Picture*, the first of six full-length films, was released in 1979. "Star Trek—The Next Generation," an updated television series, premiered in 1987 with a new cast and crew. Now in its fifth season, it is seen by over seventeen million people a week.¹

In the twenty-third century in which the show is set, Earth is a member of the United Federation of Planets, which transcends narrow divisions based on race, religion, creed, and nationality. At the heart of the Federation is Starfleet Command, which directs starships on exploratory missions throughout the galaxy. Starfleet's Prime Directive prohibits interference with the social development of other worlds, affirming that humans possess the intellectual capacity to develop moral principles.

The "Star Trek" universe is a celebration of pluralism encompassed in the Vulcan philosophy of IDIC—Infinite Diversity in Infinite Combinations. "Star Trek" advances a commitment to self-determination, freedom, equality, and individual rights. The *Enterprise* crews are dedicated to using reason, science, and logic, personified by Mr. Spock and Lt. Commander Data (a humanlike android who appears on "Next Generation"), in understanding the universe, solving problems, and improving the human condition.

While an examination of the show's treatment of religious, moral, ethical, and social issues reveals Roddenberry's

humanism, "Star Trek" does not consistently present a humanistic viewpoint, but rather, reflects the views of many writers, directors, actors, and producers. "Star Trek" has also dabbled in paranormal phenomena, pseudoscience, and mysticism, which humanists may find counter-productive. I will focus on "Star Trek"'s humanistic aspects by reviewing how religion is addressed in various episodes.

Religious Totalitarianism

Once each season, Captain Kirk's *Enterprise* encountered a society controlled by a super-computer. Although this theme may be described as man vs. machine, it is more accurately viewed as man vs. religious totalitarianism. In each case, the computer is regarded as a "creator god" that satisfies all needs of the population in exchange for strict obedience and worship. The analogy is clear between subjugation by a machine and the subjugation by a deity or rigid belief system. Each "god" views the members of the landing parties as threats to world order and decrees their deaths.

The first of these computer gods appeared in the episode "The Return of The Archons." Thousands of years ago, Landru, a planet's leader, wished to return his world to earlier times free of hate, fear, and conflict. Landru exists now only as part of a computer program. His people have become automatons, "absorbed into the body of Landru," where they are condemned to lives of "mindlessness" and "vacant contentment." Kirk rationalizes that the Prime Directive "refers to a living, growing culture." He convinces Landru to destroy itself because it is interfering with the body's freedom of choice and creativity.

In "The Apple," the computer-god, Vaal, provides a paradise free of disease and aging. Death is virtually unknown, reproduction is unnecessary, and sex is forbidden. When Vaal needs to replenish his energy, he sounds a dinner gong to summon his people to "feed" him. Akuta, "the leader of the feeders of Vaal," serves as "the eyes and the voice of Vaal."

Mr. Spock sees the society as a "splendid example of reciprocity." He notes that the people are healthy and happy and argues for their right to choose a system that works for them. He views any interference as a violation of the Prime Directive. In contrast, Dr. McCoy argues for the people's right to a "free and unchained environment—the right to have conditions which permit growth." He describes the society

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as stagnant and feels justified in putting the people back on “a normal course of social evolution.” Kirk agrees with McCoy that the people should have conditions that permit them to create, produce, think, and choose. After the *Enterprise*’s weapons destroy Vaal, Kirk assures the people that they will survive without Vaal, and that with their new freedom they will learn to care, build, think, and work for themselves.

Landru is reminiscent of contemporary fundamentalist Christians and Muslims who fear the modern world and who wish to turn back the clock by imposing theocracies. Vaal’s dinner gong sounds like a church bell summoning the faithful. Vaal, at least, provided something concrete in return.

In anticipation of their sun going nova, the Fabrini civilization in “For The World Is Hollow and I Have Touched the Sky,” built the spaceship *Yonada* to relocate part of their population. For unknown reasons, the “creators” disguised *Yonada* as an asteroid, programmed the ship’s computer as an oracle/god, and kept the passengers ignorant of the fact that they were on a ship. Due to a malfunction, *Yonada* is on a collision course with an inhabited planet.

The Oracle of the People controls its subjects by requiring implantation of the “instrument of obedience,” which hears all thoughts and words and delivers pain for any offense. McCoy agrees to the insertion of the instrument as a condition for remaining on *Yonada* as the mate of the high priestess, Natira. When Spock later removes the device from McCoy, Natira charges, “You have released him from his vow of obedience.” Kirk counters, “We have freed him from the cruelty of your oracle.” Although the oracle refers to the outsiders as “non-believers,” Natira accepts Kirk’s explanation that *Yonada* is a spaceship and acknowledges that the “creators kept us in darkness.”

In this fictional world, it is easy to recognize the absurdity of a creator who keeps its people in ignorance. Religions have long elevated faith over reason and superstition over science. They offer the paradox of a creator of intelligent beings who forbids them from using their intellect. Kirk demonstrates that knowledge is for everyone and not the exclusive purview of the gods. The danger of not sharing knowledge is evident. The oracle/god continues to hold to a sacred, obsolete program of action that would lead to *Yonada*’s destruction. It proscribes not only certain actions as evil, but also certain words and thoughts. Religion in this way demeans humanity by prescribing what one is to do, to believe, to read, and to think. Both Akuta and Natira represent the priestly class who alone know the will of god. However, even they are precluded from making moral judgments on their own. They consult with their gods to determine the fate of the strangers. Like Abraham, they are prepared to implement their gods’ orders to kill.

Ancient Astronauts

On two voyages, the *Enterprise* crew meets an alien who visited Earth centuries earlier and was mistaken for a god. One, the Greeks called Apollo; the other, the Mayans called Kulkukan. This theme may inadvertently promote Erich von Däniken’s pseudoscientific proposition that aliens actually

visited Earth centuries ago; however, the premise does lend itself to an examination of contemporary religious beliefs.

Both Apollo (“Who Mourns For Adonis”) and Kulkukan (“How Sharper Than A Serpent’s Tooth”) are vengeful and lonely “gods.” Each embraces the humans as his children while threatening to destroy them. Like the computer gods, they offer life in paradise in exchange for loyalty, worship, and obedience. Kirk informs them that human knowledge has advanced to the point where gods are no longer required to explain the world.

Kirk tells Apollo, “We’ve come a long way in 5,000 years. . . . Mankind has no need for gods.” Unfortunately, in what appears to be a concession to the network’s Non-Offensive Directive, Kirk adds, “We find the one [god] quite adequate.” However, Kirk firmly rejects Apollo, saying, “We’ve outgrown you. You asked for something we can no longer give.” Kirk preaches a similar message to Kulkukan:

. . . if children are made totally dependent on their teachers they’ll never be anything but children. . . . Because we have minds we can’t be what you wanted us to be. If we fail or succeed it has to be our own doing. Intelligent life is too precious a thing to be led by the nose. You did [teach us] long ago when it was needed most. Our people were children then. Kulkukan, we’ve grown up now. We don’t need you anymore.

Religion condemns humanity to eternal childhood, restricted in knowledge and always dependent. We must ask God what to do, for the strength and courage to do it, and for the faith to believe. We become incapable of doing or deciding anything alone.

The Book of Genesis presents a theology based on the repression of knowledge and the inability of humans to make moral judgments. Adam and Eve were cast out of paradise for eating the fruit of the tree of knowledge of good and evil and were cursed with human labor. Kirk advances knowledge over ignorance and equates the offer of paradise to slavery. He is not cast out of paradise, but courageously departs it. He views work not as a curse but as part of human creativity.

In 1975, Roddenberry submitted a movie script, entitled *The God Thing*, which was rejected by the studio. In it, the *Enterprise* crew once again encounters an alien that primitive humans believed was God. A Vulcan crewman comments:

If this is your God, he’s not very impressive. He has so many psychological problems; he’s so insecure. He demands worship every seven days. He goes out and creates faulty humans and then blames them for his own mistakes. He’s a pretty poor excuse for a Supreme Being.²

The Search for the Creator

In *Star Trek—The Motion Picture*, the early Earth probe Voyager VI amasses so much information that it obtains consciousness, becoming a living machine. Referring to itself as Vejur, it returns to Earth to find and join its creator. Spock recognizes that, despite its great knowledge, Vejur has no meaning, hope, or answers. It is asking the questions, Is this

all that I am? Is there nothing more? Why am I here? What was I meant to be? When McCoy realizes that Vejur expects its creator to be a machine, Commander Will Decker responds, "Of course, we all create god in our own image." Vejur and Decker merge, evolving into a new lifeform. Kirk comments on the crew's role in getting the new lifeform off to a good start: "I think we gave it the ability to create its own sense of purpose out of our own human weaknesses. . . ."

Kirk implies that we do not need a creator to give our lives purpose and meaning. A creator offers security and comfort by providing definitive answers and immortality in an afterlife. Humanists are unique in developing meaningful lives while accepting both uncertainty and mortality.

In the movie *Star Trek V: The Final Frontier*, Sybok, Spock's half-brother, rejects the Vulcans' commitment to logic and begins an evangelical search for God. William Shatner, who portrays Captain Kirk and directed *Star Trek V*, originally intended for the crew to find the Devil, thereby implying the existence of God. However, Roddenberry insisted that the crew find only an alien claiming to be God. Producer Harve Bennett explained, "Gene's position was that, in the twenty-third century, the concept of God is ridiculous."³

Sybok seeks "what all men have sought since time began—ultimate knowledge." Believing he has had a vision from God, Sybok hijacks the *Enterprise* to find Sha Ka Ree, the Vulcan Eden. Kirk is skeptical of finding Sha Ka Ree and believes Sybok is mad. Sybok locates his "God," who claims to want the *Enterprise* to carry its wisdom throughout the universe. Kirk continues his tradition of exposing gods by insisting on proof of their divinity. Instead of God, Kirk uncovers an evil alien attempting to escape his imprisonment.

Spock informs his brother, "Sybok, this is not the god of Sha Ka Ree, or any other god." Spock destroys the alien in order to save Kirk. Later, McCoy tells Kirk that he and Spock were speculating whether God really is out there in space. Kirk responds, "Maybe he's not out there, Bones. Maybe he's right here—[in the] human heart."

Kirk's line is nebulous. The believer may interpret it as a description of a personal god who cares about our individual welfare. On the other hand, nontheists may interpret Kirk's remark metaphorically as referring to "goodness" in the human heart. We do not have to search "out there" for the purpose and meaning because, as Kirk said of Vejur, we have it within ourselves to create them. Although Sybok described God as "ultimate knowledge," God is more accurately defined as the personification of ignorance, representing everything we do not yet understand.

Religion's Role in Ancient Societies

The episode "The Paradise Syndrome" from the original series has Kirk stranded on a planet inhabited by a tribal society when he is accidentally trapped in a temple and suffers amnesia. Tribal legend predicts dangers from approaching asteroids and the arrival of a savior god from the temple. Kirk is mistaken for a god when he is observed leaving the temple. His divinity is confirmed when he demonstrates artificial respiration because, "Only God can breathe life into

the dead." However, when Kirk is unable to affect the inclement weather caused by an approaching asteroid, the tribe quickly turns on its god and almost stones him to death.

It was natural for primitive humans to resort to the concept of gods to explain what they did not understand. Thousands of years later, creationists still desperately cling to the ancient explanations of our ancestors. Roddenberry said:

But as the human race moves into adolescence and adulthood, it can no longer afford to guide its affairs via those simple myths. Our human ancestors thought long and hard on who and what they were and came up with the best explanations they could make. The frightening thing is that we—almost at the end of the 20th century, entering the space age, becoming a society based on knowledge—are still hanging onto those explanations, which date back to our Stone Age. I think we need a more fruitful way to analyze these questions. We need exciting philosophical thought.⁴

Absolute Morality

The *Enterprise's* travels to different worlds teach that morality is neither universal nor absolute. In "A Piece of the Action," a Federation ship, the *U.S.S. Horizon*, had visited the planet Sigma Iotia II one hundred years earlier, prior to the implementation of the Prime Directive. A landing party from the *Enterprise* discovers that cultural contamination resulted when the Iotians adopted the *Horizon's* book on Chicago mobs of the 1920s as the blueprint for their society. When Kirk suggests that the planet end its gang warfare and unite, a crime boss protests, "The Book tells us how to handle things." Iotian society clearly shows the limitations of basing all beliefs on a single book.

"Star Trek—The Next Generation" takes place in the twenty-fourth century, seventy-eight years after the events in the original series. It appears we will have to wait until then before humanism really flourishes. The new *Enterprise* is commanded by Captain Jean-Luc Picard. The first officer is commander William Riker and the Science Officer is Lt. Commander Data, an android.

In "Justice," Wesley Crusher, the young son of the ship's doctor, inadvertently commits a minor offense on the planet Edo and is sentenced to death. Although the Edo are less advanced than the Federation, the planet is orbited by a technologically superior vessel. When Picard describes the vessel to the Edo, they reply that he is describing God who "is said to be somewhere up there protecting us." Data informs Picard that the vessel recognizes that the Edo's worship is both expected and harmless at their present stage of evolution.

Picard is unwilling to allow Wesley to be executed. He convinces the Edo god to let them depart with Wesley, although doing so may violate the Prime Directive. Picard implores, ". . . there can be no justice so long as laws are absolute. Even life itself is an exercise in exceptions." Riker adds, "When has justice ever been as simple as a rule book?"

Absolute moral systems may themselves be immoral because they preclude using the full range of human knowledge and experience in developing moral values. Because they can accept no other viewpoint, absolutists may be more likely to impose their morality on others, which may also be immoral.

As seen in the societies controlled by computer gods, religious authority stifles moral growth by prohibiting examination of ethical issues. Such systems of morality are stagnant because they preclude the use of reason, and do not consider changing conditions, technological advances, and new knowledge about ourselves and the universe. Curiosity, the desire to understand the universe, and the ability to fashion reasonable explanations are part of humanity's strengths. However, when those explanations become enshrined as dogma they are transformed into weaknesses.

Humanism and Skepticism

Captain Picard advises members of his crew to read more history and philosophy. His own reading has paid off. Picard demonstrates that he has learned some of the lessons of history that Kirk had not.

In "Who Watches the Watchers," a Federation anthropological team clandestinely studies the Mintakans, a species at the Bronze Age level of development. Liko, a Mintakan, observes two humans "beaming up" and is injured in a fall. He is beamed up to the *Enterprise* for treatment, and briefly awakens in sick bay, where he sees Captain Picard. When Liko awakens back on the planet he believes that he has been brought back to life. He leads the Mintakans in resurrecting the ancestral legends of The Overseer, whom he now calls The Picard.

When the Mintakans find and detain an injured anthropologist, they surmise that The Picard will be pleased and grant them favors. However, Liko becomes afraid when the anthropologist escapes with the help of the ship's counselor, Deanna Troi. Liko interprets a storm as The Picard's anger and as a sign that he wishes Troi punished.

An anthropologist tells Picard that the Mintakans' new belief will eventually become a religion which without guidance will degenerate into inquisitions and holy wars. He is advised to give the Mintakans guidelines to let them know what The Overseer expects of them. Picard refuses to sanction their false beliefs and is horrified by the developments:

I cannot, I will not impose a set of commandments on these people. To do so violates the very essence of the Prime Directive. . . . Your report describes how rational these people are. Millennia ago they abandoned their belief in the supernatural. Now you are asking me to sabotage that achievement? To send them back into the dark ages of superstition and ignorance and fear? No!

Liko's new religion transforms him into a pathetic figure. He is stripped of his rationality and ability to make decisions. His actions become based on fear, rather than reason and compassion. He frantically attempts to guess what his god wants, interprets routine natural phenomena as The Overseer's wrath, pleads to have his dead wife returned, then offers to exchange his life for hers. He becomes incapable of making moral judgments, asking The Picard for guidance on what to do with Counselor Troi. Theists refer to the concept of "losing one's faith." But the Mintakans show that in rejecting the ancient superstitions they were not losers. On the contrary,

the Mintakans develop more reliable methods for obtaining knowledge, and they acquire self-confidence, self-worth, and moral maturity.

The episode "Devil's Due" is based on a Ventaxian legend in which Ardra promised a planet one thousand years of peace and prosperity in exchange for enslaving the entire population upon her return. The planet's problems have been resolved, and a woman claiming to be Ardra attempts to enforce the contract. The people believe they have sold their souls to the Devil and that the end of the world is at hand.

Ardra uses advanced technological tricks to frighten the population. Picard recognizes Ardra as a flimflam artist and proceeds to expose her. He establishes that the Ventaxians themselves, through courage and hard work, were responsible for instituting the reforms that saved their planet from war and environmental destruction. In a scene reminiscent of the methods of the Committee for the Scientific Investigation of Claims of the Paranormal, Picard recreates Ardra's "magic" to demonstrate that her powers are not unique.

Conclusion

Religion has prompted belief in gods, devils, angels, and the afterlife for thousands of years. Most of us are raised from infancy in a universe depicted as magical, controlled by all-powerful, invisible beings. This makes us superstitious and susceptible to other paranormal claims. In my view, it is this conditioning, rather than an innate human need, that serves as the basis for what Paul Kurtz calls the "transcendental temptation."

There are many influences that can assist us in overcoming our childhood conditioning. Captain Kirk once told an alien adversary to "Go to the Devil." The alien replied, "We have no Devil, Kirk." Exposure to the idea that religious beliefs are not universal enables us to recognize our own beliefs as a product of our culture, rather than as sacred truths. Our horizons are expanded as we view the world through alien eyes. Mr. Spock shows us that there is some alien in all of us. He makes the alien more familiar, more acceptable, and even likeable. This helps to overcome what Carl Sagan has called "human chauvinism."

Through science fiction such as "Star Trek," we gain perspective not only from different cultures, but from different planets, different species, and different times. Science fiction is often social commentary disguised as aliens, monsters, and space ships in order to escape censorship by repressive government and puritanical television networks. For many, science fiction sparks an interest in science. For others, it plants small seeds of doubt that may germinate, grow, and ultimately blossom into humanism.

Notes

1. "Entertainment Weekly," No. 85, September 27, 1991: 22.
2. *Starlog*, No. 149, December 1989: 57.
3. Shatner, Lisabeth, *Captain's Log: William Shatner's Personal Account of the Making of Star Trek V: The Final Frontier* 56.
4. *Starlog*, No. 100 November 1985: 19.
5. *Starlog*, No. 100 November 1985: 19.