SYMPOSIUM: MORMONISM AND SF


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Ronald D. Moore, developer and co-executive producer of the 2004–2009 Battlestar Galactica remake, has said he was not inclined to expand the strong Mormon themes in Glen A. Larson's original 1978 series (BSG 1978), given his lack of familiarity with Mormonism (Leventry). Even so, the framework of Larson's Mormon vision undergirds the later series' premise and execution, especially through the continued centrality of religion. Elements of the new drama, furthermore, suggest parallels to Mormon beliefs that can have particular resonance for Latter-day Saints. By viewing the series through a Mormon lens, the epic conflict between polytheistic humans and monotheistic Cylons can illuminate Mormon principles of theodicy, free agency, and spiritual evolution. In addition, as boundaries between humans and Cylons blur, the initially central question of “What does it mean to be human?” gives way to the more urgent question, “What does it mean to be humane?” Similarly, the distinguishing issue of religious identity, “What do we believe?” is preempted by religion's more foundational concern, “How shall we live?” The resulting narrative can be seen to illustrate Mormonism's distinctive form of religiously framed “humanism,” with its assumptions of infinite human potential.

Other than the controversial move of turning the cocky, cigar-smoking male fighter pilot Starbuck into a cocky, cigar-smoking woman, the most significant innovations by Moore and co-executive producer David Eick in recasting BSG 1978 were to make Cylons the creation of humans (rather than the unexplained legacy of an alien race), and to give them the ability to appear as humans. As Cylon Caprica Six (Tricia Helfer) puts it, Cylons are “the children of humanity; that makes them our parents, in a sense” (“Bastille Day”). This becomes especially true when, in the process of their further evolution, Cylons model themselves on their creators (“No Exit”). In addition to the original metallic Centurions and Raiders (organic/mechanical flying fighting ships that are Cylons in their own right), the most disturbing iterations are seven numbered android models (there had been eight, but one was destroyed), and an unnumbered group called the Final Five, who developed the others. Following a SF trope dating back at least to Mary Shelley's Frankenstein and including such prime examples as Philip K. Dick's Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep? and the associated Blade Runner franchise, the “human-likeness” of Cylons poses vexing pragmatic challenges to the real humans' self-preservation, and even more vexing existential challenges to assumptions about what it means to be a “real” human. As recently as Kazuo Ishiguro's 2021 Klara and the Sun, SF has explored the unsettling potential for androids to “pass” as, or—generating a different anxiety—to surpass humans. Though technically machines, Cylon androids are, as D'Anna Biers/Number Three (Lucy Lawless) observes, remarkably similar to humans physically, at least in how they bleed (“Exodus I”). Furthermore, as the lascivious
scientist Gaius Baltar (James Callis) experiences in his pleasure with various versions of Number Six, in other important ways they also function like humans. In their ability to be endlessly cloned and resurrected, Cylons might even be considered improved humans. At the same time, until the conception of Hera, a human-Cylon baby born to Karl “Helo” Agathon (Tahmoh Penikett) and Sharon “Athena” Valerii/Number Eight (Grace Park), and of a Cylon-Cylon baby by Colonel Saul Tigh (Michael Hogan), one of the Final Five, and Caprica Six that is miscarried, they lack the human ability to reproduce biologically.

As humanity’s absolute “other” draws uncomfortably close, at least in appearance, the most intriguing aspect of Cylon “humanness” is their acquisition of religion. Religion for humans was always a subtext of the original series: Larson’s narrative of space fugitives drew directly on his LDS background (Ford) in ways that color the later series as well. Both series, for example, have a Council or Quorum of Twelve governing twelve human colonies, as in the Mormon Quorum of the Twelve Apostles (Nelson). Their use of the name Kobol for humanity’s mother-world reworks Kolob, Mormonism’s name for the star nearest God’s dwelling place (Pearl of Great Price, Abraham 3.2-3). Even the idea of a remnant of humans fleeing near-genocide to follow a lost tribe to Earth echoes the Book of Mormon, in which descendants of Israel’s Tribe of Joseph make their way to America after escaping Jerusalem’s imminent destruction (Book of Mormon, 1 Nephi 2.1-4; 5.14; 17-18). Moore made his Cylons monotheists to contrast with the humans’ polytheism, based loosely on the Greek/Roman pantheon (Leventry). Although the monotheistic/polytheistic divide adds another point of conflict, the development of Cylon spirituality itself contributes to the erosion of distinctions between human and non-human that so disconcerts the colonials. The Galactica’s crew, for example, assert that they are fighting ”toasters,” not people, and, in a nod to Blade Runner, derisively call android models “skin jobs.” The Cylons, meanwhile, decry “toaster” as a racial epithet, and, in an echo of Frankenstein’s monster (see Thrall, “What the Frak, Frankenstein!”), assert that they, in fact, possess souls. Some Cylon models express little or no interest in religion, it is true. Though at times adopting the role of clergy, John Cavil/Number One (Dean Stockwell) rejects the idea of Cylon souls (“The Ties That Bind”), and advocates what might be called an “andro-ology” (rather than a theology) that denies God any active influence at all (“Lay Down Your Burdens I and II”). But in an echo of other SF explorations of religious robots (e.g., Isaac Asimov’s “Reason”), even Cavil’s ability to parse such questions represents the achievement of spiritually self-aware artificial intelligence predicted by such futurists as Ray Kurzweil (153).

In a further examination of SF tropes, Cylons and humans share in the fraught role of “God-like” creators of other beings. Just as the humans on the twelve colony planets created Centurions as a slave race that eventually rebelled, humanoid Cylons from Kobol who settled as the Thirteenth Colony on a planet they called Earth created their own mechanical slaves, who likewise rebelled (“No Exit”). This process of successively generating races is reinforced with the series’ conclusion, which indicates that humans and Cylons, in combination with indigenous tribes they discover on the planet that is our Earth, are together the progenitors of contemporary humanity (“Daybreak
II”). Thus, perhaps none of the “human-like” creatures in the series are exactly human in the way audiences assumed. This fluidity in what constitutes a “human” is extended by the existence of human-appearing cyborg Hybrids able to control Cylon basestars, and by the presence of “Messengers,” also referred to as “angels,” who appear in the forms of individual humans and Cylons, who are capable of having sex (as Messenger Number Six does with Baltar), and seem to be eternal (“Exodus II”). Although it is not stipulated that they were formerly embodied, that possibility is suggested by the indeterminate nature of Kara “Starbuck” Thrace (Katee Sackhoff), who, in her mysterious reappearance after her death (“Maelstrom,” “Sometimes a Great Notion”) and her final “winking out” disappearance in the series’ conclusion (“Daybreak II”), might be a Messenger. Her sometime guide/sometime sparring partner, Leoben Conoy/Number Two (Callum Keith Rennie), at least points to a progression in her state when he notes how she has changed after her return from death: she is an “angel,” he says, whose “journey can finally begin” (“The Road Less Traveled”). Starbuck herself distinguishes her former physical state from her current possibly spiritual condition, referring to her post-death body as “just this alien thing” (“The Ties That Bind”).

The variety and shifting states of characters who at least appear as some form of human invite comparisons to the LDS concept of “infinite and divine human potential” that is based on founder Joseph Smith’s claim that “God and humanity were essentially members of the same species” (Mason 160, 159). While the LDS church has no official position on Darwinian “organic evolution,” which it considers a matter of scientific study and not revelation (Evenson), the “innovative notion of theosis or deification in which humans are on a path of eternal spiritual progression” provides a dramatic form of spiritual evolution, explains Patrick Q. Mason in *What Is Mormonism?* (159; see also Adams, Ricks). In a “premortal” state, the spirit children of the Heavenly Father, an embodied, yet all-powerful being, and the Heavenly Mother, who is divine but not worshiped as the Father is, prepare for life as embodied humans on Earth (Gospel Topics: Premortality, God the Father, Mother in Heaven). During “mortality” or the “second estate,” embodied spirits have “opportunities to grow and develop in ways that were not possible in . . . premortal life” (Gospel Topics: Mortality). After death and entry into “postmortality,” humans return to a spirit state to await final resurrection and reunion with their physical bodies (Gospel Topics: Postmortality). With Mormonism’s near-universality when it comes to salvation, there is a level of heaven available to all except Satan and his angels (Mason 165). The “celestial kingdom,” or highest tier, is where “God and Jesus reside, families are united for eternity, and eternal progression toward godhood is possible.” The “ultimate goal” for Mormons, therefore, Mason states, “is not merely salvation but rather exaltation—that is, becoming gods themselves, though never supplanting God the Father” (160). This possibility of becoming divinities invites claims that Mormons are “not monotheists,” Mason adds. “[S]trictly speaking, this is true as Mormons not only acknowledge the existence of innumerable gods in the cosmos but also insist that God, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit, all of whom they worship as members of the Godhead, are three separate persons” (163). Given the centrality of God the Father, it would be a step too far to call
Mormons polytheists, he argues; rather, they entertain a complex intermingling of monotheistic and polytheistic ideas.

BSG 1978’s two-part episode “War of the Gods” evokes this doctrine of spiritual progression directly when technologically advanced, angel-like creatures called Seraphs restore the human pilot Apollo (Richard Hatch) to life after he sacrifices himself to protect a fellow pilot, Sheba (Anne Lockhart), from the Satanic figure Iblis (Patrick Macnee). Brought aboard the Seraphs’ Ship of Lights, Apollo, Sheba, and Starbuck (Dirk Benedict) find they are, like the Seraphs, clothed in white. The Seraphs explain that they chose to help the humans in general and Apollo specifically because “as you are now, we once were; as we are now, you may become,” a paraphrase of the claim by Lorenzo Snow, Mormonism’s fifth president, “As man now is, God once was; as God now is, man may become” (Mason 159, Ford 86). The Seraphs also explain that they are interested in those, like Apollo, “who have the courage to grow beyond the limitations of the flesh.” The later series is not so explicit as to quote a Mormon president, yet Starbuck’s post-death return to Galactica in a gleaming white Viper fighter seems a nod to the earlier resurrection scene.

Mormons may find more extensive resonance with the principle of spiritual progress in the series’ attention to the closely allied matter of “free agency” (Mason 166), a core contributor to the humanistic flavor of LDS theology. By “humanism” I mean both the broadly inclusive term for preoccupation with human reason, actions, and motives, and the more specific reference to Renaissance endorsement of the dignity and potential of human earthly existence (“Humanism”). Although it might seem odd to associate Mormonism with the often secular concerns of humanism, LDS theology elevates human free will in its approach to theodicy, or the challenge of reconciling the idea of a good and omnipotent God with the existence of evil. Rather than assume that Original Sin imparted by the fall of Adam and Eve explains human participation in evil, the doctrine that “all humans—excepting young children and the mentally impaired—are accountable for their own actions, according to their capacities and the degree of their moral instruction” is as foundational for Mormon thought “as predestination was to sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Calvinism,” explains Mason (166). Although other branches of Christianity endorse moral living, Mormonism stands apart in the degree to which it assumes a human role in bringing about good or evil by properly or improperly exercising moral agency (Ford 84–86, Mason 124, Warner). Calling human agency “existential” for Mormons, and “inherent in their very being,” Mason observes that the interplay of theosis and “free agency” places extraordinary emphasis on the responsibility to advance spiritually. “Most substantially, it makes humans active co-participants with Christ in their own salvation and exaltation” (167).

A choice by pre-mortal spirits to either follow God and Christ, or Lucifer (Satan), who rebelled and “sought to destroy the agency of man,” gives human agency cosmic significance (Mason 124; Pearl of Great Price, Moses 4:3). Notably, in BSG 1978, when the humans of the fleet are tempted to accept Iblis as their leader, the enticement he offers is freedom from moral responsibility (“War of the Gods I & II”). While again not presenting such an explicit reference, the later series consistently foregrounds struggles of conscience and decision-making for both
colonialists and Cylons. As the Renaissance rejected medieval assumptions that inherent human sinfulness was inescapably limiting ("Humanism"), so the series matches its deep study of human and Cylon imperfection with attention to the potential for achieving some fundamental decency, if not transcendence, through active choice. A major plot point, in which a Cylon faction decides to join forces with the humans, is propelled by another faction's choice to remove Raiders' ability for independent thought, and leads to granting free will to Centurions ("Six of One"). The division of Cylon factions itself presents the kind of crossroads experienced by Mormonism's pre-mortal spirits, especially since the malevolence of Cavil, leader of the group lobotomizing Raiders, has a Satanic flavor. Other episodes repeatedly return to the question of choosing correctly among difficult alternatives, and of taking responsibility for choices made. In one tightly wound juxtaposition early in the series, shots of Colonial President Laura Roslin (Mary McDonnell) protecting the fleet by destroying a nuclear-laden ship that may or may not be carrying 1,300 humans are interspersed with shots of Baltar evading responsibility for having betrayed all of humankind when he gave Caprica Six access to the humans' defense mainframes ("33"). At a later critical moment, Roslin presents choices by Galactica's crew and passengers to join or resist a treasonous coup in stark terms: "Who do you want to be? Who do you want to be?" ("Blood on the Scales"). This focus on personal responsibility thus joins the question of “what is a human?” with the broader religious question of “how shall a human live?” or, more specifically, “how shall a human live humanely?”

Although the answers to that last question are as diverse as the circumstances in which characters must consider it, Moore's series favors gestures of mutual support and solidarity in particular. From the opening miniseries, calls of then-Commander William Adama (Edward James Olmos) for the humans to hold together in the face of the Cylon onslaught are punctuated with the colonials' version of a unified Amen, "So say we all" ("Miniseries"). The strongest statement of what the audience is invited to value in human/Cylon behavior comes, however, when such ties are extended, even tentatively, across lines of division. Besides the romantic linking of Number Six and Baltar, the mutual love of Athena and Helo overcomes Cylon infertility with the production of Hera. The promise of this new horizon of hybridity, as well as her attachment to Baltar, pushes Caprica Six to question whether a God of love would mandate genocide, and to use her status as a hero of the cause to urge her Cylon colleagues toward détente with the humans ("Downloaded"). Starbuck displays her hatred of all things Cylon by torturing Leoben when he is her prisoner ("Flesh and Bone"), and repeatedly murdering him when she is his ("The Occupation"). Even so, she is moved to pray to her gods on behalf of his soul, and her incorrect belief that they have produced a daughter together momentarily offsets her antipathy ("Precipice"). Significantly, in her later mystical revisit of her past at the point of her death, it is an apparent Messenger in the form of Leoben who serves as her guide ("Maelstrom"). These connections are often accomplished in spite of religious identifications, as what is presented as the right thing to do is what is most caring of others, with the caveat, repeatedly asserted by Roslin, that “right” must be balanced with “smart” ("No Exit"). It is right, for example, to see the imprisoned Athena as worthy of trust and respect, as Adama does eventually, and wrong to torture Gina Inviere,
another Number Six clone, as Admiral Helena Caine (Michelle Forbes) and the Pegasus crew do (“Pegasus,” “Resurrection I”). It is wrong for Tory Foster (Rekha Sharma), one of the Final Five, to murder Calandra “Cally” Tyrol (Nicki Clyne), even if Tory thinks it is smart because Cally had discovered the Five’s identities (“The Ties That Bind”). It is seemingly right, but not smart for Galen Tyrol (Aaron Douglas) to help the “Boomer” version of Number Eight escape captivity, because it leads to Hera’s kidnapping (“Someone to Watch Over Me”). Finally, it is clearly right in general for Cylons and humans to overcome their mutual hatred to join forces for their shared survival. Resurrected among other Cylons on Caprica, Boomer distills this distinction between religious belief and something more basic when she waves a photograph of her Galactica crewmates at Caprica Six and shouts: “Do you think I care about your God? . . . This is love. These people loved me” (“Downloaded”).

In a manner reminiscent of Mormonism’s acceptance of some element of “both/and” in their approach to single or multiple Gods, even the division between monotheism and polytheism weakens by the series’ end. Small moments along the way point to fluidity in the concepts, as when a Colonialist oracle gives D’Anna a message from her Cylon God (“Exodus I”), or when Roslin and another cancer patient discuss whether it makes sense to identify that God as Cylon (“Faith”). In part because of Baltar’s preaching to his cult of mostly female followers, a number of humans “switch sides” to worship one God rather than many. Later, united in their loss even as they engage in different rituals, monotheists, polytheists and Baltar’s followers come together in an ecumenical service of mourning after a deadly breach of Galactica’s hull (“Islanded in a Stream of Stars”). The specifics of religious difference thus fade, replaced by a sense that, whatever the individual level of perception, “something more” is providing support for human-like creatures responding to the call to be better. As Baltar asserts in a final confrontation with atheist Cavil, “There’s another force at work here. . . . We’ve all experienced it. Everyone in this room has witnessed events that they can’t fathom, let alone explain away by rational means” (“Daybreak II”). In the face of that experience, limiting language becomes meaningless: “Whether we want to call that God or Gods or some sublime inspiration or a divine force that we can't know or understand, it doesn't matter.” What does matter is the responsibility to exercise agency in ways that set aside the destructive power of conflict: “Good and evil, we created those. You want to break the cycle? Break the cycle of birth? Death? Rebirth? Destruction? Escape? Death? Well, that's in our hands, in our hands only.”

Given the series’ richly developed religious backdrop, which includes references to reincarnation as in Buddhism or Hinduism, to circular history that echoes Aztec cosmology, and to the quasi-religion of the Zodiac, among others, a Mormon reading of these themes of human potential and agency is, of course, only one possibility. Even elements of the series particularly recognizable to Latter-day Saints, such as Roslin’s vision of being greeted by her deceased family members in heaven (“Faith”), or the presence of guiding Messengers similar to the angel Moroni who led founder Joseph Smith to the Book of Mormon (Hardy), may connect with other religious traditions as well. As different viewers “see” the series in different ways, however, perhaps all might respond to the proffered pattern of a better way for “other” to relate to “other.” To repurpose
President Snow’s maxim, perhaps the upward striving to live humanely, which leads at least to a more fully realized humanity, if not divinity, is the best work of whatever might be called “religion,” Mormon or otherwise. That may add an element of hope to what might otherwise be despair in the oracular assertion: “All of this has happened before. All of this will happen again” (“The Hand of God”).

Notes

Works Cited


The Book of Mormon. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2013.


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