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Our Many Beliefs: Openness Toward Religion

Is the Original Series truly antireligious? Certainly, it spends a great deal of time dispelling and debunking false religions. Note, however, that the theme of these religions is consistently a manipulative, controlling, authoritarian structure. This structure is usually maintained by an imposed ignorance—through hidden information, unapproachable authority, suppression of curiosity, and even mind control, as is notable in the quasi-religious nature of the penal colony/rehabilitation center in "Dagger of the Mind." However, when it comes to sincere faith that benefits the human experience and is in harmony with basic human principles, TOS is notably tolerant and respectful, even while coming just short of embracing these religions. In "Balance of Terror," for example, Kirk conducts a wedding ceremony "in accordance with our laws and our many beliefs,"[1] one of several statements in the Original Series reflecting a variety of religions aboard the *Enterprise*. To examine this idea of religious tolerance in Star Trek, we can look at a number of key episodes of the Original Series that deal with religion and even at times with Christianity.

Roddenberry once cited "The Return of the Archons" as one of his ten favorite episodes of *Star Trek*.[2] Upon reflection, it is easy to see why. The episode manages to deal with human social structures, technology, and religion, all while staying true to Roddenberry's idea of using Earth

1. McEveety, "Balance of Terror."
2. Roddenberry, "My Favorite Voyages," 12.

analogues to tell Star Trek stories.[3] In discussions of religion in Star Trek, the episode is often cited as an example of the series and Roddenberry making a broad statement rejecting all religions as the kind of soul-killing machines of control and intimidation that we see on Beta III, the planet depicted in the episode.

Certainly Roddenberry and others have leveled such accusations at religion—Christianity in particular—at many times, often with much clear justification. However, if the episode is to be read as an outright, universal condemnation of religion, it must also be read as a similar condemnation of technology. After all, Landru is ultimately shown to be a computer that, however advanced it may be as a technological achievement, is ultimately incapable of sustaining a truly flourishing society. Dependence upon this computer has gutted the life from the planet's society. Perhaps the greatest mistake Landru ever made was leaving his people in the hands of a machine. They are free from war, but they are in bondage nonetheless. The curse of Beta III is the domination of technology—a curse that is broken when the supercomputer is destroyed. Freedom for the soul, it seems, comes in freedom from technology.

Of course, it is difficult, if not impossible, to believe that *Star Trek* would make such a blanket statement against technology. Technology is what allows its characters to function in their environments, pursue their goals, and solve many of their problems. In fact, some have claimed that Star Trek praises technology above all else. This is also an incorrect analysis, since Star Trek's stories frequently portray the perils and disastrous consequences of technology and the many inhuman goals for which it can be used. In the Trek universe, technology is neither unconditionally praised nor wholly dismissed. Therefore, a technophobic reading of this episode seems unwarranted. Instead, the episode (like many in the Trek universe) is better understood as a warning about what happens when technology is used without virtue and is too greatly depended upon.[4] Certainly warning about a particular use of technology is not the same thing as disparaging all technology.

By the same token, it seems blunt to interpret "Archons" as a universal indictment of religion. Certainly most of the religion Roddenberry had been

3. Cushman and Black, *These Are The Voyages: TOS: Season Two*.

4. The greatest working out of this lesson in Star Trek is, of course, the Borg. In fact, there are interesting resemblances to the Borg in this episode, with individuals being consumed by a mechanized collective, the Body. The phrase "You will be absorbed" seems a precursor to "You will be assimilated."

exposed to probably seemed much like Spock's description of the society on Beta III as "a soulless society" with "no spirit, no spark."[5] There is no creativity—no heart—and, therefore, a complete lack of flourishing. Kirk says as much when he counters Spock's suggestion that the Prime Directive prohibits them from interfering with the planet's social structure. "That refers to a living, growing culture," he says. "Do you think this one is?"[6] Spock's silence indicates the withdrawal of his objection. Notice that an essential missing element is creativity. Indeed, we are created to be creators.

It is also interesting to note that something as difficult—if not impossible—to scientifically describe and quantify as "spirit" could be so obvious to Star Trek's characters as important to the flourishing of a society. Because of its strongly scientific focus, it is often assumed that Star Trek is only interested in the purely rational. In reality, time and again, such ephemeral notions as "spirit" and "heart" are appealed to in Star Trek. That is because, ultimately, Star Trek is not about science or technology, except as aspects of its real focus—humanity and human nature. It doesn't take long to see that concepts like spirit, imagination, faith, courage, consciousness, love, and even justice are essential to humanity, though none of them is particularly rooted in a purely scientific understanding of humans as a species. We'll examine more of that in future chapters.

While "The Return of the Archons" is almost certainly a critique of communism, the religious imagery of the episode is impossible to miss and is arguably the prevailing tone of the society on Beta III. The Lawgivers wear monk-like, hooded robes, while followers of Landru praise his name, revere him, and speak of his gifts of peace, love, and tranquility. Some observers have gone so far as to assume this episode is a direct attack on Christianity,[7] with parallels being drawn between the "Body" of Landru and the biblical image of Christians as the Body of Christ.[8] [9] Though some intentional criticism of Christianity is likely present, a direct metaphor is never clearly drawn. Still, read in this specific context, the episode is notable for its attitude toward Landru. Even as the soulless system that imposes what purports to be Landru's will is obviously viewed as evil, Landru himself is never denigrated. Landru's wisdom and his importance in Beta

5. Pevney, "The Return of the Archons."
6. Ibid.
7. Muir, *A History and Critical Analysis of Blake's 7*, 43.
8. Higa, "#669."
9. Mooney, "The Return of the Archons."

III's society are never questioned. In fact, Kirk's central criticism of the computerized Landru is that he lacks Landru's insight and wisdom. "I am Landru," the computer says, "I am he. All that he was, I am. His experience, his knowledge."[10] Kirk counters, "But not his wisdom. He may have programmed you, but he could not have given you a soul. You are a machine."[11] In other words, the problem with the religion of Beta III is that it has lost touch with its founder in trying to create a perfect system that rids the world of flaws by, in essence, stripping it of its humanity.[12] The people of Beta III no longer truly follow Landru. Instead, they worship a projected image of him, an echo of who he really was.

This episode seems to be saying that Christian religion often suppresses the spirit, rather than restoring it, and that the rigidity of religion misses the point of Jesus' teaching. It would also seem to suggest that our image of Christ is often merely and icon and does not reflect Jesus himself. In very brief, much of the criticism Christians have leveled at their own faith is reflected in this episode, as is the cure to which they have frequently returned. The remedy for the "frozen chosen," locked in soul-killing religion, is to return to the heart and teachings of Christ as closely and as purely as possible. Indeed, Star Trek was produced in the earliest years of the Jesus Movement, which sought just such a return to first-century Christian faith. So the critique of religion here is not only accurate, but also timely.

Beyond the mechanized formality of the religion of Beta III, though, there is another element that is equally prevalent—fear. The Lawgivers use intimidation to keep the citizens of Beta III under control and the rule of fear is frequently apparent. Reger cowers before the image of Landru, burying his head in his arms on the table, pleading to be spared from the punishment he and the *Enterprise* crew receive. Ultimately, he even recants his role in the resistance against Landru, desperately shouting, "No, no, I was wrong! I submit! I bear myself to the will of Landru!"[13] as Kirk, Spock, and Marplon plan to confront Landru in the Hall of Audiences. Marplon himself has to be persuaded against his fears by Kirk and only very hesitantly leads Kirk and Spock to Landru. These and other moments reflect

10. Perhaps intentionally, the Landru computer's words here mirror Jesus' words, "I am he," in John 18:6 and God's words to Moses, "I Am that I Am," in Exodus 3:14.

11. Pevney, "The Return of the Archons."

12. Though these are aliens, who don't technically have "humanity," they look and act human and are ultimately meant to mirror humanity.

13. Pevney, "The Return of the Archons."

a common image of American Christianity as a religion based in fear and punishment—an image to which the Jesus Movement was strongly opposed, choosing instead to focus on the love of God. This focus not only reflected a Christian resonance with the philosophical direction of the hippies, but a return to the biblical admonition against punishment and fear as hallmarks of the Christian life. In a well-known passage, shortly after his assertion that "God is love,"[14] the author of 1 John says that "There is no fear in love, but perfect love drives out fear, because fear has to do with punishment. The one who fears punishment has not been perfected in love."[15] While there is no specific appeal to love in the episode, fear is confronted head on and the affectation of peace and love is abolished along with fear on Beta III when the Landru computer is destroyed. Describing several domestic disputes and fights that have erupted on the planet since the end of Landru's control, Lieutenant Lindstrom remarks, "It may not be paradise, but it's certainly human," a description which Kirk finds to be "most promising."[16] [17] Certainly, the people of Beta III have not yet been "perfected in love," but they are at least human again and that's a start.[18] "You will know the truth," Jesus said, "and the truth will make you free."[19] The people of Beta III now know the truth and they are learning to be free.

In the same way, while Christians become understandably defensive when criticisms are leveled at Christian religion, the ability to recognize the truth that is often present in critiques such as those found in "The Return of the Archons"—and indeed, throughout the Star Trek universe—can only lead to improvement. It is very possible for an insular system like much of Christian culture to become corrupted and wayward without those on the inside ever realizing it. The ability, then, to look at one's faith and faith community objectively can help to ferret out inconsistencies and failures. As Lindstrom's remarks illustrate, the human equation is never without foibles, but a striving toward righteousness is something that both a Christian

14. 1 John 4:8.

15. Ibid.

16. Pevney, "The Return of the Archons."

17. This moment, of course, also serves as another example of the Original Series questioning the value of the concept of paradise, choosing a more human existence, rather than a "perfect" one.

18. Again, these are presumably Betans we are dealing with in this episode. But, even Lindstrom's description of their burgeoning culture as "human" leaves some question as to how much effort was put into truly making this an alien race.

19. John 8:32.

worldview and Star Trek recognize as fundamentally important to human progress. In this way, learning the truth of our own failings can help Christians—and all humans—become free.

While it is unlikely that such a detailed and specific critique was intended in this episode, the lesson is there to be mined and is one that echoes the words of Jesus, who strongly criticized religious leaders of his time for loving their rules more than God's true law and missing the point of everything God had called them to do.[20] Faith without works may be dead,[21] but works without love are pointless.[22] "The Return of the Archons," like many episodes in *Star Trek* that deal with overtly religious themes, was originated by Gene Roddenberry (he received story credit for the episode). As such, there is some evidence that a return to the teachings of Jesus and a movement from fear to love is a remedy (apart from simply abandoning religion altogether) that Roddenberry himself might have suggested for the Church in his own time—namely, in another episode that originated with Roddenberry, "Bread and Circuses."[23] [24]

Conventional wisdom about "Bread and Circuses" says that the episode is about television in some way, that it's a parody of television or poking fun at television.[25] That certainly is an element of the story, however, it's honestly a very small amount that is relegated to a few lines of dialogue and the presence of the television studio and the gladiatorial combat that occurs therein. The primary focus of the story doesn't even hinge on the strange qualities of planet 892-IV, where the story takes place. Its eerie similarity to Earth is brushed off after the opening scene and its merging of twentieth-century technology and the Roman Empire is not explored very convincingly. For the most part, 892-IV looks like any other planet Starfleet might explore that happens to borrow from Roman culture. It doesn't actually feel very twentieth century at all except in the newsreel footage and in the presence of television. When the crew encounters the refugees in the desert, they have rifles, but that is really the most modern thing about them,

20. Matt 23:1–36.

21. Jas 2:26.

22. 1 Cor 13: 1.

23. Though some sources credit John Kneubuhl with writing the story for "Bread and Circuses," the story actually originated with Roddenberry. The idea that Kneubuhl wrote the story arises from a dispute over the work he did on the writing of the episode, as is made clear by Cushman and Black, *These Are the Voyages*.

24. Cushman and Black, *These Are The Voyages.*

25. Clark, *Star Trek FAQ*.

apart from the magazine Kirk flips through and the mention of cars being present. Even though Spock mentions that the planet has "power transportation" and "an excellent road system,"[26] we never see a road outside the television broadcast, or a car outside the magazine print ad.

Otherwise, it's just like a biblical epic or anything else that happens on a planet that appears in the Original Series. There is no vehicular transit. When our characters want to go somewhere, they walk there. This ends up greatly playing down the twentieth-century aspect of the episode. Certainly, there must have been production reasons for these things to be the way they were, but as a planet, except in those descriptions in the dialogue, there's nothing terrifically unique about it. It actually doesn't do a very good job of living up to the hype of merging the twentieth century and the Roman Empire. So, while observers have frequently discussed the episode in terms of the television angle and the merging of the twentieth century and the Roman Empire, these don't seem to be the focus of the episode.

In reality, the episode is about the relationships between the characters. It's about what makes Kirk and company different from Merik and his crew. Ultimately, it's really about sacrifice and redemption and the script's infamous wordplay between the words "sun" and "son." The Children of the Sun that we meet in the beginning of the episode, assumed by the *Enterprise* crew to be sun worshippers, are revealed to be the Children of the Son (of God)—that is, early Christians. They therefore bring with them an enormous package of Christian symbolism that can be read throughout the episode. Their exemplar is Flavius, the former gladiator.

Upon his arrest, we learn that he has a reputation in gladiatorial combat as a fighter and a killer. When Maximus, the centurion, tells Flavius that his first fight has been scheduled, Flavius protests, "I will not fight. I'm a Brother of the Son." Maximus cavalierly replies, "Put a sword in your hand, and you'll fight. I know you, Flavius; you're as peaceful as a bull."[27] This is an interesting exchange between these two men about the narrative that will define Flavius as a person. Maximus believes Flavius is going to be defined by fighting and killing, by being a gladiator, and Flavius insists that he will not fight.

He is forced to fight, just as Kirk, Spock, and McCoy are, but he makes a different choice. He chooses to sacrifice himself and save the strangers who he was ready to kill earlier in the episode. This is a distinctively

26. Senensky, "Bread and Circuses."

27. Ibid.

Christian act, rooted in the deepest of Christian ethics. Much the way it has in the history of biblical cinema, the sacrifice of a Christian—Flavius—mirrors the sacrifice of Jesus and one wonders if this is this is a conversion story we are seeing. Flavius, at the beginning of episode, appears to be a new believer, learning to be fully committed—a possibility suggested by his desire to kill the strangers from the *Enterprise*. "I didn't harm them, Septimus," Flavius tells the group's leader when he delivers Kirk, Spock, and McCoy, "as much as I wanted to." Septimus replies with a gentle admonishment he seems to have given Flavius many times, "Keep always in your mind, Flavius, that our way is peace."

This scene provides the first moment of identification between the philosophy of these early Christians and the crew of the *Enterprise*. McCoy remarks that they are grateful that the Children of the Son follow the way of peace, "for we are men of peace ourselves." Septimus immediately takes this as a possible sign that they are fellow believers and asks, "Oh? Are you Children of the Son?" McCoy then affirms the pluralistic nature of the Federation, in a rare discussion of its religious makeup. "Well, if you're speaking of worships of sorts," he says, "we represent many beliefs." As such expressions often do with modern Christians, McCoy's statement of pluralistic values immediately draws anger from Flavius, who retorts, "There is only one true belief!" and concludes that these outsiders must be "Roman butchers, sent here by the First Citizen." Septimus, the older and wiser believer, consistently responds to Flavius' outbursts by gently insisting on peace. "I know killing is evil," Flavius tells Septimus, "but sometimes it's necessary." Septimus simply responds, "No."

The central struggle of Flavius' character, then, is repeatedly shown to be a conflict within himself, between a warlike nature and a peaceful nature. Is he a fighter, or a man of peace? In other words, when he is pressed, will he follow the words of the Son or not?

> FLAVIUS: For seven years, I was the most successful gladiator in this province
>
> KIRK: Then you heard the word of the sun?
>
> FLAVIUS: Yes. The words of peace and freedom. It wasn't easy for me to believe. I was trained to fight. But the words, the words are true.[28]

28. Ibid.

Later, Flavius again refers to the words of the Son, and to his difficulty believing them. "The message of the Son, that all men are brothers, was kept from us," he says. "Perhaps I'm a fool to believe it. It does often seem that man must fight to live." But Kirk encourages him, "You go on believing it, Flavius. All men are brothers." Flavius then goes on to live—and die—as though those words are indeed true.

"The words that I have spoken to you," Jesus said, "are spirit and are life."[29] Like the words of the Son depicted in "Bread and Circuses," his words both drew people to him and repelled them. When many of his disciples left him because of what he taught, he asked the twelve, "You don't want to go away too, do you?" to which Simon Peter replied, "Lord, to whom would we go? You have the words of eternal life."[30] Flavius lives between the poles of Peter and the disciples who left Jesus. While he is drawn to the Son by "the words of peace and freedom," they are difficult for him to accept because they challenge him to fundamentally change how he views the world and his place in it. Ultimately, though, Flavius chooses to follow the Son because "the words are true."

While Flavius struggles to accept the words of the Son and questions his salvation, more lost than Flavius by far is former Federation Merchant Marine captain R. M. Merik, known on the planet as Merikus. Merik has surrendered to Proconsul Claudius Marcus, allowed himself to be bullied and his crew to be killed. He has failed in his duty as a captain and has become the whipping boy for the proconsul. The proconsul has won a victory over him and he has accepted defeat. "Would you leave us, Merikus?" Marcus says during a conversation with Kirk. "The thoughts of one man to another cannot possibly interest you." Merik quietly accepts the insult and walks away, but it may in fact be a turning point for his character, a moment when he realizes just how put down he is, as he ultimately decides to make a desperate attempt to help Kirk, Spock, and McCoy escape. In so doing, like Flavius, he loses his life. He must know that this would happen, but he still makes this last effort to save not only Kirk and his crew, but also himself. He chooses to rebel against the authorities and the manipulation that have held him down, and to rebel against the weakness within himself that would allow him to sacrifice his crew.

So, again with Merik, we see a redemption, or perhaps a conversion of sorts, that moves someone from a place surrendering to evil to an act of

29. John 6:63.

30. John 6:67–68.

self-sacrifice. Flavius, even though he is a celebrated warrior, as a gladiator, is still a slave. He fights and kills because the authorities want him to fight and kill, to risk his life for their entertainment. In the same way, Merik is also a slave. He is a captive, held where he is by the proconsul. Even though he appears to be in some form of authority or position of privilege, the truth is that he is being kept where he is so that he can be controlled, manipulated, and used, his own crew relegated to death in gladiatorial combat. Since his men are all dead, Merik really has outlived his usefulness. When the proconsul encounters Kirk, he sees fresh meat and he goes after it. Seeing this, Merik chooses to act, as Flavius does, to help save Kirk and his crew. In so doing, like Flavius, he finds a kind of redemption for himself.

The narrative that the authorities want to tell about Flavius—and want him to tell himself—no longer defines Flavius. Similarly, Merik is no longer defined by the narrative with which the proconsul has controlled him. In a story that is centered around the effects of Christian faith on a Roman world, these characters are defined by salvation wrought through self-sacrifice. This is not insignificant. In fact, this seems to be the theme of the story—the victory that is won by consistently choosing peace over war. Though the *Enterprise* could have laid waste to the planet, she did not open fire. There is no rescue effort made and no attack launched. Rather, Scotty holds to the Prime Directive of noninterference. He interferes enough with events to allow Kirk, Spock, and McCoy to get free, but does not alter the course of the planet's culture. So these three characters—Flavius, Merik, and Scotty—all win victories against a very powerful opponent by holding true to their core values, regardless of what they want to do. They set aside their immediate impulses and instead stay true to a code of honor and peace, winning the victory, in spite of the odds. This, again, is a very Christian concept, that the last will be first, that the unlikely will be victorious. So, the words of the Son, the Prime Directive, and a core concept that all human beings are brothers and sisters are really at the heart of the episode. The core story comes down to the conversation on the bridge at the end of the episode.

> McCOY: Captain, I see on your report Flavius was killed. I am sorry. I liked that huge sun worshiper.
>
> SPOCK: I wish we could have examined that belief of his more closely. It seems illogical for a sun worshiper to develop a philosophy of total brotherhood. Sun worship is usually a primitive superstition religion.

> UHURA: I'm afraid you have it all wrong, Mister Spock, all of you. I've been monitoring some of their old-style radio waves, the empire spokesman trying to ridicule their religion. But he couldn't. Don't you understand? It's not the sun up in the sky. It's the Son of God.
>
> KIRK: Caesar and Christ. They had them both. And the word is spreading only now.
>
> McCOY: A philosophy of total love and total brotherhood.
>
> SPOCK: It will replace their imperial Rome, but it will happen in their twentieth century.
>
> KIRK: Wouldn't it be something to watch, to be a part of? To see it happen all over again?[31]

It is seems as if Kirk encourages Flavius' religious belief because it contains a humanistic truth, possibly in the hope that it will lead Flavius into humanism. Isn't it interesting that most Christians don't seem to encourage beliefs that are in line with Christian values, regardless of what worldview they come from, in similar hopes? "There are many good, helpful values contained in [religious] beliefs," Roddenberry said. "How could I condemn them?"[32]

From these examples, it is clear that the kind of religion TOS admires and respects is the kind that is life-giving, peacefully oriented, and essentially humanistic. It also most often resembles or directly mirrors Judaism and "pure," first-century Christianity. TOS, it seems, always comes back to biblical essentials, with the possible exception of its conception of God.

31. Senensky, "Bread and Circuses."
32. Fern, *Last Conversation*, 123.