

3

The Theology of Gene Roddenberry

While nuances certainly exist, the essential definition of atheism is simple. The word is comprised of the Greek root *theos*, meaning “God,” and the prefix *a*, meaning “not.”¹ Atheism, then, is the belief that God is “not,” or, that God does not exist. While earlier applications of the term can were used with reference to disbelief in a particular god or gods,² in modern times, the word “atheism” has generally referred to, as William L. Rowe puts it, disbelief in “the existence of any sort of divine reality.”³

In very brief, the only thing an atheist believes about God is that he, she, or it does not exist. Therefore, if one attributes any characteristic or quality to God other than nonexistence, that person is categorically not an atheist. Gene Roddenberry had many ideas about the nature of God, not one of which was God’s nonexistence. With this in mind, I’d like to give some attention to the various statements Roddenberry made about God and to construct at least a working understanding of his theology.

“I believe in a kind of god.”

It’s one thing to say, based on a critical analysis, that Roddenberry’s irreligious and antireligious statements are not atheistic, but more than that, Roddenberry himself even rejected the atheist label at least once and

1. McKim, *Westminster Dictionary of Theological Terms*, 20.

2. “The cry of the heathen populace in the Roman empire against the Christians was ‘Away with the atheists! To the lions with the Christians!’” 1911 *Encyclopædia Britannica*.

3. Rowe, “Atheism,” *Shorter Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, 73.

specifically described his form of theism on multiple occasions. In *Last Conversation*, Roddenberry proposes the idea that perhaps the human imagination is not simply a function of the mind, but also something that exists, independent of human consciousness. When asked to define what that something might be, he calls it “A mystery. A flashlight in the dark. God.” Fern seems somewhat incredulous.

“You’re pretty well known for not believing in God. Do you claim him now?”

“Oh, well, people are often pretty well known for things which are not true.”

“Well, is it?”

“No, it’s not. I believe in a kind of god. It’s just not other people’s god. I reject religion. I accept the notion of God.”⁴

Fern then points out that “the notion of God” is not the same thing as God and presses Roddenberry for further clarification. After initially attempting to dodge the question, Roddenberry finally relents.

Alright. God, to me, is intrinsic to humanity. To the whole cause of humanity. To the imaginative principle. To what we create, and think. He—or I should say “it”—is a source, yes, but more an involvement with the unknown. God is like the leap outside oneself—something that has no discernable source, but is a source.

“Inspiration?” Fern offers. “That’s as good a word as any,” replies Roddenberry. “Better than most.” Fern notes that the word “inspiration” is derived from the Latin *inspiro*, which means, in her words, “to breathe into.” Within Roddenberry’s definition, she says, this suggests, “a breath of life from an unknown source.” Roddenberry appears satisfied with this description. “A breath of life,” he says. “I like that. It is a breath of life, this god thing. It’s not a thing you pray to, it’s a thing you use to answer your own prayers. Humanity needs God in order to be humanity—it is part of them.”⁵

This breath, to Roddenberry, was more than a “notion,” and more than just a part of humanity. Roddenberry saw God as a reality intrinsic to the universe, perhaps even a scientifically provable one. “I think God is as much a basic ingredient of the universe as neutrons and positrons,” he told Terrance Sweeney. “I suspect there is a scientific equation in matter and

4. Fern, *Last Conversation*, 67.

5. *Ibid.*

time and energy, and that we'll ultimately discover the missing ingredient. God is, for lack of a better term, clout. This is the prime force, when we look around the universe."⁶

“God is not a person.”

As his above exchanges with Sweeney and Fern allude, it wasn't just the idea of God as a warlike, vengeful being that Roddenberry rejected; it was the idea of a personal God—that is, a God who is a person—in which he also disbelieved. It is this disbelief that many Roddenberry observers have characterized as atheism. As we have seen, however, the conclusion that Roddenberry was an atheist is one that his consistent statements on the matter of his view of God do not support. However, his statements about God—even his use of the term “God” to describe what he believed in—can easily lead to the equally false assumption that he was a traditional monotheist, believing in a single, separate, and external God.

Roddenberry remarked to Sweeney that, “God is not a person, not a simple thing like that,” calling such an idea “a petty, superstitious approach to the All, the Infinite.”⁷ His belief in the nonexistence of a personal God—biblical or otherwise—was based on his belief in the existence of a God that is “too great and too encompassing to be explained and appreciated by any single system of belief.”⁸ He likely intended this statement with particular emphasis on organized religion and on the belief in God as a separate, personal being. As he told Ellen Adelstein,

I think the more that you delve into science, the incredible mystery of the universe, the incredible precision and all of this, you begin to realize that God—creative force or whatever it is—is so far beyond what we can even imagine that you kind of move out of your belief that there's someone up there with a long, white beard, and so on.⁹

While a “long, white beard” is hardly a tenant of Christian theology, Roddenberry's point is well taken: traditional concepts of God, for him, simply won't do; he sees them as far too limiting of the Divine. So, if, in

6. Sweeney, *God &*, 12.

7. *Ibid.*, 14.

8. Alexander, *Star Trek Creator*, 422.

9. Adelstein, *Up Close and Personal*.

Roddenberry's view, God is not a person, what is God? And, if religion is corrupt and untrustworthy, where is one to find God?

“I am God; certainly you are.”

There are two essential aspects to Roddenberry's conception of what he called the “God thing”: humanism and pantheism. These two aspects are intimately connected and are most succinctly stated by Roddenberry early in his conversation with Sweeney. “As nearly as I can concentrate on the question today,” Roddenberry says, “I believe I am God; certainly you are, I think we intelligent beings on this planet are all a piece of God, are becoming God.”¹⁰

Roddenberry said that he loved individual humans because they are part of humanity.¹¹ For him, neighbor love was a part of the progress of humankind. As we love one another and accept one another and work toward peace and unity with one another, we progress—not only as individuals, but as a species. This species—according to Roddenberry—is not just a collection of organic individuals, but is a participant in and is evolving toward the Divine. In essence, we are God. Loving one's neighbor, then—even loving oneself—is, ultimately, loving God. This is, of course, an extrapolation based on Roddenberry's stated beliefs, but it is a logical one and one which it is doubtful was lost on Roddenberry himself. Humans are fragile, selfish, petty, and hateful creatures. But this is not what Roddenberry believed to be our truest, best nature. It is our capacity for goodness, kindness, forgiveness, peace, and perhaps especially creativity and invention where Roddenberry saw that “we have things to be proud of.”¹² It is here that Roddenberry saw in humankind the spark of the Divine.

Seeing this spark, along with the incredible order of the universe, brought Roddenberry to the clear, consistent conclusion that some form of divinity exists. Seeing the corruption, manipulation, oppression, and greed carried out in the name of religion brought him to the conclusion that the most common religious conceptions of God cannot be correct. Therefore, humanity became the anchor for his view of God. Seeing God reflected in his creation—especially in humans, who are made in his image—but rejecting the concepts of God that humans could be reflecting, he instead saw the

10. Sweeney, *God &*, 11.

11. Fern, *Last Conversation*, 28.

12. Beck, *Star Trek 25th Anniversary Special*.

reflection and the reflected as synonyms. Since he saw God in humanity and not elsewhere, humanity must be God. Since humanity is also wicked, humanity—and God—must also be in progress. Since God has already created the universe, God must also, somehow, already be fully evolved. Hence, “In some cyclical, non-time thing, we have to become God in order to create ourselves.”¹³

Ultimately, it is unclear whether it was Roddenberry’s concept of God that caused him to reject religion, or the religion he saw as worthy of rejection that informed his conception of God. As will later be shown in my discussion of the Original Series episode “Bread and Circuses,” it is possible that he could have, under other circumstances, been a Christian, as he seems to have found his greatest philosophical kinship there. Whatever he thought of Jesus, though, the Christian religion, as he saw it, and the perception of God he perceived in it pushed him away from any kind of pursuit of Christ. But that is not to say that Christ did not pursue him. It seems, in fact, that Roddenberry may have fit Flannery O’Connor’s description of the American South as “Christ-haunted.” It seems that, in his Star Trek stories, Roddenberry was constantly struggling with concepts of God and religion, drawing on Edenic imagery as early as the rejected pilot episode “The Cage,” and persisting in writing literal struggles with divine beings, to the point that Original Series and Animated Series writer David Gerrold remarked that “When in doubt, Gene just had Kirk get into a fight with God.”¹⁴

It is not difficult to imagine a young man like Gene Roddenberry questioning the simple platitudes and pat answers he likely got in a West Texas Southern Baptist church in the 1930s, especially with the influence of his skeptical father. And certainly, our childhood experiences of religion and moral formation have a tendency to affect some portion of our lives into adulthood, but Roddenberry seems, strangely, at once obsessed with religion and God and not mindful of them at all.

The first example of the latter most observers point to is Roddenberry’s well-documented hedonism—especially in the area of his lack of sexual fidelity to Majel. Even as he clearly loved her more than anyone in the world and remained, at heart, completely devoted to her, this never stopped him from “dipping his wick” wherever he pleased.¹⁵ Added to his penchant for

13. Sweeney, *God &*, 11.

14. Tescar, “The TAS David Gerrold Interview.”

15. Fern, *Last Conversation*, 111.

drink, his sailor's vocabulary, his dabbling in drugs, and his contempt for religion, this made Roddenberry the consummate, classic heathen.

All of this, however, seems at least partially rooted in his official rejection of Christianity and the pursuit of an essentially moral life—in terms of seeking justice and walking humbly—without a stern religion and a vindictive God towering over him and threatening to punish him if he got out of line. As we hear echoed in the dialogue from the episode “Bread and Circuses” (“The words are true”), there was clearly something undeniable to Roddenberry about the wisdom of Jesus. Equally undeniable to him seems to have been the existence of some form of creator and deity, even if he could ultimately pinpoint it nowhere but in, as Kirk puts it in *Star Trek V*, “the human heart.”

His hedonism, then, may have been a kind of reaction against a perceived insufficiency of religion to encompass the greatness of the divine, or to satisfy the human heart. All the pleasures he sought—perhaps especially sex—were rooted in the belief that, if humanity was divine, then it is also basically good, and further, if it is basically good, then so are its basic desires. So, a desire for pleasure and sexual fulfillment was seen as simply the desire to connect with another human being in a mutually pleasurable way. From the external signs, he may have been completely vindicated in this belief, as Majel seemed to accept this aspect of her husband's personality. One wonders, however, if the detectable sadness on the surface of her demeanor when she discussed this subject might hint that she was more hurt by his behavior than she let on.

In reacting against religion, however, it would seem that Roddenberry was, in a certain sense, questing for a divinity he did not find with the walls of a church. In fact, there is more than a small amount of evidence to suggest that biblical narratives and Christian ideas and imagery had made an impression on Roddenberry and imbued him with a kind of “indelible Christian imagination”¹⁶ that colored his work. “I used religion several times in *Have Gun, Will Travel*,” he recalled. “Once in a penitentiary where a pastor was trying to keep a fellow from being hung, I wrote that the pastor grabbed a hacksaw blade, was cut by it, and was bleeding. I had him make some comment about blood and salvation.” While his familiarity with Christianity from his time in church certainly contributed to his ability to use this type of imagery, he included it, in part, with an awareness of how

16. This is something of a paraphrase of the book title, *Afterimage: The Indelible Catholic Imagination of Six American Filmmakers*, by Richard A. Blake.

it would be received. “It’s not that I actually believed in blood and salvation being connected,” he continued, “but that was the way the audience believed and I can remember going out of my way not to deal directly with what my thoughts [on religion] were for several reasons.”¹⁷

These references Roddenberry consistently brushed off as incidental flukes of imagination. However, his humanistic philosophy seems thoroughly rooted in his rejection of religion (and, conversely, in the moral foundation he received from religion) and talk of God seems to have been never far from his lips. Time and time again, Roddenberry—of his own volition, with no one else even mentioning the subject—brings up the topic of the divine, whether as creator of all things or in the collective human spirit or with reference to religion. In some form or another, Roddenberry the creator seemed to be also on his own journey of discovery.

SAMPLE

17. Alexander, “Interview of Gene Roddenberry.”