

## *Religious Discourse in Lost and Battlestar Galactica*

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The television series *Lost* (2004–2010) and *Battlestar Galactica* (2004–2009) provide two recent examples of mainstream pop-cultural success stories to which the interrogation of religious certainties are an integral, arguably essential element. While these shows hooked audiences with immediately engaging premises (respectively attractive-actors-do-*Survivor*-as-scripted-hour-long and aircraft-carrier-in-space-does-War-on-Terror), both also questioned received religious teachings from an early stage. Though largely spurned by fans, this sustained investigation of religion as a practice and as a social construction—an investigation often mediated through the dichotomy between science and faith—became very much a central subject matter of the shows' final seasons. Both *Lost* and *BSG* manipulated the symbolic language of Judeo-Christian religions to posit idiosyncratic portraits of the cyclical conflicts humanity must move beyond if it is to achieve genuine transcendence. While the theological inquiry proffered was often received and rejected without consideration for what the writers were trying to articulate, *Lost* and *BSG* had profound messages to communicate about life, belief, community, and the dangerous tendency of religion to divide humanity into ideological factions rather than to unite people into truly accepting societies. As such, thoughtful viewers must ask themselves what is the purpose behind *Lost* and *BSG*'s use of heretical notions such as apathetic deities, resurrections that are not, and the deliberate collision of contemporary belief systems with archaic or esoteric forms of worship?

At first glance, contemporary television science fiction seems very far

removed from the realm of theological inquiry. Traditionally such material has been lighter in tone than its literary antecedents, eschewing sustained consideration of religion and its effects on individuals and societies. Obvious exceptions include shows such as *Babylon 5* (1993–1998) and *Star Trek: Deep Space Nine* (1993–1999), but, as with *Lost* and *BSG*, these favoured a serialized narrative style that allowed for a long-term, *in situ* focus on social and theological themes generally outside the remit of episodic television sci-fi. *Lost* and *BSG* built upon the success of such precedents, transcending the niche genre audiences of the 1990s and achieving genuine mass appeal with atypical material. For better or worse, these shows number among the most discussed television series of the twenty-first century thus far.

*Lost*, set on a mysterious island which seems to exist outside space and time as we generally perceive them, was created by J. J. Abrams, Damon Lindelof, and Jeffrey Lieber, but produced and masterminded throughout most of its run by Lindelof and Carlton Cuse, who together contributed many of the most important scripts. Trading heavily on mystique and misdirection, the most philosophically resonant moments of *Lost* were those which dramatized the contemporary disconnect between the certainties of science and the convictions of religion. While this discourse was packaged within sensationalist science-fictional elements such as time travel, magnetic anomalies, global conspiracies, and so on, the show's real strength lay in how its characters personified the demarcation between knowledge and belief, or — to use the show's own parlance — between science and faith in the form of main protagonists Jack Shepherd and John Locke. In particular, Locke's assertion that the show's disparate characters were brought to the island for a reason serves as the starting point for an interrogation of "faith" which was continually refined as *Lost* progressed: What does it mean to have belief? What obligations are incumbent upon those who believe? Is it possible to reconcile provable knowledge of the physical world with belief in transcendent reality?

These same questions were asked by *Battlestar Galactica*, a self-consciously gritty reimagining of the kitsch 1970s series by the same name. The modern *Battlestar Galactica* follows the crew of the titular spacecraft in their defense of a rag-tag fleet, human survivors of a nuclear holocaust on the Twelve Colonies of Man. This new version of the show was developed by Ronald D. Moore, who also produced and wrote for *Deep Space Nine* throughout much of its run. Moore served as executive producer on *BSG* along with David Eick, and together they constructed an intricate universe which took its lead from the original series but which was simultaneously rooted in contemporary concerns about religious fundamentalism, terrorist sleeper cells, and the fragility of civil liberties. Issues of theology are woven into the basic

premise of the show, with the polytheistic humans pursued by the Cylons, a monotheistic adversary responsible for the holocaust and humanity's one-time robotic slaves who have evolved into flesh and blood "machines." Both sides boast figures that blur the divide between the rational and the religious, chief among which is Dr. Gaius Baltar, a deeply flawed scientist who is manipulated by the Cylons into allowing them access to the Colonial defence network and so, in many ways, is accountable for the destruction of the human race. Baltar's journey from atheist lab-coat through cynical politician and cult-leader to, in the final episode, true believer in the saving power of spirituality is one of the more remarkable and engaging transformation in recent popular culture.

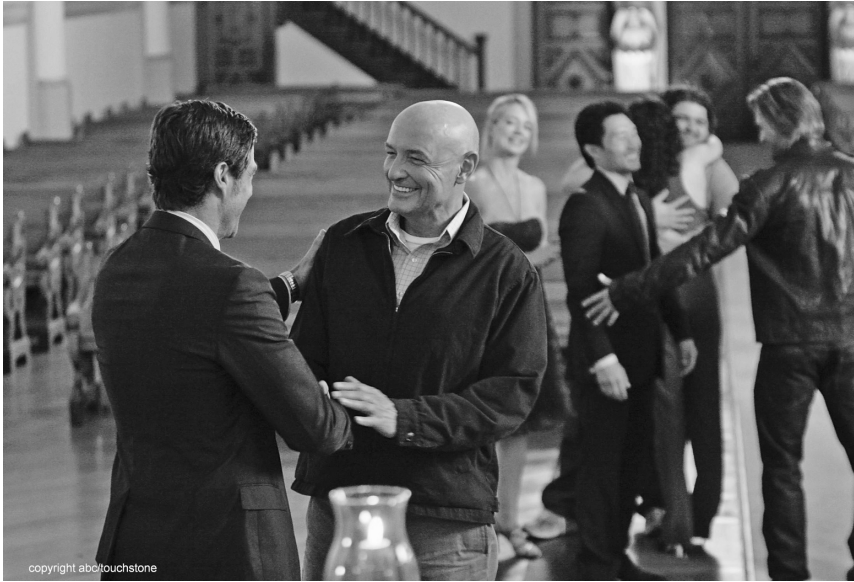
A hybrid series, *BSG* subsumes its theological inquiry beneath a veneer of straightforward military sci-fi in the same way *Lost* conceals the full scope of its intentions within a succession of mysteries and narratological trickery (for instance, the bait-and-switch whereby flashbacks became flashforwards). While both shows display the genre hallmark of complex mythologies—which in this context refers to their elaborate back-stories—they also insist on a religious subtext antithetical to the science of science-fiction. The protagonists of both are in search of an ultimate or seemingly unobtainable reality: for the characters of *Lost* it is a way to escape the mysterious island on which they have been stranded; for those of *Battlestar Galactica* it is Earth, safe haven from their Cylon pursuers and the mythical homeworld of the Thirteenth Tribe of Humanity. More often than not, these characters all discover the essence of their being in the course of these journeys, a strong thematic similarity of *Lost* and *BSG*'s final seasons. Likewise, both series are successful in tapping into that most potent aspect of science fiction, its ability to represent the present in allegorical form. *Lost* and *BSG* are inseparable from the post-9/11 context in which they were created. The linkages may be more apparent in the case of *BSG*—essentially a drama about the ambiguities of life in wartime which just happens to be set in space—however it is possible to discern one common message from both it and from *Lost*: religion is bad, spirituality is good.

God, in the universes of *Battlestar Galactica* and *Lost*, does not exist as typically imagined in popular culture. While organized religion tends to function along recognizable lines, the object of such worship is closer to a force of nature than to the stereotypical bearded man in the sky. Both *Lost* and *BSG* exhibit a profound skepticism with regard to the veneration of God-like figures and/or pantheons composed of such deities, depicted as being largely indifferent to the fate of those who pray to them. This lack of interest in mortal affairs comes through not just in the overt religious material but also in the prevalence of absent or problematic fathers throughout both shows.

Jacob on *Lost* is one such figure. The ageless and seemingly omnipotent protector of the Island, Jacob may as well be God as far as many of the Island natives are concerned.<sup>1</sup> Certainly he controls the destiny of all those on the Island — even many of those around the world — and is able to grant seemingly divine gifts such as immortality. Though “He,” as the character is frequently referred to, remains unseen until the final episode of season five, his influence, like that of any deity, is felt through the actions of followers, the mysterious Others who menace *Lost*’s protagonists throughout the show’s early years. The absent father par excellence, he is later shown in flashback to have visited many of the main characters in their youth. Yet, despite his powers and abilities, the character’s first on-screen appearance in “The Incident” (written by Lindelof and Cuse) depicts him as a false god, one who is unable to prevent his own dethronement once directly challenged by an acolyte. He is, in the end, murdered by a mere mortal who has grown frustrated with his inaccessibility and with his issuing of orders and doctrinal edicts from on high.<sup>2</sup>

With Jacob’s demise, the Island succumbs to a period of lawlessness and chaos while its inhabitants struggle with a lack of guidance and the malevolent, opportunistic activities of Jacob’s opposite, the Man in Black. This spiritual anarchy constitutes the on-island plotline of *Lost*’s final season and so runs concurrently with what is known as the “flash-sideways universe.” The flash-sideways universe derives its confusing, subsequently *inaccurate* designation from misdirection on the part of the show’s writers. Whereas the previous seasons had used both flashbacks and flashforwards to divulge crucial segments of *Lost*’s mythology, season six portrayed what at first appeared to be a parallel universe (seemingly created by interference with the established timeline during the season five finale). This unusual narrative device seemed to present the story of what might have happened had the protagonists’ plane not crashed on the island. However, in the show’s final episode (“The End,” written by Lindelof and Cuse), *Lost*’s “flash-sideways universe” is revealed to be the ultimate flash-*forward*, a kind of waiting room for the afterlife created so that the characters might find each other again before they finally move on together.<sup>3</sup>

The flash-sideways universe is the most obvious of the show’s religious elements and the one which is least vulnerable to accusations of window dressing. Simply put, while iconic and ritualistic elements of religious symbolism appear frequently in *Lost*, the story of the characters on their way to the afterlife represents the writers’ most successful integration of the theological into the show’s narrative. It is essential to the ending of the series and, moreover, constitutes the clearest statement of *Lost*’s central thesis: the importance of community and how individual lives—or deaths—are defined by



“We’ve been waiting for you”: In one of the final scenes of *Lost*’s finale, “The End,” the souls of the main characters are joyously reunited in a timeless “waiting room” for the afterlife. This “is the place that you, that you *all* made together so that you could find one another,” Jack Shepherd is told by the spirit of his father. “The most important part of your life was the time that you spent with these people. That’s why all of you are here. Nobody does it alone, Jack. You needed all of them and they needed you.” Left to right: Matthew Fox as Jack Shepherd, Terry O’Quinn as John Locke, Cynthia Watros as Libby Smith, Daniel Dae Kim as Jin-Soo Kwon, Evangeline Lilly as Kate Austen, Jorge Garcia as Hugo “Hurley” Reyes, and Josh Holloway as James “Sawyer” Ford.

our relationships with those around us. Live together, die alone is not simply the survivalist mantra of main character Jack Shepherd, but a central tenet of the series as a whole.<sup>4</sup> The waiting room is explained to Jack (and so to the audience) by the spirit of his father, the perfectly named Christian Shepherd who—as an absent father finally come to make amends—guides the souls of the survivors into the next world. Though the characters have, in many cases, died alone, this temporary existence is a place their souls constructed so that they could find each other again. This is, Christian says, because the most important part of their lives was the time that they spent together. None of them found fulfillment in isolation. None of them succeeded alone.<sup>5</sup>

Of course, given the widespread confusion over the meaning of “The End,” it should be clearly stated here: the characters of *Lost* are not in purgatory throughout the series. Events that occurred on the Island, however remarkable, inexplicable or strange they were, actually occurred in the world

of the series. Everything that happened on the island actually happened, Christian explains.<sup>6</sup> That said, events occurring in the flash-sideways universe do constitute a state of being with purgatorial characteristics. While the survivors and the other characters all died at different points, their souls congregate in this space outside of time so that they can come to terms with their lives and all move on together. While the true nature of the flash-sideways universe is unambiguously defined by Christian, misunderstandings did occur, being particularly apparent in online discussions where the immediate responses to “The End” ranged from dissatisfaction to outright anger. The finale, said one commentator, “was a lame duck, such a shame they abandoned most of the interesting threads: time travel, physics, [and] the wheel under the Island” while another review — headlined “The *Lost* finale was incredibly dumb” — rejected “The End” as “two-and-a-half hours of slow-motion bullshittery.”<sup>7</sup> Continuing online hostility towards the finale is occasionally inflamed by the profound misreadings of the show propagated by mainstream commentators and cultural critics. Take, for instance, this interview which fantasy novelist George R.R. Martin gave to *Time* in 2011:

Having been a veteran of not only writing for but watching *Twilight Zone*, it was about the second episode of *Lost* I said, “Oh, they’re all dead.” They’re all dead. That’s what it would be in a half-hour Rod Sterling *Twilight Zone*, in 1958. And [*Lost*’s writers] took what? How many seasons to get to the point where they were all dead?<sup>8</sup>

Though there can be no doubt that Martin is wrong, the comments of such a widely read and influential author perpetuate the inaccuracies associated with *Lost*’s conclusion, serving as tacit approval of fan backlash against the religious elements of the show’s mythology and, beyond “The End,” the wider incorporation of spiritual themes into genre television.<sup>9</sup> Furthermore, his dismissal negates the purpose of “The End” and of the show’s final series in a more general sense: to deliver closure for, on one hand, the characters’ relationship to each other and, on the other, the viewer’s relationship to them. Achieving both aims, “The End” provides a beautiful, emotionally resonant conclusion to the series, one which requires the kind of contemplation which is increasingly lacking in this digital age of instantaneous reaction and online discussion. Would the spiritual elements of “The End” have been better understood if the audience had allowed themselves time to absorb the message of the series? More than likely yes, for *Lost* was always more about its characters than its mysteries, a line Lindelof and Cuse stuck to despite it being little comfort to fans of the show’s puzzle-box aspects. Viewers who valued the science-fictional elements of *Lost* rejected the spiritual content of “The End” as anathema to the atheistic tendencies of a genre where technology

almost inevitably trumps theology. This group, core members of the show's audience, was particularly vocal in disparaging "The End" as weak mysticism or even a wholesale cop-out.

For many, such griping constituted a form of active resistance against the spiritual message of *Lost*'s finale: the implication that — in fiction as in real life — some things will never be explained and that adherence to teaching or doctrines which promise such enlightenment will inevitably let you down. In "The End," Christian Shepherd emphasizes this by holding forth from a multi-domination house of worship, a building of superficially Christian architecture but one which is adorned with the symbols of many major religions: the Islamic Star and Crescent, the Star of David, the Hindi Aum, the Christian Cross, the Buddhist Dharmacakra, and the Taoist Yin/Yang. Their appearance together serves as a leveller, denying the primacy of any single system of belief and underlining how both *Lost* and *BSG* employed religious symbolism to demonstrate the divisive aspects of ideology. Religion — propagated mainly by individuals — is portrayed as a fractious distraction from the kind of genuine healing necessary in the aftermath of tragedy, a spiritual undertaking which requires true communities to succeed. That the final moments of *Lost* play out in the absence of dialogue only reinforces this; the characters have found each other again, rejoicing in each other's company before Christian opens the church doors and ushers in their next existence. Though much derided, the white light through which the protagonists progress into the afterlife is akin to the "God" of *Battlestar Galactica*, typically defined as a force of nature rather than a distinct entity.<sup>10</sup> Both transcendent powers are unknowable and that is the point. From the perspective of the viewer, the critic, or the online blogger, attempts to understand where *Lost*'s survivors are going or what is manipulating the fates of *BSG*'s protagonists are not just unsuccessful but counter-productive, marring the emotional, contemplative content of the shows with a reductive search for answers that sadly typifies one of sci-fi fandom's most negative characteristics.

Indeed, the final season of *Battlestar Galactica* provides a case in point, with the spiritual content inherent in the ending of that series being just as, if not more controversially received than the conclusion of *Lost*. Echoing that show's emphasis on light and dark, good and evil, *BSG* advances two diametrically opposed theological constructions: the robotic Cylons's Abrahamic belief in one true God versus the polytheistic Human faith which espouses worship of a pantheon closely resembling the real-world Greek deities. Reinforcing its thematic connection with the post-9/11 War on Terror, the conflict between the Cylon and Human is depicted as a clash of civilizations, one in which powerful political grievances are expressed through a violent discourse of disparate religious philosophies. In particular, the Cylons claim divine



inspiration and endorsement for their genocidal attack on the human race which begins the series and so, on an immediate level, *BSG* speaks readily to the twenty-first century American fear of religious extremists with nuclear ambitions. What separates the show from similarly themed television series (say *24*) is not that it eschews conservative or reactionary tendencies—*BSG*'s engagement with these topics is one of its strengths—but instead that it makes a concerted effort to understand the role of religion in provoking those responses in the first place. Again and again, the argument proposed by the series is that arbitrary religious division manifests always as destructive, disastrous conflict.

It is no accident that in the final episode of the series, "Daybreak" (written by Moore), the survival of Human and Cylon alike is contingent on finding a way to work in cooperation with each other, to look past the differences of ritual and rite so that they might—tellingly—begin to construct a new world together. Like *Lost*, the show espouses a philosophy of spiritual growth through community-building rather than through organized religious institutions or instruction. Religion is depicted as actively retarding the spiritual growth of the Human and Cylon races, trapping their opposing doctrines in an endless spiral of hatred and holocaust. God, though the entity eschews that title, sends his agents, described as angels, amongst the mortals but he never appears in person to any of the characters.<sup>11</sup> Whereas *Lost*'s Jacob, for his many flaws, at least presented himself in the form of a man, the God of *BSG* is best characterized as a brutal and mechanical force. Despite sending investigative figures or guides to manipulate the variables, this entity's behavior is closer to a computer incessantly running variations on a simulation than it is to any traditional notion of a supreme being.

As a result, the betterment of humanity on *BSG* is the business of humanity alone. For a stirring summation of how this is so, one must turn to Gaius Baltar in "Daybreak," with the philosophical implication of what he says being equally applicable to the theological position of *Lost* as well as *BSG*. God, claims Baltar, is an undeniable force at work in the universe and one which has been witnessed by many of the characters. Trying to understand its motivation is a meaningless exercise and, worse, one which has led Human and Cylon alive into an endless cycle of good and evil, war, destruction, and escape. The only rational thing to do, the only way to break the cycles on which the fictional history of the *BSG* universe are predicated, is to replace terror of divine judgment with a willingness to live in hope.<sup>12</sup> It is a speech which highlights how religion, throughout both series, is a source of fear, a paradigm of human behavior which inhibits true spiritual growth and retards hope. Baltar himself is a prime example of how this message is expressed not in a moralistic fashion, but more subtly, through the evolution of character



from skeptical scientist to a man who, for all his self-described unconscionable crimes, has come to understand the power and the value of redemption. Through his transformation he finds a measure of salvation, though this is something which the universe only offers once he chooses to accept his fate and not to fight it anymore.<sup>13</sup>

What then is Baltar's fate? It is certainly less belief than it is predestination. He is to ensure the safety of the first mixed-race, Human-Cylon child, something he accomplishes with the assistance of his once and future Cylon lover, Number Six. Originally, the attractive Number Six seduced Baltar and used him to compromise the Human defence systems on the eve of the holocaust. Subsequently she is resurrected in a new but identical form — as machines, Cylons do not die they “download” into a replacement body — while Baltar is haunted by a representation of her whom no one else can see. The demeanor of this apparition, described as “Head-Six,” differentiates her from the various physical appearances of other Sixes throughout the series. From the initial episodes of *BSG*, the Head-Six character is noticeably more aggressive than the original Six, particularly in her instance that God has a plan Baltar, in fact a plan for everything and everyone.<sup>14</sup> There is an intentional sense of ambiguity in how the series portrays Head-Six, the possibilities raised including Baltar having been brainwashed, having had a chip implanted in his brain, or simply having experienced a mental breakdown due to his involvement in the destruction of the human race. The truth of the matter is actually far stranger, with Head-Six eventually transpiring to be a messenger from a higher, though not necessarily divine power.<sup>15</sup>

While she, unlike the ghosts and sundry supernatural apparitions of *Lost*, is capable of interacting with the material realm when called to, Head-Six's role in the narrative is primarily as a guide for Baltar's personal and spiritual development. Steered by this entity, Baltar makes the leap from denial of the inexplicable to a cynical understanding of the role played by faith in society at large when he runs for president at the end of season two.<sup>16</sup> His linkage of religion and politics reveals more than just his developed talent for opportunism (and, later, his remarkable sense of self-preservation), it also echoes the relationship between declared faith and electoral success in the United States.<sup>17</sup> Playing to said galleries, Baltar manages to win the election but his resulting administration — a cornerstone of the show's barbed commentary on US policy in Iraq — proves to be a disaster for what remains of the human race. President Baltar is eventually tried for collaborating with the enemy, and, though he is unexpectedly acquitted due to a lack of solid evidence, he soon discovers that no one will grant him sanctuary except for a human cult which has adopted the Cylon system of belief. Finding himself in a situation where he has to preach for his upkeep, Baltar delivers a series of sermons on



“The Last Supper.” Playing the religious subtext of the series, the Sci-Fi Channel released this promotional image for the fourth and final season of *Battlestar Galactica* along with explanatory comments by producer and writer Ronald D. Moore. Mirroring the composition of Leonardo’s famous painting, the pose and position of each *BSG* character hinted at developments in the final episodes of the show. Note how Baltar looks to Head Six for guidance and how Kara Trace is embraced by only Samuel Anders after her resurrection. From left to right: Mary McDonnell as President Laura Roslin, Tricia Helfer as Natalie Faust, Michael Hogan as Col. Saul Tigh, Jamie Bamber as Cpt. Lee Adama, James Callis as Dr. Gaius Baltar, Tricia Helfer as Head-Six, Katee Sackhoff as Cpt. Kara Thrace, Michael Trucco as Ens. Samuel Anders, Aaron Douglas as Chief Galen Tyrol, Grace Park as Lt. Sharon Agathon, Tahmoh Penikett as Cpt. Karl Agathon, Edward James Olmos as Admiral William Adama.

how the Human Gods cannot be blamed aiding the survivors of the Cylon Holocaust because they simply do not exist.<sup>18</sup> Instead of embracing the established religion, Baltar backs the theology of humanity’s enemy, a belief in one true God.

Though he cites the remarkable turnaround in his own fortunes as evidence of supernatural interest in his existence, Baltar’s turn to “God” is problematic and is not an expression of his true convictions. In actuality, Baltar does not believe; his limited prospects in the aftermath of his trial (along with his sexual needs and his previous knowledge of religion as a powerful instrument of control) lead him to see this group of scorned human monotheists as his only viable option for survival. While he affirms their belief in pub-

lic, his private comments describing himself as a king of fools and doomed to live his life in a loony bin are much more telling.<sup>19</sup> His cult is essentially a cult of personality which he maintains by regurgitating the comments of Head-Six rather than via any genuine spiritual insight of his own. It is only when he separates himself from existing religious paradigms and moves beyond clichéd conceptions of divinity that he is truly open to the revelation of another force which occurs in “Daybreak.” Once he experiences the enormity and the indifference of God, the disparate religious beliefs of the Human and Cylon factions pale into insignificance. God has no interest in helping them and, as such, the metaphorical promised land — the rich continents of a new world — can be reached only when Human and Cylon put aside their ideological differences and work together, when they believe in themselves and what they can accomplish as a unified community.<sup>20</sup>

As with the final season of *Lost*, it takes the collapse of the existing belief systems to motivate such an epiphany. Just like the death of Jacob led to a period of social and spiritual disorder for the inhabitants of the Island, the Human characters of *Battlestar Galactica* endure a catastrophic breakdown, a protracted period of hopelessness and despair once they reach Earth in the middle of the final season. The home of the Thirteenth Tribe, described in their sacred scrolls as a safe haven, is actually a dead world ruined by a nuclear war two millennia earlier. What’s more, remains recovered from the rubble show that the Thirteenth Tribe were not even Human, they were Cylons who — like Number Six and her cohort — had evolved to emulate their creators. The Thirteenth Tribe went on to create their own artificial life, machines which inevitably rose up and annihilated them. The shock of these revelations pushes the Human fleet to civil war. It is the nadir of their exodus from the Twelve Colonies, and, having placed all their hopes in religious teachings rather than attempting to reaffirm their individual and community spirituality, the characters find they have nothing to fall back upon.

The fact that *BSG*’s pilot miniseries was titled “Night” and the finale “Daybreak” has a further effect on how we judge the journeys of the show’s characters at this junction. In essence, the four seasons of *BSG* constitute a single dark night of the soul, the loneliness, desolation, and desperation of the last human beings in existence; a permanent state of spiritual crisis during which their religion and its theological foundations are challenged to the point where they lose all experiential value, life devolving into a more or less literal existential wandering in the void. The civil uprising and military mutiny depicted in “The Oath” (written by Mark Verheiden) and “Blood on the Scales” (written by Michael Angeli) results from a society which has lost its way, not just literally — for after they have found Earth they have nowhere else to go — but also spiritually. Long reliant on appeals to their Gods, the

characters discover that they have been abandoned and have nothing to believe in anymore. Again, these final season developments underline how deeply rooted the theologies of *BSG* and *Lost* are in the post-9/11 mindset, one in which belief in human authority and in God has been fatally undermined. The question asked by both shows as they move towards their conclusions is neither “What do we do now that man has killed God?” nor “Where is the safe homeland promised by the Gods?” but essentially ‘How can we continue to believe in God when he has allowed so many to die on American soil?’

In the case of *BSG*, this religious anxiety builds to a head in the final season with many of the characters expressing a belief that their Gods have abandoned them.<sup>21</sup> Tied to this is the manner in which the show’s main characters all come close to losing themselves and their sense of purpose in the course of their journey, an aspect of the series which give *Battlestar Galactica* its reputation as one of the most relentlessly dark television shows of recent years. Nonetheless, *BSG*’s dark night does provide at least a semblance of a blessing in disguise. The human race becomes more virtuous as they emerge from their trials; or at the very least they become less materialistic, abandoning their technology in the closing hour of the series and opting instead to return to basics on a newly discovered planet, a veritable Garden of Eden which they christen Earth as it represents both the true end of their journey and also an end — be it temporary or not, “Daybreak” leaves that open — to the cycle of violence between mankind and its creations.

In fact, by the end of the series, the most important difference between Human and Cylon has been eliminated by the destruction of the Cylon “Resurrection Hub.” Death has become permanent for all Cylons and it has an astonishing, unexpected consequence: it has given each moment of life its own significance; it is a violent realization, but with the end of resurrection many Cylons begin to understand that, for the existence to have any value, it must be an existence with an end. Mortality, a human flaw they have previously sought to overcome, is revealed as crucial to their growth as individuals and as a society.<sup>22</sup> The effect is the same for the characters of *Lost*, meeting again on the way to the afterlife. The limbo space of the final season is not just a What-If predicated on an alternate history, it is an opportunity for them to process deep-rooted and destructive personal issues, a chance to come to terms with the true value of their lives.

Moreover, just as Christian Shepherd ushers those characters into the hereafter, the final journey of *Battlestar Galactica*’s protagonists is orchestrated by the character of Kara Thrace, callsign Starbuck. A pilot who is apparently killed in action during season three, Starbuck returns from the dead to guide the fleet to Earth in the course of season four.<sup>23</sup> After her mortal remains are discovered amongst the ruins of that world, Starbuck is proclaimed an angel

by Baltar, and through what seems like divine intervention she leads the fleet to a new planet, a new Earth, which they can finally call home. When her work is done, Starbuck simply vanishes into thin air. This last development generated considerable fan outrage about the intrusion of mysticism into the archly atheistic realm of science fiction, something which, as primarily an online phenomenon, continues to this day and so echoes the manner in which the ending of *Lost* was received in many quarters.

With that in mind, it is perhaps no surprise that the *Lost*-bashing George RR Martin would also have a go at the *BSG* finale:

*Battlestar Galactica* ends with “God Did It.” Looks like somebody skipped Writing 101, when you learn that a *deus ex machina* is a crappy way to end a story [...] Yeah, yeah, sometimes the journey is its own reward. I certainly enjoyed much of the journey with *BSG* [...] but damn it, doesn’t anybody know how to write an ending anymore? Writing 101, kids. Adam and Eve, God Did It, It Was All a Dream? I’ve seen Clarion students left stunned and bleeding for turning in stories with those endings.<sup>24</sup>

Again though, Martin’s comments are erroneous. God might well have done “it,” but God had been doing it all along and, as with *Lost*, the clues had been there from the earliest episodes. Head-Six’s ongoing religious dialogue with Baltar is only the most up-front aspect of a spirituality which was central to the series from the pilot miniseries and from the initial stories of season one; at no point did it become less important to either the characters or to the writers. What’s more, the ending of *Battlestar Galactica* cannot rightly even be considered a *deus ex machina*; “Daybreak” was not the sudden and abrupt solution of a seemingly inextricable problem by the contrived and unexpected appearance of a heretofore unseen character, ability, or object. Though off-screen, God had been part of the series from the very beginning, and any analysis which denies this is predicated upon a fundamentally flawed understanding of the series in its entirety.<sup>25</sup>

Contrast Martin’s claims with what an actual *deus ex machina* might have looked like, one of Ronald D. Moore’s abandoned concepts for the season one finale:

[Baltar] comes into a room and he hears music and it’s a recognizable Earth tune to the audience and to him. It was Jimi Hendrix was playing, actually, and he goes, “God, I recognize that.” And then somebody’s voice says, “You recognize that?” And he says, “Yes.” And he turns and it’s Dirk Benedict [star of the original *BSG*]. And Dirk Benedict says, “Hi. I’m God.” And you just cut. We just cut out on that[...] That was gonna be the end of that whole storyline and the episode.<sup>26</sup>

While such a development would have comprised an all-too ridiculous wink at the audience, the fact that it was considered and discounted illustrates a

valuable point: those involved in the writing and running of *Battlestar Galactica* were, from an early point, concerned not simply with the theological underpinnings of their story but with an appropriate integration of such material into their ongoing narrative. Much like *Lost*'s Christian Shepherd or the mentions of Jacob dropped throughout that series, God was a mysterious presence on *BSG* as far back as the pilot. That the creative minds behind the series consistently resisted the inclusion of a *deus ex machina* is evidenced by Moore's comment above and by the careful manner in which Starbuck's arc was prepared and executed.

In many ways, Starbuck's story is more meticulously planned than that of Gaius Baltar, the clues to her death, "resurrection," and special purpose as saviour of humanity having been introduced as far back as the start of season two. It is her destiny to lead humanity to its end, though despite the ominous nature of such a prophecy, the resurrected Starbuck—reborn as another of God's messengers—rallies Humanity and Cylon alike to the completion of their long journey.<sup>27</sup> Yet her function is not simply to act as guide; she, again like Christian Shepherd, brings together a community heretofore shattered by the arbitrary divisions of religion. In a clear statement on 9/11's divisive effect on the early twenty-first century world, *Battlestar Galactica* eventually shows both sides of its destructive, religiously motivated conflict to have more in common than they ever dared admit. Human and Cylon work together to construct a new society which, in the finale's pointed flashforward of an astonishing 150,000 years, eventually develops into our twenty-first century civilization. "Daybreak," with its epilogue of contemporary robotic achievements, suggests that this society is on the verge of the same technological leaps which led to the creation of the Cylons, and so is poised to begin the cycle of violence once again. Some may see this ending as pessimistic; however, the epilogue is ambiguous, offering at least the possibility that the society created by the merger of Humans and Cylons will be able to avoid the mistakes of the past.

Such ambiguity is essential, for had *BSG* offered a concrete statement on the future of the hybrid civilization it would have been a cheat on the part of the show and a negation of how, in a metafictional touch, the series concludes in the era which inspired its narrative of holy war. The endless, biblical wandering of the human fleet which precedes "Daybreak" (or, for that matter, the aimlessness of the survivors throughout large stretches of *Lost*) speaks to a widely felt lack of direction in the years after 9/11. The focus on large-scale goals and threats such as the War on Terror, and how these were pursued at the expense of individual and community spiritual development is something which informs both narratives. Consider the manner in which the mythologies of both shows focus on continuous cycles of violence, or the implication of the rebuke to the life-and-death mission of *Lost*'s protagonists by long-

term background characters Rose and Bernard in “The Incident.” Characters who have, by the end of season five, stood by and endured more than their share of epic conflicts and melodramatic last stands, Rose and Bernard have been threatened with death so many times that they have lost their fear of it. They are jaded by the struggle between good and evil; they have opted out of it entirely, choosing to be happy with what they have instead of partaking in the insistent vacillation between the various factions—read little religions—which continue to inhibit the spiritual development of the main protagonists.<sup>28</sup> In this way Rose and Bernard provide a model for the eventual fate of all the characters in the show’s waiting room for the afterlife as well as for the characters of *Battlestar Galactica*. In both cases, communities are continually broken down to the extent that they eventually rebel against conventional religious doctrine or systems of belief, striking out at the absent father figures of both narratives.

Paraphrasing, of all things, the opening of the filmic *Peter Pan*, the oft-repeated religious mantra of both Human and Cylons is “all of this has happened before, and all of this will happen again.”<sup>29</sup> Thematically, *BSG*’s mutiny episodes represent another instance of humanity trying to overthrow its deities (in this case their political and military leaders) before they themselves are overthrown in turn by their creations. The cyclical nature ascribed to the universe here serves as a key component of the human theology on *BSG*, with characters told many times that belief in their Gods equates with a belief in a cycle of time and predestination in which they are all fulfilling role which occur again and again throughout eternity.<sup>30</sup> The implication here is clear: religious belief retards the ability of individuals and societies to transcend petty grievances and achieve true peace, prosperity, or happiness. It is a message which is mirrored by the question of eternal recurrence debated by *Lost*’s Jacob and the Man in Black. The latter argues for a cycle of corruption and devastation which always ends the same way; the former believes that all destruction is merely progress and that the story only ends once.<sup>31</sup>

Given that *Lost* and *BSG* are narrative texts, stories carefully constructed with—insofar as episodic television allows—clear beginnings, middles, and ends, it is no surprise that the finales of both depict their characters successfully breaking out of their respective cycles. “The End” and “Daybreak” are both aspirational conclusions which portray their protagonists moving on literally and figuratively. In doing so, *Lost* and *Battlestar Galactica* both end in a fashion entirely consistent with the marked prevalence of theological themes and religious allegory throughout their runs. Both series challenged viewers in an uncommon fashion, demanding an unusually high level of involvement from their audience and, as a result, arming fans with the double-edged sword of fierce loyalty and a misguided sense of ownership with regard



to the properties. This loyalty was cemented as every new twist of *Lost* and *Battlestar Galactica*'s plots confounded audience expectation anew. However, such investment on the part of viewers turned ugly when both shows actively pursued directions antithetical to fan reaction.

While the theological underpinnings of both *Lost* and *BSG* are more coherent than generally perceived by fan and critic alike, the manner in which this material was received is troubling. Though the shows offered intelligent, allegorical discussion of personal spirituality and belief in a contemporary world racked by fundamentalism and religiously motivated conflict, it is clear that audiences—particularly the shows' vocal internet followings—did not like what they saw in the mirror of their television screens. Though a component of this was the rejection of so-called mysticism by science fiction fans, the fashion in which viewers rounded on the finale of *Lost* in particular betrays a deeper discomfort amongst mainstream viewers forced to confront the ugly potential of religion to divide rather than to unify. Charlie Brooker, writing in *The Guardian*, dismissed the final scene in the church as "a pretentious building society advert."<sup>32</sup> Another commentator deemed "The End" to be "the worst ending Hollywood has ever done," an extreme position though one which continues to be widely expressed online.<sup>33</sup> The *BSG* finale fared little better, *Salon* deeming it to be "40 minutes of speeches about lessons learned and the need to 'break the cycle,'" the naiveté of which did indeed feel like a break—from the knowing, worldly stoicism that made *Battlestar Galactica* so refreshing to begin with.<sup>34</sup> Another more extreme review, adopting the vernacular of the show itself, accused Ron Moore of succumbing to "superstitious mumbo jumbo" and having "finally got to douse us in his pro-God, anti-society, anti-technology philosophy":

Why the frak does Baltar have an imaginary friend? Answer: It's God! Why isn't Starbuck dead and what the frak is she? Answer: Oh it's God! Why did the Cylons destroy the colonies? Oh it's God! How are the Humans going to find a home? Oh it's God! Every remaining question was answered tonight and the answer to every question was: Oh it's God.<sup>35</sup>

If anything, reception of "The End" and "Daybreak" demonstrates that the defining characteristic of *Lost* and *Battlestar Galactica*—their attempts to open a unique dialogue with popular entertainment audiences through deployment of idiosyncratic theological material—is also their Achilles' Heel. In the years since they wrapped, the reception of both shows has been dogged by confusion over their meaning and outright dismissal of their moral messages. As a result, it seems unlikely that we will see such a sustained investigation of the theological in popular science fiction television any time in the near future. All of this may have happened before, yes, but will it ever happen again?

## Notes

1. "The Incident, Part II," *Lost*, Damon Lindelof and Carlton Cuse, 13 May 2009.
2. "The End," *Lost*, Damon Lindelof and Carlton Cuse, ABC, 23 May 2010.
3. "White Rabbit," *Lost*, Christian Taylor, ABC, 20 October 2004.
4. "The End," *Lost*, Damon Lindelof and Carlton Cuse, ABC, 23 May 2010.
5. "The End," *Lost*, Damon Lindelof and Carlton Cuse, ABC, 23 May 2010.
6. Steve Busfield and Richard Vine, "A *Lost* embrace," *Guardian* (London), 25 May 2010, p.12; Max Read, "The *Lost* finale was incredibly dumb," *Gawker*, 23 May 2010. <http://gawker.com/5545877/>, accessed 10 November 2011.
7. James Poniewozik, "GRRM Interview Part 3: Twilight Zone and *Lost*," *Tuned In Blog*, *Time.com*, 19 April 2011, <http://tunedin.blogs.time.com/2011/04/19/grrm-interview-part-3-the-twilight-zone-and-lost/>, accessed 15 August 2011.
8. In fact it appears that Martin saw what he wanted to see, having stated in April 2009 that "if it turns out that They Were Dead All Along I'm really going to be pissed." George R.R. Martin, "Writing 101," <http://grrm.livejournal.com/82239.html>, 5 April 2009, accessed 20 August 2011.
9. "Daybreak, Part II," *Battlestar Galactica*, Ronald D. Moore, Sci-Fi Channel, 20 March 2009.
10. "Daybreak, Part II," *Battlestar Galactica*, Ronald D. Moore, Sci-Fi Channel, 20 March 2009.
11. "Daybreak, Part II," *Battlestar Galactica*, Ronald D. Moore, Sci-Fi Channel, 20 March 2009.
12. "The Road Less Travelled," *Battlestar Galactica*, Mark Verheiden, Sci-Fi Channel, 2 May 2008.
13. "33," *Battlestar Galactica*, Ronald D. Moore, Sci-Fi Channel, 14 January 2005.
14. "Daybreak, Part II," *Battlestar Galactica*, Ronald D. Moore, Sci-Fi Channel, 20 March 2009.
15. "Tigh Me Up, Tigh Me Down," *Battlestar Galactica*, Jeff Vlaming, Sci-Fi Channel, 4 March 2005.
16. "Lay Down Your Burdens, Part I," *Battlestar Galactica*, Ronald D. Moore, Sci Fi Channel, 3 March 2006.
17. "The Road Less Travelled," *Battlestar Galactica*, Mark Verheiden, Sci-Fi Channel, 2 May 2008.
18. "Escape Velocity," *Battlestar Galactica*, Jane Espenson, Sci-Fi Channel, 25 April 2008.
19. "He That Believeth In Me," *Battlestar Galactica*, Bradley Thompson and David Weddle, Sci-Fi Channel, 4 April 2008.
20. "33," *Battlestar Galactica*, Ronald D. Moore, Sci-Fi Channel, 14 January 2005; "Daybreak, Part II," *Battlestar Galactica*, Ronald D. Moore, Sci-Fi Channel, 20 March 2009.
21. "Faith," *Battlestar Galactica*, Kevin Fahey, Sci-Fi Channel, 9 May 2008.
22. "Guess What's Coming to Dinner?" *Battlestar Galactica*, Michael Angeli, Sci-Fi Channel, 16 May 2008.
23. "Crossroads, Part II," *Battlestar Galactica*, Mark Verheiden, Sci-Fi Channel, 25 March 2007.
24. George R.R. Martin, "Writing 101," <http://grrm.livejournal.com/82239.html>, 5 April 2009, accessed 20 August 2011.
25. "Daybreak, Part II," *Battlestar Galactica*, Ronald D. Moore, Sci-Fi Channel, 20 March 2009.
26. Ronald D. Moore, "Podcast for Kobol's Last Gleaming, Part II," [http://en.battlestarwiki.org/wiki/Podcast:Kobol%27s\\_Last\\_Gleaming%2C\\_Part\\_II](http://en.battlestarwiki.org/wiki/Podcast:Kobol%27s_Last_Gleaming%2C_Part_II), accessed 23 August 2011.
27. "Razor," *Battlestar Galactica*, Michael Taylor, Sci-Fi Channel, 24 November 2007; "Daybreak, Part II," *Battlestar Galactica*, Ronald D. Moore, Sci-Fi Channel, 20 March 2009.
28. "The Incident, Part I," *Lost*, Damon Lindelof and Carlton Cuse, ABC, 13 May 2009.
29. "Flesh and Bone," *Battlestar Galactica*, Toni Graphia, Sci-Fi Channel, 25 February 2005.
30. 'Kobol's Last Gleaming,' *Battlestar Galactica*, Ronald D. Moore, Sci-Fi Channel, 1 April 2005.
31. 'The Incident, Part II,' *Lost*, Damon Lindelof and Carlton Cuse, ABC, 13 May 2009.
32. Charlie Brooker, "Charlie Brooker's Screen Burn: *Lost* and 24," *Guardian* (London), 29 May 2010, "The Guide," p.52.
33. "tmaster" commenting on the *LA Times* article "Of love 'Lost,'" 25 May 2010, <http://www.latimes.com/entertainment/news/tv/la-et-lost-review-20100524,0,289843.story>, accessed 10 November 2011.
34. Laura Miller, "Goodbye, Calactica," *Salon*, 21 March 2009, [http://www.salon.com/2009/03/21/battlestar\\_galactica\\_2/](http://www.salon.com/2009/03/21/battlestar_galactica_2/), accessed 10 November 2011.
35. Josh Tyler, "Why The *Battlestar Galactica* finale is a huge cop-out and why it doesn't matter,

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