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Star Trek

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Star Trek

Abstract

This is a review of *Star Trek* (2009).

J. J. Abrams has something of a Midas touch these days. His writing, directing, and producing résumé includes both successful television series (*Felicity*, *Alias*, *Lost*) and feature-length films (*Armageddon*, *Mission Impossible III*, *Cloverfield*). In his latest film endeavor, *Star Trek*, Abrams resurrects a franchise for the next generation with an exhilarating display of visual storytelling.

Time travel plays a significant role in Roberto Orsi's and Alex Kurtzman's script and, therefore, the film interestingly acts as both prequel and sequel to other *Star Trek* endeavors. Central to the plot of this installment is the back-story, revealed a little over an hour into the film, which explains why a Romulan is trying to destroy the Vulcan planet: in the future, a star explodes which "threatens to destroy the galaxy." An aged Spock promises the inhabitants of Romulus that he will save their planet from the supernova by using "red matter" to create a black hole that will absorb the volatile star. As Spock is enroute to carry out his plan, the supernova unexpectedly destroys the planet Romulus; having little time, Spock shoots the red matter into the supernova and attempts an escape. The Romulan captain Nero apprehends Spock and both are pulled back in time through the black hole. Nero holds Spock responsible for the loss of his planet (on which were Nero's wife and unborn child), so he spares Spock's life so that Spock can witness the destruction of his own home planet (Vulcan) in revenge.

Admittedly oversimplifying an intricately woven plot, the narrative follows the formation of the Enterprise crew and their ultimate victory over the Romulan hostiles from the future. It begins with a Romulan attack and James T. Kirk's birth, the latter made possible by his father's self-sacrifice. *Star Trek* proceeds to show a rambunctious Kirk as a child and young adult, getting into all sorts of trouble until a Star Fleet captain, Pike, challenges Kirk to emulate his father's greatness: as captain for twelve minutes, Kirk's father had saved eight hundred lives. We also see Spock's origins: a child of a human mother and a Vulcan father who was trained to use his intellect and avoid the "disadvantage" of human emotion. Through a series of events, Kirk, Spock and a host of other characters are introduced to one another and take their seats as the crew of the starship Enterprise.

There are, of course, several aspects of Abrams' *Star Trek* that may be interpreted theologically and/or philosophically, despite the secular humanism and "agnostic atheism" of *Star Trek*'s original creator, Gene Roddenberry. These themes include self-sacrifice for the greater good, friendship, emotions and/or faith versus the intellect, destiny and freedom, etc.

Of particular interest, however, are two themes. First, *Star Trek* explores the themes of identity and otherness. The film constantly asks what it means for a particular subject to be a part of one or more communities, each group having its own distinct set of values as, say, a religious community does. Although the theme

is apropos in both Nero's and Kirk's character arcs, it is explored most fully in Spock's incarnations at varied stages of life: boy, young, and old. The boy Spock is a child of two worlds, and is instigated toward violent reaction by pureblood Vulcan children as a result; the young Spock struggles throughout the film to find an appropriate Vulcan-human balance, an internal conflict that is supposedly settled by a chance encounter between the young Spock and the old. In their brief exchange, old Spock reveals to the young that it is acceptable – preferable even – to act contrary to that which defines their race; that is, it is appropriate at times to act on faith, to “put aside logic” and “do what feels right.”

As one can tell, the theological implications are many. For instance, entertaining notions that one can (and should) be identified and shaped by things one's community typically devalues relates to theological-anthropological concerns of religious communities, which seek to answer not only “what” a human is, but also “why” and “how” a human is to be.¹ What are we, why are we here, and how should we live? These are obviously fundamental questions that touch upon all sorts of other theological issues.

Second, *Star Trek* is rich in apocalyptic imagery throughout: destruction by fire under the leadership of the appropriately named Nero. Historically, the Emperor Nero (37-68 C.E.) was responsible for the razing of Rome and the punishing of early Christians as scapegoats. Several New Testament documents

respond to the Emperor's tyranny, none more strongly than John's "Revelation" of the Beast, replete with a cosmic battle which eventuates in good triumphing over evil. In *Star Trek* and ancient Rome, Nero chose suicide rather than submission to encroaching forces. Both the script and Abrams' direction effectively portray these ancient apocalyptic themes that linger to this day in certain conservative religious communities (e.g., evangelicals and the *Left Behind* series).

I have never been a "trekkie" or "comic book" type, only a fan of Abrams, but the *Star Trek* series is itself a form of religion in the avid following it has in its viewers, and continues to be with this new prequel. Abrams has introduced *Star Trek* to a new generation and as a result, I have no doubt that the franchise will continue to live long and prosper.

¹ David Kelsey, "The Human Creature," in *The Oxford Handbook to Systematic Theology* (Tanner, Torrance, and Webster, eds.; New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 121-139.