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This Show Was Religious?! Online Reactions to Religion in the *Lost* and *Battlestar Galactica* Finales

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Abstract:

As the American populace is increasingly identifying as non-religious, religious representation is surprisingly also increasing on television, leading many to discuss the limits and boundaries of acceptable representations of religion through the cultural forum of television. The series finales of *Lost* and *Battlestar Galactica* serve as a particular pair of case studies I place in discussion with each other about religious-representational and generic concerns. Online reactions in discussion forums or comment sections to the religious elements in these finales generally occur in one of two ways: negative reactions that set the religious endings in opposition to the genre expectations viewers had for the shows or generally positive reactions that focus on the religious themes as successful affective tools that provided adequate or at least justified narrative closure. In both discursive strains, the tone was overwhelmingly respectful and occasionally aware that those entering into the discussions were engaging in larger cultural debates, providing one site of exploring the changing role of religion in popular television through a study of expectations of science fiction narratives and their conclusions.

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This Show Was Religious?! Online Reactions to Religion in the *Lost* and *Battlestar Galactica* Finales

1. Introduction

While fewer and fewer Americans claim to practice a particular religion in the twenty-first century, religious elements are appearing more and more frequently and explicitly in popular television (Pew 2011). Two of the earliest, most popular, and longest running series in this shift toward religion on television are *Battlestar Galactica* (SciFi 2003-2009) and *Lost* (ABC 2005-2010), both of which engaged explicitly with their religious elements in their series finales. The demographic shift toward no religious affiliation, however, doesn't mean that these Americans aren't spiritual or religious in a broader sense, and in fact, more than two-thirds of the "unaffiliated" say they believe in God (Pew 2011).

The plastic relationship to belief and doctrine held by the majority of Americans is reflected in the online debates among fans following the finales of *Battlestar Galactica* and *Lost*. Through the cultural forum and polysemous medium of television, fans negotiated the shifting ideas about the place of religion in both popular television and the wider culture. By studying the digital representation of this cultural forum, I argue that audiences' genre expectations of science fiction affect their reception of spiritual narrative conclusions. These fans are largely resistant to such conclusions but careful to couch their reception as regardless of their own religious self-disclosure. Science fiction television expectations are not wholly anathema to religious storytelling, but it remains a relatively risky choice despite—and even because of—being situated within a fantastic genre.

In their foundational "Television as a Cultural Forum," Horace Newcomb and Paul M. Hirsch wrote:

In its [television's] role as central cultural medium it presents a multiplicity of meanings rather than a monolithic dominant point of view. It often focuses on our most prevalent concerns, or deepest dilemmas. Our most traditional views, those that are repressive and reactionary, as well as those that are subversive and emancipatory, are upheld, examined, maintained, and transformed. The emphasis is on process rather than product, on discussion rather than indoctrination, on contradiction and confusion rather than coherence. (Newcomb and Hirsch 2000, p. 564)

Television programs, in their recurrence, offer repeated engagement with cultural concerns without necessarily forcing closure. This allows them to operate as an ongoing, perpetually open cultural forum for working through those concerns, dilemmas, and views. Newcomb and Hirsch first articulated the idea of the cultural forum well before the current era of multiple, visible, online fora, but the transition from office water cooler to virtual discussion boards is one of amplification and visibility more than a difference in kind. In the current age of convergence, there are many more avenues for viewers to participate in discussions and discourses about issues of culture and identity (Jenkins 2006, p. 3). Online forums, Facebook, Twitter, and any number of social media have made the cultural forum visible in cyberspace, but that visibility carries with it various limitations and mores of social performance that affect the debate over religion's cultural role.

Fans use the cultural—online—forum to debate religion's role in science fiction television. To study this, I analyze online discourses surrounding the overtly religious finales of *Lost* and *Battlestar Galactica* as a particular pair of case studies that I place in discussion with each other about religious-representational and generic concerns. That is, how religion is represented through character, narrative, and visual symbols on television and the expectations attendant with savvy viewers who are familiar with the conventions of the particular genre (science fiction). The reasoning behind this focus on religion is twofold: 1) religion remains a relatively avoided topic of discussion among fan communities, and 2) it has become a much clearer category of identity politics in the last decade. As Stanley Fish wrote in a column for *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, "When Jacques Derrida died I was called by a reporter who wanted know what would succeed high theory and the triumvirate of race, gender, and class as the center of intellectual energy in the academy. I answered like a shot: religion" (2005, n.p.). Through a degree of displacement afforded by the science fiction genre, religious representations are allowed to be both safe and subversive, which makes negative fan reactions to religious finales all the more intriguing. Both shows' content and online discourses of their representations of religion reveal a great deal about how religion is discussed through television. Moreover, examining these discussions provides a vision of how fans relate to their religious identity vis-à-vis their fan identity.

My analysis of online discourses in the thousands of pages of *Television Without Pity* forums and discussions in comment sections of topical articles surrounding these two shows' finales identifies two main strains of discourse: negative reactions that set the religious endings in opposition to the generic expectations viewers had for the shows and generally positive reactions that focus on the religious themes as successful affective tools that provided adequate or at least justified narrative closure. In both discursive strains, the tone was overwhelmingly respectful and occasionally showed awareness that those entering into the discussions were engaging in larger issues of culture. The posts in these forums provide one avenue for exploring the changing role of religion in popular television.ⁱ In studying a similar exploration in the *Supernatural* fandom, Lisa Kienzl explained the significance of such study, writing: "Broadcasting the television series disseminates these newly generated religious practices among wider audiences where they contribute to what the audience perceives as religious knowledge" (2014, p. 167). Where she studies *Supernatural*'s adaptation of religion and thus its effect on religious knowledge, specifically of mediumship,

this essay examines a similar underlying reason for studying *Lost* and *Battlestar Galactica*'s fans reactions to their religious conclusions: it is not about newly generated religious practices but about the generation of generic expectations in reaction to religious narratives.

2. Genre's Role in Religion on Television

Fans activate the cultural forum for these two finales to engage with religion's place in culture and, more consciously, to distinguish generic boundaries. Understanding genres as discursive categories, as Jason Mittell argues we should, telefantasy and cult television are genres created by those who engage with them; their meanings are fluid (Mittell 2004, p. 1). I focus on science fiction in this study because that is the genre label used most often in the online discourse about these shows, but I am conceptualizing science fiction under the umbrella term, "telefantasy," to better access the genre's relationship to social mores and displacement. According to media scholar Catherine Johnson, the term "telefantasy" itself originates from fan discourse instead of industry terminology, operating as a useful umbrella term for a grouping of genres (fantasy, science fiction, and horror) that share similar traits of displacement and allegory in which their generic verisimilitude may challenge normative notions outside of the fiction (Johnson 2005, p. 2). Thus, these genres occupy space between margin and mainstream, a position that allows for more play and critique among representations and those interpreting them. Telefantasy embraces the potential of its non-verisimilitudinous mode, "conflict[ing] with accepted notions of 'reality'". As such, all texts that represent the fantastic ask questions that push the boundaries of socio-cultural verisimilitude" (Johnson 2005, p. 4). This mode—and its facilitation of the fantastic—opens space for potential challenges to religious and social representational norms, among other things.

By focusing on science fiction within the telefantasy umbrella, this study illuminates the space for religious representation that can be found within that genre. In this way, it contributes to genre studies of telefantasy, particularly the representations and discourses of religion in science fiction, fantasy, and horror programs. Though it appears common knowledge in popular discourses about telefantasy that shows within the science fiction genre often use allegory to convey political messages, there is little attention to their similar ability to convey messages about religion. From *Star Trek* to *Battlestar Galactica*, politics has found its place in science fiction, but there appears to be an aversion to discussing religion in the same mode. Perhaps this is due to the popular discourse, especially among fans, that science fiction—more than fantasy—must adhere to a degree of (secular) logic that appears outside the realm of religious thinking. David G. Hartwell (1996) states, "Science fiction's appeal lies in its combination of the rational, the believable, with the miraculous" (p. 67). But that combination has generally drawn ideas of "miraculous" *from* the rational, making the latter its foundation. Vivian Sobchack identifies the core of the genre similarly, arguing danger comes from action and is thus grounded, "There is no such sense of predestination in the SF film. Danger does not arise from what men inevitably are, but rather from what they do or from what is done to them" (Sobchack 1987, p. 36). I would argue, however, that there are equal opportunities to find religious meaning through the allegories of science fiction. The

degree of displacement that allows for allegorical readings in telefantasy equally allows space for both skeptics and believers (or at least those looking for religious meanings) to engage with religious discourses surrounding science fiction television programs. Skeptical and religious modes of readings among viewers of *Lost* and *Battlestar Galactica* present concrete examples of such engagement.

Although there is little scholarship about discussions of religion on television in online forums, both media scholar Matthew Hills and religious scholar Lynn Schofield Clark claim that telefantasy and cult television have links to religion, and that the fan practices associated with it resemble religious praxes. Hills explicitly argued for such a link in "Media Fandom, Neoreligiosity, and Cult(ural) Studies," writing, "I will examine the extent to which the term 'cult,' . . . relates not to the interpretive models of scholastic reason but rather to modes of fan practice (practical reason) which can be described as 'neoreligious'" (2000, p. 74). Clark argued similarly, "In this era of irregular attendance at religious organizations, stories like Jodie's [a teenaged subject in Clark's study] suggest that, whereas the local synagogue, mosque, and church may be sources of information about the realm beyond, so are television programs like *The X-Files*" (2002, p. 795). Both Hills and Clark are useful in opening dialogue between religious studies and media studies because they focus on reception and fan practices as analogs for religious praxes, but this paper will not focus on the religiosity of fan practices but instead on fans' online discussions of religious representation. Clark more specifically focuses on fan reactions to and religious readings of the ongoing mysteries of *Lost*, and concludes, in part, that "many of the English-speaking fans brought some understanding of Christianity to the series (even if it was from *Jesus Christ Superstar*), and this informed their ability to decipher at least the more overt Christian references in the early seasons (2009, p. 338). Clark was necessarily constrained by her time of publishing (before the series concluded) and much of her argument is based in the narrative polysemy that is at least partially narrowed when a series can plan its ending and thus its ultimate investment in which mysteries to solve and what those answers are. As she concludes her article, "Fan consensus seemed to suggest that Christianity could be a source of allusions within the series as long as those allusions did not support a narrow viewpoint" (2009, p. 339). Where Clark drew on overtly religious sites and posts as much of her data, my focus on general or genre-specific fora provides a useful addition to Clark's conclusions and a reaction to the narrowing she warns fans might dislike.

The practice of debating among fans about what is appropriate for a show is not unique to *Battlestar Galactica* and *Lost*, even if the subject of religion is relatively under-discussed. As Derek Johnson argued, "Practices of cult television fandom can be considered in terms of 'fan-tagonism'—ongoing, competitive struggles between both internal factions and external institutions to discursively codify the fan-text-producer relationship according to their respective interests" (2007, p. 287). Johnson continued, "By reinforcing certain textual contingencies as desirable, fan consensus reproduces tastes predisposed to those particular interpretations" (2007, p. 291). This present article studies the debates occurring around the end of the first decade of the twenty-first century, a time marked by a rupture in fan consensus as audience fracturing became not only the dominant industry logic but also a visible part of fan-producer engagement.

The debate over the acceptable role of religion in these finales is one of these fan-agonistic struggles, arising out of different generic expectations and ideas of authorial intents as the two multi-year narratives concluded. In the moment of narrative closure, what the narrative was “really” about becomes a key site of fan-tagonism, and for *Lost* and *Battlestar Galactica*, that generally boils down to the long-standing debate and imaginative binary of logic (science fiction) versus emotion (fantasy) within the fantastic genres. Religious identity self-disclosure among fans posting online is relatively rare, likely because of this historical debate in which science fiction and its fandom has been interpellated as non-religious. In a study of religious self-disclosure online, Piotr S. Bobkoski and Lisa D. Pearse argue that “as individuals negotiate their religious identities and the social norms that discourage both overt religious piety and irreligion, [s]ocial media are one public venue in which to observe the enactment of self-disclosure” (2011, p. 744). This fraught negotiation of privacy and self-disclosure, especially when such a disclosure is used only to further support one’s argument about the shows’ finale, highlights the precarious role of religion in science fiction entertainment and those who are fans of the genre. Even when used to “win” a debate online, religion is still an intensely personal and precarious part of identity.

Religion is often seen as controversial territory for television. As television scholar Horace Newcomb argued, “Producers avoid the specifics of belief, the words of faith, and concrete images of the transcendent like the plague. Such specificity could cost them audience. In the meantime, we are given the deeply, powerfully embedded notions of the good that must come from . . . somewhere” (1990, p. 41). Newcomb’s argument is a few decades old, and the political and economic factors it draws on have changed since he wrote it. However, for a television scholar such as myself, there is a lingering sense that producers of texts that engage religion still search for an inoffensive attempt to gain a mass audience—or at least an economically desirable audience that resembles the middlebrow masses of an imaginary television past—despite the narrowcasting trend in contemporary television.

3. Religion in *Battlestar Galactica* and *Lost*

Battlestar Galactica, which aired on the SciFi Network from 2003-2009, merits a great deal of religious scholarship because of the central conceit that the Cylon-Human war is also a monotheism-polytheism war. Chris Klassen wrote a research note in the *Journal of Contemporary Religion* that synthesizes and analyzes the primary trend of the show’s internal monotheism-polytheism debate in *Battlestar Galactica*’s religious scholarship, explaining that though polytheism is expected to be more tolerant than monotheism and appears so initially on *Battlestar Galactica*, the show undermines that assumption by portraying intolerance from both sects (2008, p. 361). Jason T. Eberl and Jennifer A. Vines bring atheism (and practical concerns) into the discussion in “‘I Am an Instrument of God’: Religious Belief, Atheism, and Meaning,” discussing the role each religion plays in the evil actions caused by humans and Cylons while pondering if atheism, like that of Admiral Adama, is the more practical tack (2007, p. 159). Less is written in academic publications about religious representation on *Lost*, in part because it is a less obvious recurring theme

than it is in *Battlestar Galactica*, a characteristic that leads to nuanced differences in fan reactions to their religiously inflected finales.

In October of 2010, months after the finale of *Lost* and more than a year after the end of *Battlestar Galactica*, Tiffany Vogt, writing for the science fiction blog *Airlock Alpha*, claimed that the explicitly religious endings of these two shows “alienate[d] the very audience that such shows seek to engage” (2010). Though *Airlock Alpha* is not a website well known beyond online science fiction fan communities, Vogt’s polemic sparked widespread online discussions. In a follow-up article on the website (one of two), Michael Hinman explains Vogt’s piece’s impact both within the *Airlock Alpha* commenting community and beyond:

Besides creating seven pages of discussion at TrekBBS and other message board sites, Vogt’s story was discussed heavily at the [social news aggregator Reddit](#), where it drew more than 225 comments over the 36 hours since the column was first posted on Airlock Alpha. (2010)

Although such dissemination is unique for *Airlock Alpha*, the topic of the discussion—religion in telefantasy—is an increasingly popular and contentious online debate. The concrete examples Vogt uses, particularly her personal reactions as a fan to the overtly religious finales of *Lost* and *Battlestar Galactica*, are a central node for the online discourse about interactions with, reactions to, and understanding of religious representations’ place—or lack thereof—within the science fiction genre on television.

Vogt expressed one common theme expressed in this discourse: that religious representations on science fiction television programs are a means to telling a story but not an end for the story. She writes, “Angels, purgatory, limbo and monotheistic/polytheistic religious wars—each has its place in science-fiction, but they are merely an element. They should not be the core of a science-fiction story” (Vogt 2010). Many of her commenters, however, disagree, providing examples of the other major theme of the discourse, discussing the narrative or affective justifications for the series’ religious codas.

These two recurring readings of the two series’ finales reveal the tension created by generic expectations within an ongoing telefantasy series. As genre scholar Steve Neale noted in *Genre and Hollywood*, “Genres do not consist solely of films. They consist also of specific systems of expectation and hypothesis which spectators bring with them to the cinema and which interact with films themselves during the course of the viewing process” (2000, p. 31). The same holds for television, but in convergence media culture, such a system of expectations is constantly being shaped through engagement in popular and cultural fora like online sites. In the online public fan discourse about the two shows’ endings, the boundaries of the science fiction genre appear blurred, battling for prominence within the melodramatic, relationship-focused mode of television storytelling that so often accompanies the serial form. Religious representation serves as a controlled but contentious site of this tension because religion is an intensely personal issue for many, and one that is often foundational in shaping their worldview. Narrative and generic television expectations that are expressed in the mediating context of religion provide ample avenues for pursuing cultural significances and relations beyond the television texts themselves and into the cultural forum of television.

4. Methods and Texts

Before entering into an analysis of the two specific themes of the online discourse discussed above, I must lay out my sources and methodology. My main sources for this online discourse analysis are the previously-public, now-closed forumsⁱⁱ at TelevisionWithoutPity.com, a well-known and popular television website in the 2000s that features recaps, reviews, news, and forums for more than thirty television shows that aired contemporaneously with *Lost* and *Battlestar Galactica* in America, as well as countless off-the-air programs from earlier in the decade. At the time of my research, the forums at *Television Without Pity (TWO P)* were well known as a place for in-depth and intelligent discussions of television. They were open to the public for viewing but required log-in for searching or posting. I created an account in order to narrow my search field from among the hundreds of posts in the specific forums germane to my study. I searched through the posts in the specific *Lost* and *Battlestar Galactica* subforums discussing religion on the shows as well as the episode threads for both *Lost*'s "The End" and *Battlestar Galactica*'s "Daybreak Part 2." In addition to these forums, I also studied the discourses arising from Vogt's *Airlock Alpha* article, both within the comments and in other response articles posted by the site. From both of these sources, the tone of the discussion is almost uniformly respectful, even when obviously passionate. This is likely due, at least in part, to the expectations created by the websites themselves due to the register of their content and their explicit commenting rules. *Television Without Pity*'s forum FAQ and guidelines for entering a discussion were notoriously strict and rigorously enforced by the site's moderators.

For another element of the fan discourse, I also used the *Battlestar Wiki* forums and the *Lostpedia* forums, where the tone is less policed and less journalistic/intellectual than *TWO P*. In these sources, *ad hominem* attacks and dismissals are much more common. Their behavior in discussing religion in the finales is curtailed somewhat by these wikis' forum rules that prohibit "discussions of religion or politics" (Battlestar Forum, n.d.). This is likely a result of the general bias toward "provable facts" or at least logical speculation due to their connection with the wikis. Because there is much less discussion of the religious elements in the wiki forums than in the *Television Without Pity* forums, they serve as more of a supplementary than primary source for my study of this discourse.

I gathered data by reading all of the comments on the *Airlock Alpha* articles, *BSG* wiki articles, and *Lost* wiki articles included in this study and the first 15 pages (approximately 150 posts) for each *Television Without Pity* thread cited herein. I also conducted keyword searches for the remainder of the posts for each thread, some of which were over 50 pages. I have maintained the anonymity for each poster based on their own self-disclosure through their publicly-accessible (i.e., not password-protected and with no log-required to view) comments and posts. This respects the voice of these individuals without risking their exposure. Although this means that I then cannot draw any conclusions based on their demographic profiles, the key element of these posts is how they construct a discourse about religion through their patterns of expression. This does not require personal information beyond what they choose to express in these public, online spaces.

Finally, a brief description of the textual elements of *Lost* and *Battlestar Galactica* that yielded this discourse is necessary to contextualize the fan reactions. *Lost* tells the story of a host of plane crash survivors stranded on a mysterious island. The series is known for its layered, intricate mythology, so to go into much more detail of its description would take many paragraphs. Importantly, the show often deals with season-long time displacement narratives in which action on the island was interspersed with flashbacks or flashforwards or time travel, a genre trope of science fiction. In the final season, the island narrative was balanced by stories about the plane crash survivors in an alternate identity that lacks the influence of the mystical, mysterious island. Many assumed these stories to be representative of an “alternate universe” flash-sideways in keeping with the series’ telefantasy genre. The “sideways-verse” is revealed in the finale to be a kind of anteroom to the afterlife in which the former inhabitants of the island meet after their deaths so that they can move on together. This revelation occurs in a church—granted, one with various other religions’ symbols in its side chapel—officiated by a character named Christian Shepherd, and the act of moving on is visually represented by leaving the church into a bright white light, flanked on either side by sacred (Catholic) holy water fonts. Within the church, the most notable gesture toward non-Christian religions is a stained-glass window with symbols of Christianity, Islam, Judaism, Taoism, Buddhism, and Hinduism inlaid, but the church setting and implication of the afterlife is wrapped mostly in the symbols of Christianity (The End 2010).

The finale of *Battlestar Galactica* also attempts to integrate disparate religious worldviews while privileging a Christianity-inflected monotheism. Throughout the series, the monotheism of the Cylons (and human Gaius Baltar) battled for ideological supremacy with the polytheism of the humans and the atheism of a few prominent characters as the Cylons and humans literally battled each other across space. In the finale, various religious prophecies appear to come to fruition in a way that supports Baltar’s religious power and place and his and the Cylons’ monotheism. This appears most clearly in a time jump to the present day that reveals that the events of the series occurred in the ancient past. The Cylons’ monotheism—and its visions of “angels” in the form of Baltar and his Cylon lover, Caprica Six—persist across 150,000 years, long after the characters of the series, particularly the ones who saw the “angel” visions, have died (Daybreak Part 2 2010).

5. Fan Debate over Religion in Telefantasy

Both series clearly integrated religious elements throughout their run but often tied them to specific characters; thus, the series were influenced by religious themes but mainly through character proxies. This appears to be the main reason for the schism in online discourse about the religious turns in the finales. Influence-by-proxy allowed for those who expected these science fiction series to remain situated in their non-religious generic boundaries to conceptualize religion as a secondary narrative element while those whose generic expectations were less rigidly a-religious understood religious representations as a narrative theme with the potential to be of primary importance if it served the story or characters.

The former grouping often makes their adherence to supposed genre rules clear by describing feeling duped or tricked into a religious ending. *Television Without Pity* user

AlohaGirl expressed her feelings of betrayal regarding *Lost*'s conclusion, "I am just mad because I feel like I was bamboozled into watching a show that ended up being about a completely different premise than the one I thought it was about originally" (AlohaGirl 2010a). Some variation on AlohaGirl's articulation of "this is not the show I've been watching for the last six years" appeared many more times in fan reactions that place the finale in opposition to generic expectations. On Lostpedia, user MisterE described the ending as "just another of the myriad of TV gimmicks the writers used on the show" (MisterE 2010). Often this reaction is couched in a profoundly personal sense of betrayal that leads viewers to express anger as their main affective reaction. Another *Television Without Pity* user, googuse, translated genre betrayal into anger, writing, "They drew me in with logic and philosophy and psychology, quantum theory, time/space loops and other fantastically interesting ideas and ended up pandering to the lowest common denominator—the spiritual/religious crowd who wallow in hackneyed religious allegory" (googuse 2010). This sense of betrayal and anger appears more in posts responding to the *Lost* finale than to the *Battlestar Galactica* finale, likely due to the latter's more central dialogue with religion throughout the series.

Battlestar Galactica's finale garnered slightly different genre-inflected responses in the *Television Without Pity* forums than the genre "betrayal" posts found in the *Lost* finale thread. There, poster hellkiller1234 wrote, "Well. First of all, RDM [showrunner Ronald D. Moore] should not have put "GOD" in this show. To me... Scifi is **NOT** a show for god stuff. They are science fiction show not god show" (hellkiller1234 2010, emphasis in original). Further in the thread, user thevarrior responded, "None of these other shows/stories ACTUALLY INTRODUCED A GOD INTO THE STORY WHICH WAS AN ACTUAL OMNIPOTENT GOD. BSG did. It violated its own rules of being naturalistic science fiction. Any time a 'god' character existed in the other stories it was in the form of a sentient but highly advanced civilization who were not actually gods" (thevarrior 2010, emphasis in original). In the *Battlestar Forum*, unlike the *TWoP* forum, the response displayed a simplistic faith versus science dichotomy. Thus even in the *Battlestar Forum*, the genre betrayal also took on added betrayal of realism, the nuance that often appeared in the *Television Without Pity* forums.

This nuanced approach to genre found in the discussions on *Television Without Pity* rarely sets religion as opposed to science fiction. Instead these posts see the finale as a disingenuous modal shift away from realism *in addition to* a movement away from science fiction genre expectations. As user pegannc, responding to a similar post by user AaronicusLives (2009), wrote, "Previously the OTG [One True God] or gods was wrapped in that ambiguity we both enjoyed so much. The finale took the story into the fantasy realm whereas previously it had been a gritty realistic scifi drama" (pegannc 2009). This is the prevailing inflection of most of the genre-based posts both in the *Television Without Pity* forums and in the *Airlock Alpha* comments that focus their response on *Battlestar Galactica*. In response to Vogt's original post, user ddt73 wrote:

The problem with the ending was it was too overtly religious. It allows for no other interpretation than god did it. Also with the head characters taking center stage at the end, it is obvious that the Cylon's one true god was the one true god in this universe. This is not a question the show should have tried to answer, any more then we can answer

definitively does god exist in our universe. This is a show that prided itself in realism. In its last hour went so far off the rails far as realism that it felt like it let itself down. (ddt73 2010)

The betrayal is not so much one of the science fiction genre in favor of fantasy or melodrama but one of realism tied to the science fiction genre and an ending in which negotiated and ambiguous meanings gave way to simplicity and a one-dimensional *deus ex machina*.

Interestingly, as indicated in ddt73's comment above, often paratextual evidence is brought in to the genre reactions, most often recalling interviews with the producers, writers, and/or showrunners. User ddt73 (2010) cites the *Battlestar Galactica* show bible, and many *Lost* fans cite paratextual constructions of "Darlton" (the fan-created portmanteau of showrunners Damon Lindelof and Carlton Cuse) as arbiters of logical answers. There are qualifications, however, as to which paratexts matter to these fans, for none cite the promotional images for both *Battlestar Galactica* and *Lost* that recreate Leonardo Da Vinci's *The Last Supper* with each show's cast. These images enter the show into explicit dialogue with religion, foregrounding the threads and themes of religion present in both programs, yet in my survey of fan reactions to the show's finales, I did not see them mentioned once in the debate over the finales. As promotional images—no matter how wide their circulation (in magazines like *Entertainment Weekly* and online) – they are deprivileged as meaningful paratexts, especially when compared to the text- and creator-based use of program bibles and showrunner interviews to support the argument of genre betrayal (Kung & Kurutz 2010, n.p.).

Where the fans' personal emotions arise as a consequence of this sense of genre or modal bait-and-switch, in the narrative-focused fan reactions, affective and emotional responses are expressed as concurrent with the narrative closure provided—or at least aimed for—by the finales. Based on my analysis of fans' qualitative comments, these responses are vastly more prevalent regarding *Lost*'s "The End" than *Battlestar Galactica*'s "Daybreak, Part 2." This is likely because the respective fandom's responses to the finales were broken down quite differently. *Lost* fans split approximately evenly in terms of loving or loathing the finale, but there are fewer (vocal) fans in the *Battlestar Galactica* camp who defended that show's ending, and only a fraction reacted to the religious turn. The fan discussions that explain the justifications—if not praise for—the narrative goals of the religious ending in "Daybreak Part 2" are mostly retrospective and/or vague. Commenter tcurran on *Airlock Alpha* praised *Battlestar Galactica* through the vague praise of polysemy, writing, "Like great literature, our job is to interpret it as we will. What was the central theme of *Lost*? That would depend on who is reading this post, what baggage they bring to the question, and how deeply they think about it. The same is true for *Galactica*" (tcurran 2010). A more vociferous if retroactive appraisal appeared in two later *Television Without Pity* posts in the "Daybreak Part 2" finale thread. The posts appeared following a forum-led group re-watch of the series. More than two years after the finale aired, user stillshimpy wrote, "I don't think divinity could have been a late addition. I could be wrong, of course, but looking back I see a lot of instances where there were direct references" (stillshimpy 2011). Months after that, user Belili wrote:

I can understand frustration over the lack of ambiguity re: the supernatural/god elements—while I think that's somewhat a postmodern critique where we as an audience expect our post-apocalyptic narratives to be ambiguous about the nature of reality, BSG definitely spits in the face of the Aristotelian definition of bad plots—BSG's narrative is literally *deus ex machina*. I think that's brilliant, but I can definitely see why other folks are bothered. (Belili 2011)

Like with those *Battlestar Galactica* fans who felt genre-betrayed, the real contention regarding whether the finales' narrative closure appeared justified is linked with the method of religious presentation. There are few supporters of the finale because there are few supporters of the perceived *deus ex machina* ending. Belili's response is not the norm. More often the fans malign that plot resolution as indicative of laziness, as *Airlock Alpha* commenter Snowkestrel did, writing, "I think that 'deus ex machina' is Latin for lazy writer's plot device" (Snowkestrel 2010). Tying back to the genre and mode betrayal, these fans (Snowkestrel, Vogt, etc.) position the *Battlestar Galactica* ending as a narrative "cop out".

Perhaps this is partially because the religious elements of the narrative, until the finale, had always been ambiguous, articulating monotheism with a coward/villain character (Baltar) and the Cylons, atheism with the admiral of the human fleet, and polytheism with a dying human President/prophet (Roslin). Each religion and the character they became predominantly attached to vied throughout the series for the validity of their belief system, and each had equal potential to gain that privilege. "Daybreak Part 2," however, closed down that ambiguity in favor of the certainty of monotheism—see pegannc and ddt73's responses above—and thus recuperated Baltar as the central hero of the finale (and as a result, the entire history of human civilization). The character who had among the least heroic fan connections was raised above all others in the quest for narrative closure, leaving few fans to avow a sense of personal closure because of or despite the religious ending.

In direct contrast, the *Lost* finale's religiously inflective narrative closure was founded on an emotional connection among the show's many characters and between the characters and the audience. The whole point of the church ending is that the characters all move on together; whereas on *Battlestar Galactica* Baltar and Caprica Six—more precisely, their "angel" versions—persist beyond all others. The result of the *Lost* approach is many more pleased, satisfied, or at least understanding reactions to the religious ending. As *Television Without Pity* user ontheedge22 wrote:

I went into the finale [of *Lost*] not looking for answers (because I didn't think I would get them), [. . .] Personally, I [sic] not religious in any sense of the word. I don't subscribe to any particular faith, and I really have no idea what I believe when it comes to death and what may or may not happen after. But obviously, Darlton do have a viewpoint on this and they presented it in an amazing visual and audio package. I may or may not agree with their viewpoint on the afterlife, but the one they presented was certainly hopeful and uplifting and filled with joyous and emotional reunions. (ontheedge22 2010)

This sentiment is echoed in many more fan posts on *Television Without Pity*. User Emmett wrote, "I loved the ending of *Lost*. It was so ambiguous that it could be interpreted anyway

you like. Plus, I cried my eyes out, which I always enjoy” (Emmett 2010). Most of these reactions support *Lost*’s religious ending in a nebulous “it felt right” mode of justification, contrasting with the sense that *Battlestar Galactica*’s finale provided only one (clearly religious) conclusion.

Some *Lost* reactions on *Television Without Pity* also emphasize that religion and spirituality were central narrative themes throughout the series. User garyc argued that *Lost* has always dealt with religious themes, writing, “While *Lost* might not have been about any organized religion it sure had a lot of religious, or spiritual, themes running through it. Chosen People aka the Others. Prophets and false prophets like Jacob and Ben. [etc.]” (garyc 2010). Another user, leahbethm (2010), cited specific examples of characters interacting with religious figures and praxes. They conceptualize religion as the chosen one of many avenues the *Lost* finale could have taken to provide narrative closure.

A more drastic contrast to reactions to the *Battlestar Galactica* finale appears in many of the narrative-justification responses. These *Lost* fans read the finale as spiritual or religious but still open to interpretation. These posters turn to the scene of Jack and his father in the chapel of the church, surrounded by symbols of various world religions—Buddhas, small shrines, wall hangings, and a stained-glass window featuring a cross, a star of David, a crescent and star, the wheel of life, a yin-yang, and an Om. These set elements combined with the vague spiritual language used to describe the afterlife support fan reactions such as this post by leahbethm: “I think the multi-religion stained glass window in the finale ‘The End’ was appropriate because during the series there were many religions represented and in the finale the people that met at the church were from various religions.” (leahbethm 2010).

This reading aligns with Horace Newcomb’s description of religious bricolage as a “safe” avenue for religious representation on television. In “Religion on Television”, he wrote:

These aspects [signifiers/signs] of religion are considered safe, neutral, and are often used because of their immediate visual qualities. They are part of television’s narrative shorthand and represent received, confirmed aspects of religious life. Their very “sameness,” rather than any meaningful “difference,” makes them useful not only to producers but to audiences. (Newcomb 1990, p. 33)

The stained glass window places the world’s religions on the same plane both literally and symbolically (even though the window is still clearly and explicitly housed in a church space) in an attempt to facilitate polysemous or at least religiously open readings of the ending, an attempt that appears to have worked for many fans.

The discussion of the stained-glass window, furthermore, provides the starkest examples in support of television’s continued viability as a cultural forum. *Television Without Pity* user Wondra took her or his position against those fans who felt unfulfilled by the answers provided by the finale:

But didn't we all learn a great deal about time-travel, psychology, tracking boars, *The Wizard of Oz*, among countless other literary works, and historic religious artifacts during the last six years? Even in the finale thread, I learned the religious significance of

the wheel in the stained glass window of the chapel. This was a show that not only made viewers think, but made us connect with each other to share our own personal knowledge and opinions about what we had seen. (Wondra 2010)

Though her or his post begins somewhat tongue-in-cheek by including the consciously ludicrous idea of *Lost* viewers tracking boars thanks to the show, by the end of the post, Wondra articulates what Newcomb and Hirsch theorized television to be: a cultural forum for understanding and negotiating “our most prevalent concerns or our deepest dilemmas” (Newcomb and Hirsch 2000, p. 564). Wondra touched on her or his own religious education through the show and the literal forums she or he participated in, similar to the fans Kienzl studied (Kienzl 2014), but a more complex avenue for exploring the process of the cultural forum is to note the repeated interjection of a poster’s personal religious views, often in contrast to their reaction to religion in the finales of *Lost* or *Battlestar Galactica*.

The negotiation of religion, belief, and disbelief in American society is an anxiety that appears to manifest in these moments of self-disclosure online. While not prevalent, religious self-disclosure appears often enough to be a theme in both *Lost* and *Battlestar Galactica* finale discourses about religion. While occasionally these self-disclosures align with the fan’s response to religion in the finale—as with AlohaGirl who wrote, “As a fervent agnostic, I simply can’t digest the fact that the writers of *Lost* decided to make it all about Hell/Heaven/Purgatory/Faith in the end” (AlohaGirl 2010b)—most of the self-disclosures counterbalance the poster’s acceptance or distaste for the way religion appeared in the finales. In addition to the post from ontheedge22 cited above, *Television Without Pity* users Emmett, who wrote that he “think[s] of [him]self as an atheist” (Emmett 2010) but loved the *Lost* finale, and AaroniusLives (2009), who also disclosed their beliefs while trying to make their points about the show. In a later post, AaroniusLives used his own atheism to support his explanation of why he appreciated the ending of *Lost*:

For myself, I truly don't believe in *any* higher power, *any* moment of redemption after death, *any* clarity that comes from the Great Beyond. Which is why I try to make the most of my life each and every day, since it's *all* I have. And why Jack's fictional death was so inspiring, entirely without the sideways-flash, because...for the most part...he *did* make the most of that moment. (AaroniusLives 2010, emphasis in original)

Similarly, a writer for *Airlock Alpha*, Michael Hinman, who would soon after write a response article to Tiffany Vogt’s polemic, “Is Religion Killing Good Sci-Fi Shows?”, responded in the comments to her article, positioning himself in terms of religious beliefs before conveying his opinion. As user mhinman, he wrote, “I’m not the most religious person in the world, and the last thing I want is people to start preaching all over the place. But I have not been uncomfortable with the use of religion in sci-fi. In fact, I like it. Especially when it works well with the story” (mhinman 2010). Vogt herself used this tactic in her article, writing of her and her father’s response to the *Lost* finale, “Both of us are deeply religious and yet we were still shocked and horrified. In all the years devotedly following every baited-breath of *Lost*, it never occurred to us that it was a show more interested in religion than science-fiction” (Vogt 2010). Often positioned as preambles or asides, the fact

that someone who is “deeply religious” is so affronted by the use of religion or that even an atheist can see the reason for a religious ending are both modes of justification as well as performance.

6. Conclusion

As religion continues to find expression in a variety of ways through the cultural forum of television, viewers, particularly the visible fans participating in public discussions about religion and television online, are creating new ways of policing its representational and generic acceptability. Fans can use their own belief systems or religious identity, as many of those featured in this study did, to justify the boundaries of acceptable content and genre boundaries. Such a pattern reveals the new ways religion is inflecting older modes of television discourse. These new ways contrast with past prominent forms such as boycotts for “ungodly” or blasphemous content or the heralding of family- (and faith-)friendly television content by organizations who have set themselves up as the industrial arbiters of such designations. As the American public moves away from religious affiliation in larger and larger numbers, ironically religion is increasingly shaping mainstream media, at least as narrative sources or as a way of providing answers to unanswerable questions in mythologically heavy serial stories. Along with this mainstreaming of religion is the establishment of boundaries where it remains risky at best and unwelcome at worst, with science fiction television as one example of such a space. Fan reactions and self-disclosure of their religious beliefs in conversation with their generic expectations illustrate the evolution (or codification) of genre when faced with a pervasive cultural element that had previously been ignorable. The fact that in these examples, that element is religion, a cultural marker that is still difficult and occasionally dangerous to discuss in public, makes the ability to even address its role more significant and requiring of study.

Notes

ⁱ As I will discuss when I turn to a close analysis of these discourses and their sources, where I found these discussions likely shaped their tone and general approach to online discussions. This is an acknowledged but interesting limitation of my research.

ⁱⁱ Author conducted research in the openly-accessible *Television Without Pity Forums* before the site closed, and author personally digitally saved posts that form the basis of this research.

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