ABSTRACT

Evangelical Responses To Science Fiction Film And Television, 1960-1980

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This project examines the nature of evangelical interactions with popular culture in the 1960s and 1970s in America, specifically in regard to responses to science fiction film and television. The evangelical movement within Protestant Christianity was gaining traction in this era, as conservative Christians coming out of fundamentalism began to intentionally reengage secular culture. Simultaneously, secular culture was going through radical changes of its own. In response to technological developments and a growing focus on the future of humanity, the genre of science fiction became more prevalent in the media. The development of the *Star Trek* franchise and the growth of fandom around it are covered here as an indication of the importance of the genre. This study examines the intersection of these two emerging movements of evangelicalism and science fiction. Looking at reviews of and articles on science fiction film and television in an evangelical publication, *Christianity Today*, with a mainline Protestant publication, the *Christian Century*, as a comparison, this project advances the argument that *Christianity Today*'s treatment of science fiction film and television mirrors the increased openness on the part of evangelicals to engage with popular culture in a thoughtful way on secular but relevant matters, while not yet embracing secular culture as wholeheartedly as the Protestant mainline.

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EVANGELICAL RESPONSES TO SCIENCE FICTION FILM AND TELEVISION, 1960-1980

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INTRODUCTION

The evangelical movement in the 1960s through the 1980s gave rise to a new level of cultural engagement on the part of conservative evangelical Christians. As evangelicals began to reengage culture, they did so in a variety of realms, including that of film and television. One might assume that evangelicals would be hesitant to embrace secular media, and indeed they did express reservations about the ultimate value of popular culture. But, in order to become relevant in culture so that they would have a firmer evangelistic platform, evangelicals found themselves in the position of having to confront secular culture at some level. Sometimes this interaction was critical in nature, and at other times it was receptive. This project looks at the reactions of evangelicals in the 1960s and 1970s to one particular genre of film and television, science fiction. By analyzing the ways in which evangelicals responded to science fiction films and television series, one can better understand the nuanced relationship that evangelicals had with the secular world as expressed through popular culture.

The project starts off by attempting to define the demographic under consideration. By defining who an evangelical is, Chapter One begins to explain why the narrow topic of evangelical responses to science fiction is significant. Evangelicals, emerging largely from fundamentalism in the mid-twentieth century, came from a background of cultural isolation but intentionally tried to break this pattern. Though they shared conservative theological commitments with fundamentalists, evangelicals wanted to change their approach to mainstream secular culture in order to become more

missional. With an evangelistic goal in mind, evangelicals began to try to speak into secular culture with the goal of changing it. Sometimes, this interaction went both ways, with popular culture influencing evangelicals as much as they influenced it. Methods and strategies of initiating this interaction varied, but the common factor is that cultural engagement became a significant evangelical priority. Thus, the investigation of how exactly this engagement was expressed within the narrower context of responses to science fiction film and television is an interesting one, as it provides some insight into the style of evangelical approaches to popular culture as a whole.

Chapter Two introduces the second component under consideration, science fiction film and television. Because a full coverage of the development, popularization, and impact of every major science fiction franchise would be beyond the scope of this project, this project selects *Star Trek* (1966-69) as one example for in-depth study. There are several reasons for the selection of *Star Trek*: the franchise produced multiple iterations that include both television and film, it generated a vibrant and culturally-visible fanbase, and it encompassed productions in both the 1960s and the 1970s. Other science fiction films and television series also come up throughout this study, but *Star Trek* is the primary example treated in this chapter. The first part of the chapter covers the development of the initial television program in the late 1960s, relating the program's significance and impact to the historical context of the decade. Because America in the 1960s seemed to have an uncertain trajectory, viewers were primed for a series that projected an optimistic view of humanity's future in a technological society. The second part of the chapter examines the fan groups that rose up based on *Star Trek*. These groups, termed "fandom," exhibited a seriousness in the way they expressed their

commitment to the franchise that several scholars have compared to religious participation. While this project concludes that fandom cannot be precisely equated to religion, the discussion is relevant because it demonstrates the degree of cultural impact that *Star Trek* and other science fiction films and televisions had. Because science fiction was rising in popularity at this time, and because it captured a popular concern, evangelical responses deserve special examination.

Chapter Three then turns to the actual examination of responses. However, this chapter does not deal with evangelical responses to the genre, but rather treats mainline Protestant responses in order to set up a point of comparison. In order to understand how evangelical responses and methods of engagement differed, one must first have an idea of how other Protestant sectors treated the same issues. This project attempts to examine these responses, of both evangelicals and mainline Protestants, by looking at the flagship publications of each movement. For the mainline, this publication is the *Christian Century*, a magazine founded in the late 1800s but still with significant readership at the point of this study. The *Christian Century* contained a plethora of reviews and analyses of science fiction productions, not only including *Star Trek* but also covering many other films and programs. After introducing the *Century* and placing it in relation to the evangelical movement, Chapter Three uses articles from the magazine to examine these responses to science fiction, as well as the magazine's overall position towards the media, technology, and the future of humanity. In its coverage of science fiction, the *Century* tended to embrace science fiction when the genre offered deep commentary on human nature and a vision of the future that still incorporated concepts of morality.

Finally, Chapter Four moves on to the treatment of evangelical responses in particular. Adopting a similar method as Chapter Three, Chapter Four uses the dominant evangelical publication and the responses to science fiction within it. This publication was *Christianity Today*, a magazine founded in 1956 but which had already surpassed the *Century* in circulation numbers by the 1960s. As with the *Century*, *Christianity Today* contained many articles on science fiction film and television. There was not as much material present on the primary example of this study, *Star Trek*, but the franchise was still treated, and the magazine treated other programs and movies thoroughly as well. Overall, the general treatment of science fiction within *Christianity Today* tended to range from neutral to positive. The magazine was certainly open to engaging the genre, and was willing to point out religious themes where they came up. In some reviews, the magazine even acknowledged the good in science fiction, much like the *Century*, in that it introduced a vision of good and evil in a technological world. However, *Christianity Today* was also warier about embracing science fiction wholeheartedly. Chapter Four argues that the theological distinctives of evangelicals, including their belief in the fallenness of humanity, kept them from believing in science fiction's optimistic vision of the future as a realistic path forward.

In many ways, the results of the examination of both mainline and evangelical responses are what one might expect. The *Christian Century* was open to appreciating the good in science fiction, and its more optimistic view of human nature caused it to see in the fantasies a hope for a future that made room for both technology and morality. *Christianity Today* was more reserved in its appreciation of science fiction franchises, warning against bad theology and remaining more tentative about the visions the films

and programs offered. But, both still openly engaged with the genre, offering quite detailed commentary on the entertainment value, morals, and deeper messages of a number of films. The growing popularity of science fiction as a genre is reflected in these interactions, but also the increasing inclination of American Protestants to interact seriously with elements of popular culture is evidenced. This willingness is perhaps more surprising from the evangelicals than from the mainline; however, it is not anomalous. As this project will argue, as evangelicals tried to reach into secular culture for purposes of evangelism, they also came to engage it on a popular level, and did not reject outright the merits of popular culture in general and science fiction film and television in particular.

CHAPTER ONE

Evangelical Emergence And Cultural Engagement

Evangelicalism, while a near-ubiquitous feature of the modern-day American religious landscape, is not as simple as its widespread presence might make it appear. The concept of the evangelical Christian, and the nature of his or her interaction with broader American culture, has evolved significantly over time and is shaped by the early formation of evangelicalism. Briefly put, evangelicalism is a variety of Protestant Christianity, traditionally defined by scholar David Bebbington as being based on the four characteristics of Biblicism, crucicentrism, conversionism, and activism.[1] This definition has been commented upon by other historians, and will be explored later in the chapter, but will serve as a starting point. This chapter will explore the definition and background of evangelicalism, with the goal of examining the nature of evangelical approaches to interaction with popular culture. Although the neo-evangelicalism of the 1950s and onward came out of a separatist vein of Protestant fundamentalism, and in some ways retained the mentality of being distinct from mainstream culture, it was characterized by a nuanced approach to cultural interaction, rather than complete rejection.

To understand evangelicalism, however, one must first have a grasp of the theological tradition from which it in a large degree arose: fundamentalism.

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[1] David W. Bebbington, *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain: A History from the 1730s to the 1980s* (London: Routledge, 1988), 1–19.

Fundamentalism, also a variant of Protestant Christianity, arose in the late 1800s through the early 1900s as a reaction against modernism, and is characterized largely by its attitude toward the emergent secular American culture. In some sense, it is a type of evangelicalism, argues historian George Marsden; however, attitude makes a difference: "an American fundamentalist is an evangelical who is militant in opposition to liberal theology in the churches or to changes in cultural values or mores…militancy is crucial to their outlook."[2] Thus, fundamentalism was set against a specific cultural backdrop that created the urgency behind this militancy. Specifically, the development of modernism in the early 1900s, social and political changes following World War I, new trends toward biblical criticism, and new scientific views such as Darwinism seemed to challenge cultural and Christian conservatism.[3] In the 1930s and 40s, as the fundamentalists' positions became more marginalized, separatism became the dominant response of fundamentalism to culture.[4] Up through the 1950s, fundamentalism comprised a distinct, if heterogeneous, segment in American religion.

So, what were the doctrines of fundamentalism that shaped this withdrawal? "Militantly anti-modernist Protestant evangelicalism" is a helpful definition of the cultural attitude, but there were doctrinal characteristics behind this mentality.[5] Features

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[2] George M. Marsden, *Understanding Fundamentalism and Evangelicalism* (Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans, 1991), 1.

[3] Joel A. Carpenter, *Revive Us Again: The Reawakening of American Fundamentalism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 153–164.

[4] Ibid., 33–34.

[5] George M. Marsden, *Fundamentalism and American Culture*, 2nd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 4.

such as revivalism, a holiness movement, and dispensational premillenialism seem common among strains of fundamentalism; though, as Marsden and others caution, the movement was hardly universally unified.[6] One self-set definition by the Presbyterian General Assembly in 1910 involves five specific commitments: "(1) the inerrancy of Scripture, (2) the Virgin Birth of Christ, (3) his substitutionary atonement, (4) his bodily resurrection, and (5) the authenticity of the miracles."[7] Generally, fundamentalism was characterized by a conservative, literal biblical interpretation, combined with an urgency driven by the sense that Christianity was in conflict with modern culture.

In the 1950s and 60s, however, some conservative Christians began to challenge this separatist approach to culture. With renewed cultural engagement and relevancy came a new vein of evangelical theology that emerged from fundamentalism. The goals and forms of this neo-evangelical movement were characterized by a turning away from the stark militancy and separatism of fundamentalism, toward cultural interaction. This is not to say that doctrinal or theological claims were entirely lost or surrendered; however, their presentation shifted to an approach capable of reaching into culture.[8] Variety existed in evangelical forms and alignments, with the movement being far from monolithic, but there was indeed enough of a shift for it to be characterized as a "movement."

In light of such a significant shift, one must ask both why and how it happened. Why was it that fundamentalism opened a path for renewed cultural engagement, when it

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[6] Ibid.

[7] Ibid., 117.

[8] Axel R. Schäfer, *Countercultural Conservatives: American Evangelicalism from the Postwar Revival to the New Christian Right* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2011), 9.

was characterized by such a sense of "otherness," martyrdom, and separation?[9] Partially, it was the fundamentalist emphasis on revivalism that helped begin the process. Because of the premillenialist emphasis on conversion, fundamentalists such as Charles Fuller and others in the 1930s and 40s began using radio as a means of mass communication.[10] Joel A. Carpenter captures the tension: like evangelicals before the fundamentalist-modernist controversies, "the tendency to withdraw from the world was qualified by their urgent desire to tell the world about Jesus."[11] The new medium fueled the need for a new approach: to reach into a broad audience for evangelistic purposes, a more culturally-aware, intellectually-engaged message was needed. Moreover, this involved a re-branding because the term "fundamentalism" had become associated with anti-intellectualism, thanks to its adherents' opposition to modern science and culture.[12] The trend in some veins of neo-evangelicalism was towards a more palatable gospel, what Axel Schäfer terms a "therapeutic" Christianity, which engaged a new post-War audience in politically and culturally relevant ways, although there were certainly other strands of evangelicalism that adopted a more intellectually-oriented approach.[13]

Several forms and institutions served as the means through which neo-evangelicalism was organized and propagated. Methods of mass communication were

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[9] Carpenter, *Revive Us Again*, 241–242.

[10] Mark A. Noll, *American Evangelical Christianity: An Introduction* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 2001), 17.

[11] Carpenter, *Revive Us Again*, 126.

[12] Schäfer, *Countercultural Conservatives*, 19.

[13] Ibid., 27–29.

key. In the early days, radio was important for both fundamentalist and neo-evangelical preachers; later, television, publications like *Christianity Today*, and preachers such as Billy Graham, who preached to throngs of people, spread a more ecumenical message.[14] These speakers and figures in the evangelical community built on interdenominational organizations. Previously, fundamentalist leaders had attempted similar organizations, such as the American Council of Christian Churches.[15] The later National Association of Evangelicals, with its "ultimate goal of a 'national revival,'" became the evangelical alternative.[16] Furthermore, also building on a network and strategy developed by fundamentalist organizations, Christian seminaries and colleges began combatting the anti-intellectual image of fundamentalism, providing a reinvigorated and rigorous version of evangelicalism, more appealing to a modern world.[17] All in all, by the 1960s, evangelicalism had shifted towards greater cultural engagement, less strict separation, and a higher degree of interdenominational organization.

The question then becomes, in light of the trend towards a more culturally-sensitive presentation, what were the doctrinal distinctives that evangelicals retained? The classic definition of evangelicalism is given by David Bebbington in a discussion of evangelicalism in modern Britain; however, the categories that he gives apply to the American strain as well. Bebbington identifies four characteristics: "*conversionism*, the belief that lives need to be changed; *activism*, the expression of the gospel in effort;

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[14] Ibid., 51; Noll, *American Evangelical Christianity*, 18–22.

[15] Carpenter, *Revive Us Again*, 145–150.

[16] Ibid., 151–152.

[17] Schäfer, *Countercultural Conservatives*, 51–52.

biblicism, a particular regard for the Bible; and what may be called *crucicentrism*, a stress on the sacrifice of Christ on the cross."[18] As Bebbington goes on to discuss, and indeed as most other scholars stress, these shared traits do not necessarily mean that evangelicalism was a unified or homogenous movement. Rather, different strains and denominations were prone to stress or exhibit some characteristics more strongly than the others.[19] These traits are essential to evangelicalism, but they leave room for theological and denominational variety.

Definitions given by other scholars help provide clarification. Marsden gives a similar-sounding five points: "(1) the Reformation doctrine of the final authority of the Bible, (2) the real historical character of God's saving work recorded in Scripture, (3) salvation to eternal life based on the redemptive work of Christ, (4) the importance of evangelism and missions, and (5) the importance of a spiritually transformed life."[20] Additionally, he emphasizes the evangelicals' conscious identification with the interdenominational aspect, as well as the diversity derived from this broader sense of the term. Mark Noll emphasizes also the variety of definitions of evangelicalism through historical contexts, and points out that Bebbington's definition does not quite neatly capture all evangelicals (and captures some who would not seem evangelical, such as Catholics). But, he too points out a few common traits: biblical fidelity; experiential faith; a bias against institutions; flexibility in approaching "political, social, and economic life";

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[18] Bebbington, *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain*, 2–3.

[19] Ibid., 3–4.

[20] Marsden, *Understanding Fundamentalism and Evangelicalism*, 4–5.

and the practice of "discipline."[21] Likewise, Schäfer highlights the ways in which evangelicalism was heterogeneous. It did not represent merely a backlash against secular political and popular culture in the 1960s and onward, but was rather shaped by a variety of influences it attempted to reconcile and not outright reject.[22] In short, as these scholars argue, evangelicals are a group sharing common traits, with a desire to work interdenominationally, but who retain a good deal of diversity.

Yet, in a few key ways, evangelicals can still be contrasted to fundamentalists for the purpose of distinction. Theologically, though still conservative, they were less inclined to be staunchly premillenialist or dispensationalist. Accordingly, the presentation of the message, though still gospel-centered, was generally more palatable to a broader, more modern audience. Culturally, the radical segregation from culture recommended by fundamentalists was no longer seen as the best alternative for evangelicals. In some degree because of the retained focus on conversion, engagement was viewed as necessary, although by no means was secular culture universally exalted or embraced. However, there was a new attitude of openness. Because they still held core, generally theologically conservative beliefs, based on the need for Christ's personal salvation, evangelicals were people with a mission, since evangelism was necessary; yet, their mission did not require militancy, but rather open extension into culture. In some sense the hardline doctrines of the fundamentalists were softened, geared toward the individual;

[21] Mark A. Noll, "What Is 'Evangelical'?," in *The Oxford Handbook of Evangelical Theology*, ed. Gerald R. McDermott (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 19–34.

[22] Schäfer, *Countercultural Conservatives*, 5–6.

however, this allowed evangelicalism to appeal to more people outside the church, and to form more interdenominational structures within it.

Still, although evangelicals were inclined to work together, their differences could be stark, both in doctrine and, as a result, in how they interacted with culture. Schäfer distinguishes between liberal and conservative evangelicals. Conservative evangelicals, aligned neither with fundamentalists nor liberals, were those typically identified with the NAE, which was founded in 1942. According to Schäfer, "Theologically, they desired to restore orthodoxy to societal relevance, yet rejected rigid dispensationalist theology in favor of a broad-based revivalism."[23] Initially, they retained a bit of the fundamentalist sense of separation; however, because of their desire for salience, they sought to be "both uncompromising and contemporary."[24] Yet, politically and socially, in these post-War years, conservative evangelicals ended up aligned with capitalism and mainstream culture in some senses: they maintained an interest in economic issues, family values, and a political opposition to socialism, while concern over possible internal differences and fragmentation kept conservatives from uniting on a single plan of social reform.[25] In this instance, some evangelicals did not seem so counter-cultural; in response, others took the opportunity to further distinguish themselves.

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[23] Schäfer, *Countercultural Conservatives*, 50.

[24] Ibid., 40.

[25] Ibid., 72–76; Hilde Lovdal Stephens, "Money Matters and Family Matters: James Dobson and Focus on the Family on the Traditional Family and Capitalist America," in *Religion and the Marketplace in the United States*, ed. Jan Stievermann et al. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), 103.

The Evangelical Left, which arose largely in the 1970s, made social reform its defining trait. While conservative evangelicals were concerned that adopting a platform of social reform might fracture the interdenominational movement, left-leaning evangelicals emphasized "the transformation not only of sinful individuals, but also of a sinful social order."[26] Their vision of revival and renewal based on the work of Christ extended beyond personal conversion and emphasized the element of activism. Eventually, this was reflected theologically as well: the evangelical left was more open to liberal cultural values, and focused on the "transforming power of the Bible" rather than strict inerrancy. In the context of the 1960s and 70s, they fit with the times, and "combined an anti-establishment mood with social engagement."[27] So, in this way, the Evangelical Left was quite open to cultural engagement. Ultimately, internal divisions fragmented the Evangelical Left; however, the long-term effect was that social engagement was infused throughout broader evangelicalism. For instance, the 1973 Chicago Declaration, signed by liberals, members of the Evangelical Left, and conservative evangelicals, was aimed at increasing evangelical political and social involvement "in a specifically biblical way."[28] The unity was short-lived; yet, as institutions on both sides began to falter, evangelicals did not entirely forget the need for cultural engagement, and would engage in some activism when the Christian Right emerged near the turn of the decade.

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[26] Schäfer, *Countercultural Conservatives*, 77.

[27] Ibid., 78–80.

[28] Ibid., 83–85.

By the late 1970s, evangelicals acknowledged that they must engage society anew in order to remain relevant. The response to this recognition took two major forms: evangelicals reaching out, and culture reaching in. Evangelical conservatives, such as Carl F. H. Henry, wanted to assert a more intentional evangelical engagement; he blamed "division, complacency, and withdrawal" for the faltering relevancy of the NAE and conservative evangelicalism.[29] Eventually, in the 1980s, this mode of re-engagement would take the form of the rise of the Moral Majority and evangelical participation in politics.[30] This political engagement was a symptom of the broader mindset of acceptance towards renewed evangelical interaction with culture. Born largely from the desire to reach into culture and change it through theological renewal, through mass preachers such as Billy Graham, mass movements like the Youth for Christ, and, increasingly, mass communication such as radio and TV evangelism, evangelicalism was never separatist in an isolationist sense.[31] Driven by their doctrinal tenants, as discussed earlier in the chapter, evangelicals fell easily into the habit of reaching into culture, first theologically, later socially, and eventually politically.

However, cultural interaction is rarely one-sided. At the same time that evangelicals were reaching into culture, mainstream American culture began to have a noticeable effect on evangelicals. This was not an entirely new phenomenon: from the

[29] Schäfer, *Countercultural Conservatives*, 90–93.

[30] Marsden, *Understanding Fundamentalism and Evangelicalism*, 106.

[31] Richard N. Ostling, "Evangelical Publishing and Broadcasting," in *Evangelicalism in Modern America*, ed. George M. Marsden (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1984), 47; Joel A. Carpenter, "From Fundamentalism to the New Evangelical Coalition," in *Evangelicalism and Modern America*, ed. George M. Marsden (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1984), 14–15.

American founding, political and economic forms had an influence on religious expression.[32] But, in the more modern sense of evangelical Christianity in the 1950s through 1970s, cultural engagement took on a new significance. Through modernism, secular culture had developed as a phenomenon apart from religious culture. As evangelicals came increasingly into contact with it, evangelicalism began to demonstrate cultural influences, particularly in political and economic realms. Rather than rejecting the capitalism and consumerism of secular culture, evangelical conservatives reconciled them with their theology: they "combined their embrace of private property and the free market with a rejection of the traditional Protestant suspicion of wealth."[33] They trended politically right, simultaneously embracing political culture as a means to a voice into culture through encouraging conservative social values and systems, and being molded and identified by that political culture as those values came to be identified with capitalist and consumerist systems.[34] Because of their desire to be more culturally involved in various public spheres, the definition and role of evangelical cultural engagement was being formed by these public influences.

Sometimes, the interaction seemed particularly to go both ways. Evangelicals became quite good at reaching the counterculture that arose in the 60s and lingered afterwards, sometimes adapting forms of evangelism to spread religious messages. For

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[32] R. Laurence Moore, *Selling God: American Religion in the Marketplace of Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 4–6; Jan Stievermann et al., eds., *Religion and the Marketplace in the United States* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), 5.

[33] Schäfer, *Countercultural Conservatives*, 116.

[34] Ibid., 112–113.

example, youth culture and the desire for relevancy fueled a shift in worship forms and expressions, and the new genre of Christian Contemporary Music, with artists like Larry Norman, flew into popularity.[35] Christian bookstores boomed from the 1960s onwards, selling not just Bibles and books on holy living (of which plenty were peddled), but also Christian paraphernalia mimicking popular culture, such as buttons, bumper stickers, and t-shirts with tacky slogans.[36] Another example of this hybrid interaction is the Jesus People movement in the 1970s, born out of the conversion of ex-hippies. The converted counterculture retained some of its relaxed feel, and brought this mood into ordinary evangelical worship, particularly in music, in youth ministry, and in a "seeker-sensitive" attitude. Both the counterculture and the church shifted because of their interactions with each other: eventually the Jesus People integrated into the congregations, while the evangelical churches retained characteristics gained from this brush with popular culture.[37]

Schäfer terms the evangelicals who were exploring these means of cultural engagement "countercultural conservatives." At the same time evangelicals engaged the broader American culture, they saw themselves as challenging it (though the truth of this perception varied a good deal). Evangelicals did not represent a simple, monolithic backlash against secular culture; rather, they resisted in some ways and assimilated in

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[35] Paul S. Boyer, "Back to the Future: Contemporary American Evangelicalism in Cultural and Historical Perspective," in *American Evangelicals and the 1960s*, ed. Axel R. Schäfer (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2013), 28–30; Larry Eskridge, *God's Forever Family: The Jesus People Movement in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 222–229.

[36] Moore, *Selling God*, 246–269.

[37] Eskridge, *God's Forever Family*, 266–284.

others. Some evangelicals did not react as strongly and completely against sociopolitical liberalism as might be assumed. Evangelicals attempted to "reconcile conflicting impulses," integrating elements of modern culture while also trying to maintain the doctrinal distinctives discussed earlier, with varying degrees of emphasis and success.[38] However, overall, it is important to stress the nuanced relationship of evangelicals with culture: it was a complex one, defined neither by reactionary militancy nor complete assimilation within modernism. Instead, there was a tension in the relationship between evangelicalism and culture.

Given all of this complexity, and given the tension with cultural engagement in the various approaches of the strains of evangelical Christianity by the time of the 1960s, the question then turns to how in particular evangelicals reacted to specific aspects of popular culture. Is it the case that they, following in the path of fundamentalists, largely rejected it? Or, should the heavy degree of political, economic, and consumer interaction be taken to mean that they were gradually more and more open to unrestricted cultural mingling? Clearly, as has been demonstrated through the habits and institutions of evangelicals, isolation was not the dominant response; indeed, it is the lack of isolation that served as a major hallmark of the neo-evangelicals.[39] And yet, at the same time, not all culture was seen as positive and worthy of engagement. There was still a desire to change culture rather than adopt it, which resulted in the integration various societal

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[38] Schäfer, *Countercultural Conservatives*, 3–6.

[39] Carpenter, "From Fundamentalism to the New Evangelical Coalition," 13–16.

influences into evangelicalism.[40] In general, the evangelical response to culture was as varied as the movement itself, but overall it exhibited at least an initial openness to either reaching into culture or allowing culture a (limited) reach into itself.

To summarize, this chapter has attempted to define the evangelical responses to culture in relation to evangelicalism's past and background, to their contemporary societal influences, and to the multiplicity of expressions of evangelicalism itself. It has explored the degrees and types of evangelical cultural engagement: theological, political, societal, and economical. There was no one way in which evangelicals responded to or viewed culture—rather, the movement itself was based around figuring out how to do this. There was interaction with culture, to varied extents. Sometimes the interaction took the form of a criticism or commentary, and sometimes the response was to assimilate elements or support aspects of the broader culture. The project of this study moving forward, therefore, will be to explore the nature of this reaction and engagement within the setting of popular culture and entertainment. Which style of response formed the dominant response, critique or acceptance? Examining the reactions of evangelicals in the 1960s and 1970s, as well as those from more mainline theological commitments, to genres of popular culture and media that seem initially overwhelmingly modern and secular, such as *Star Trek* and other science fiction films and television shows, is one way to get at this question.

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[40] Boyer, "Back to the Future: Contemporary American Evangelicalism in Cultural and Historical Perspective," 25–32.

CHAPTER TWO

Star Trek Development And The Nature Of Fandom

While evangelicals were undergoing development and transformation, secular culture in the 1960s and 1970s was also evolving. War and international tension, counterculture and protest, and the enfranchisement of a large section of the nation were absorbing people's focus. However, at the same time, and arguably because of some of the broader cultural changes and stresses, leisure culture was also undergoing a significant shift. With the rising ubiquity of television, the medium became central to American life. Additionally, the cultural context, particularly the space program, influenced the rise of new genres such as science fiction that sought to project a futuristic or alternative version of the world as a reprieve from the current one. Because of the compelling visions that these genres projected, groups formed around them that identified closely with the messages presented, associated in communal structures, and interacted with the programs in contexts beyond the initial presentation. For the purposes of this paper, these groups will be termed "fandoms." One of these television programs that generated an enduring fan-base was *Star Trek*; *Star Wars* (1977, 1980, 1983) and other lesser-known productions also generated fandoms of their own*.* *Star Trek* and other science fiction fandoms represented an instance of the growing popularity of science fiction television shows, around which people formed groups that defined some aspects of their identity, not to the same extent that religion was group-identifier, but with some clear similarities. The growth of fandom demonstrates the enormous cultural impact of

science fiction film and television, and thus indicates that religious reactions to it bear further study.

To understand why television, science fiction, and fandom became such powerful cultural forces, one must first understand the broader cultural context of the 1960s and 1970s. The decades immediately following World War II were ones of realignment. Protest culture became a visible social force, with the Civil Rights Movement lasting into the 1960s, and the anti-war protests over Vietnam also occurring during the same decade. Rebellion and protest of a different sort was also expressed in youth culture, through the hippie subculture, drug usage, and the sexual revolution; predictably, social and moral debate ensued. Political and international tensions were also present; the conflict in Vietnam, lasting from the mid-1950s until the mid-1970s, was merely one component in the Cold War, which lasted until the 1990s. In 1962, the Cuban Missile Crisis occurred.[41] At the same time that the United States was taking a more forceful role in international politics, it was also becoming a dominant influencer of culture. The music, aesthetic, and television of America was no longer confined to just America; as such, leisure culture in the United States became even more noteworthy. Simultaneously with cultural tensions, cultural expression flourished in music, art, and film, sometimes as a reprieve from the tension, and sometimes as a response to it.

Television represented an important part of this development in popular culture, because it was such a ubiquitous element in the life of the average American. Initially, program space was limited, since only three main networks dominated: CBS, NBC, and

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[41] Matthew Wilhelm Kapell, *Exploring the Next Frontier: Vietnam, NASA,* Star Trek *and Utopia in 1960s and 70s American Myth and History* (New York: Taylor and Francis, 2016), 15–26.

ABC. But, by 1960, these networks reached into 50 million homes.[42] Initially based on the structure of radio programing, television slowly developed into its system of prime-time, episodic shows. Variety shows, live-action anthologies (that is, theatre-style productions), and game shows dominated the medium in early days. As the industry moved from New York to Hollywood, however, and became more influenced by the movie industry and the need for a structured form that suited both ratings systems and sponsors, the episodic series developed.[43] These series were structured around the American middle-class family, as both the rating system (the Nielsen Family Index) and the early popularity of comedies on family or community life, such as *I Love Lucy* or *The Andy Griffith Show*, demonstrate. Later, these genres transitioned into more dramatic subjects, such as crime, Westerns, and science fiction.[44]

Science fiction in particular is the topic under consideration in this project. One dictionary defines science fiction as follows:

> A genre (of literature, film, etc.) in which the setting differs from our own world (e.g. by the invention of new technology, through contact with aliens, by having a different history, etc.) and in which the difference is based on extrapolations made from one or more changes or suppositions; hence, such a genre in which the difference is explained (explicitly or implicitly) in scientific or rational, as opposed to supernatural, terms.[45]

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[42] Ella Taylor, *Prime-Time Families: Television Culture in Post-War America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989), 19–20.

[43] Ibid., 21–24.

[44] Ibid., 33–35.

[45] Jeff Prucher, ed., *Brave New Words: The Oxford Dictionary of Science Fiction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 171.

As a genre, science fiction began long before the advent of television, or even the popularity of film at all. It started out as a print medium, with authors like Jules Verne or H.G. Wells being some of the most well-known early writers. Works exploring fantastical worlds had been created since the earliest known literature; however, these authors' works catered to a new era of readers who were more inclined to be skeptical of the fantastic and appreciative of the scientific.[46] The popularity of print science fiction and fantasy books continued throughout the twentieth century, and magazines such as *Amazing Stories* and *Weird Tales*, founded in the 1920s, continued to popularize the genre by publishing science fiction and fantasy stories.[47] Science fiction moved into a new medium as well—film—with movies such as Fritz Lang's *Metropolis*, and later films in the 1950s.[48] The genre moved to television with force around the turn of the 1960s, and it is in this context that *Star Trek* and other science fiction film and television developed.

The 1960s provided particularly fertile ground for a genre such as science fiction to grow in popularity. The decade was host to a peculiar mix of cultural progress and failure that both provided space for an optimistic vision of America's technological future, and also fueled a desire to escape into such a future, where progress and tolerance might find acceptance. One commentator, writing in the midst of the continued popularity of *Star Trek*, argued that the show was not escapist in nature, but "firmly rooted in human

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[46] Sam Moskowitz, "The Origins of Science Fiction Fandom: A Reconstruction," *Foundation; Reading, UK* 0 (1990): 13.

[47] Ibid., 16–18.

[48] Fritz Lang, *Metropolis*, Science fiction (UFA, 1972).

reality" in terms of its understanding of human nature and its search after the heroic and romantic, even amidst an age of science.[49] She wrote, "In unsettled times…there is a desire to see the human spirit exalted, to hear about what mankind could really do if its shackles of hate, ignorance, and fear were removed….It provides a counterpoint to the reality-view that created Watergate."[50] Both the facts and the spirit of the times prepared the public to embrace sci-fi: technological progress, the space race, and the desire for an optimistic, globally-integrated, socially-progressive vision of the world.

This study selects *Star Trek* as an example through which to examine the cultural impact of science fiction film and television. So, what exactly was *Star Trek*, and what was the vision it promoted? The basic premise of the show is well-summarized in its introductory sequence, played in every episode subsequent to the pilot: "Space: the final frontier. These are the voyages of the Starship *Enterprise*. Its five-year mission: to explore strange new worlds; to seek out new life and new civilization; to boldly go where no man has gone before."[51] The episodic series follows one futuristic spaceship's crew on a five-year (though only three seasons were produced) journey through the stars, during which the crew of the ship interacts with characters from unknown planets, as well as from the past. The show's progressive, futuristic bent is well-demonstrated in the main cast, which although mostly white, is ethnically diverse: it features a couple of white, American-English speaking males, but also an African-American woman, a Scot, a

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[49] Helen A. Hauser, "Harnessing the *Star Trek* Phenomenon," *South Atlantic Bulletin* 42, no. 4 (1977): 145.

[50] Ibid., 147.

[51] Marc Daniels, "The Man Trap," *Star Trek* (Desilu Productions, 1966).

Japanese man, and a Russian. The show's handling of deep concepts does not stop at its casting, however. It explores philosophical questions such as the nature of love and knowledge and morality, it challenges the desire for power through several different villains, and it also deals with religious questions, which shall receive further treatment later in this chapter.

Initially aired in 1966, *Star Trek* had a shaky run. It produced only 79 episodes over the course of its Original Series, around which the early popularity was based. Created by Gene Roddenberry, the show was jointly owned by his Norway Productions and Desilu Productions, and eventually, due to several mergers, the rights to the show passed into the hands of CBS in 1994.[52] The idea for the show was originally cast as a sort of space Western or adventure drama, though it quickly found its home more comfortably in the genre of science fiction, but set within a marketable, commercial framework.[53] Because of the concerns of the network on which it would eventually run, NBC, the show intentionally "stays within a mass audience frame of reference by avoiding 'way-out' fantasy and cerebral science theorem, and instead concentrating on problem and peril met by our very human and very identifiable continuing characters."[54] Although this desire to be commercial would seem to limit the program, it perhaps explains some of its draw: it takes an approach to science fiction that was interesting to

[52] Douglas Brode and Shea T. Brode, *The* Star Trek *Universe: Franchising the Final Frontier* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2015), 163–164.

[53] Roberta E. Pearson and Máire Messenger Davies, Star Trek *and American Television* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2014), 21–23.

[54] Ibid., 23.

viewers, and also allowed them to relate the themes dealt with to their normal, off-screen lives.

Unfortunately, the commercial aspect of the production of the series would lead to its eventual cancellation. Timeslot scheduling and prioritization based on sponsorship resulted in the show's time block being moved between seasons, preventing it from having its full potential impact on younger audiences. The special effects and production were also expensive, running $40,000 per episode over the standard $160,000.[55] With each season, fan protests and letter-writing convinced the broadcasting company to renew the show instead of cancelling it; however, after the third season, the demand was still not strong enough for the company to keep the show running, and it was cancelled.[56] *Star Trek* continued to be popular, however, when it went into syndication. Then, an animated series was produced in 1973-74, with many of the same characters from the Original Series appearing. Following upon the popularity of the original *Star Wars* movie, *Star Wars: A New Hope* (1977), *Star Trek* also produced its own movie by the end of the 1970s, with *Star Trek: The Motion Picture* (1979). Continuing beyond the scope of this paper, new television series and spinoffs from the original continued to be produced throughout the next thirty years. The most recent *Star Trek* movie, *Star Trek: Beyond*, was produced as recently as 2016, and featured once again the characters from the original three seasons. As *Star Trek* remained alive, its fanbase grew, and it remains a thriving franchise with one of the broadest science fiction fanbases ever.

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[55] Ibid., 24, 28.

[56] Ibid., 31; Rich Brown, "Post-Sputnik Fandom (1957-1990)," in *Science Fiction Fandom* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1994), 94.

Star Trek was not alone in serving the needs of a growing interest in science fiction shows. Other popular shows from 1960 to 1980 dealt with similar themes in the same genre. These included *The Twilight Zone* (1959-1964), and, though it was produced in Britain, *Doctor Who* (1963-present). Movies also continued to grow in popularity within the genre, the most famous of course being the *Star Wars* franchise. Other notable films would include *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968) and *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* (1977). Throughout the production of these other programs, *Star Trek* fandom remained strong in its own right, as members watched re-runs in syndication, produced their own commentaries and expanded on the fictional world they had been presented, and pondered the questions posed by their original *Star Trek* series. At the same time that fans remained faithful to *Star Trek*, the genre of science fiction programming continued to develop and expand, with new shows introducing new approaches to similar questions.

Many of these shows cast their own visions of the way the world was or ought to be; likewise, many also experienced the development around them of fandom groups that continued the experience beyond the initial introduction of material. There are several characteristics that usually help define fandom. Largely, fandom is separated from mere consumerism of a show or movie by its participatory nature.[57] Fans, over and against viewers, engage with the subject material beyond the mere broadcast of the program, self-identify as a fan of the program, and typically interact in some way with other members of the same community built around the subject. Fandom is not a new phenomenon; rather, it originated with print media. It began as a way to have serious

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[57] Mark Duffett, *Understanding Fandom: An Introduction to the Study of Media Fan Culture* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2013), 20–31.

critical discussion on an over-looked genre: "Professionals in the fields of science and literary criticism tended to ignore the genre; its analysis was left to the fan. Consequently, there soon developed a small cult of people interested not only in reading science fiction but also in critically examining it and the ideas it presented."[58] Broadly considered, fandom is a common element in American popular culture; for instance, it is almost expected that a person is a "fan" of some sports team. However, it is the element of participation and intense identification that tends to set the serious fan apart, particularly in this genre of science fiction.

Participation in fandom can take on a number of different forms. One of the earliest forms of fan participation that emerged was the fanzine, or fan-produced magazine. These sorts of publications, discussing the science fiction genre, began in the 1930s and 40s regarding written works, and continued to develop along with the genre.[59] Other features are also commonly found, such as the organization of fan clubs. Often, these can be very informal, with attendance equating to membership; in other instances, the membership hierarchy might be quite advanced, and the club might produce a publication of its own, termed a clubzine.[60] The fan club might interact with other fans and clubs through a convention. Conventions were started as early as the 1930s, with the

[58] Bruce Southard, "The Language of Science-Fiction Fan Magazines," *American Speech* 57, no. 1 (1982): 19–20.

[59] Prucher, *Brave New Words*, 60, 272.

[60] F.M. Busby, "Fan Clubs: An Example," in *Science Fiction Fandom*, ed. Joe Sanders (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1994), 143–147; Prucher, *Brave New Words*, 23.

first World Science Fiction Convention taking place in 1939.[61] At a convention, fans of different fandoms could meet and discuss shared interests, see panels of their favorite actors in person, and purchase fandom-related merchandise. Merchandizing is also a significant factor in fandom, helping to establish identity: many fans also become collectors, with a shelf full of memorabilia or a closet full of T-shirts marking the owner as a committed fan.[62] In general, fandom and the culture of fan participation constitute much more than a mere affinity for a certain show: rather, they represent a means of identification and a key element of lifestyle.

In many ways, fandom shares similarities to religion in terms of the strength and ways in which people identify themselves with it. Indeed, many scholars of religious studies have advanced the claim that fandom can be seen as a type of religion, one of popular culture instead of theology.[63] Countless books exist for most fandoms, comparing the content or structure of the particular program at hand to some aspect of religious devotion or worship. Fans and worshippers both attend meetings, read and publish local or group newsletters, go to conventions, and adopt their group's philosophy as a way of life. Not only are the group identity and personal belief elements of fandom and religion similar, but also the institutional and commercial elements in some ways mirror those of fandom. Indeed, as was discussed in the previous chapter, evangelicalism in the 1960s

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[61] Hank Luttrell, "The Science Fiction Convention Scene," in *Science Fiction Fandom*, ed. Joe Sanders (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1994), 149.

[62] Howard DeVore, "A Science Fiction Collector," in *Science Fiction Fandom*, ed. Joe Sanders (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1994), 221–228.

[63] Sean McCloud, "Popular Culture Fandoms, the Boundaries of Religious Studies, and the Project of the Self," *Culture and Religion* 4, no. 2 (2003): 187–190.

and 1970s began to pick up more and more traits from popular culture, among them the trend toward merchandising and apparel as a means of identification with the group.[64] Fan and believer both have strong central belief systems based on a particular source media, both congregate with like-minded adherents, and both engage with their subjects in contexts beyond the initial introduction.

The *Star Trek* fandom is no exception to this trend toward comparison with religion. Michael Jindra, one of the main scholars working in the field of religion in *Star Trek*, suggests that like religion, *Star Trek* offers fans an alternative identity group. He clearly states his thesis on the matter: "I will set out to demonstrate that ST fandom has strong affinities with a religious-type movement….ST fandom is one location in which to find religion in our society."[65] For Jindra, *Star Trek* fandom's strong similarities to religion are so convincing as to make it a quasi-variety of religion. He identifies *Star Trek*'s belief system as central and utopian, with a recognizable consistency. It has a mythology, it points adherents to a better vision of the world, and it identifies humanity's place in the world.[66] The passing-down of this vision and message through fan clubs, networking, and conventions offers a parallel to religious organizations and pilgrimage. Jindra ends up arguing that *Star Trek* fandom represents a type of "civil religion": "A civil religion is a 'generalizing' of religious belief necessary to have an integrated

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[64] Colleen McDannell, *Material Christianity: Religion and Popular Culture in America* (London: Yale University Press, 1995), 249–256.

[65] Michael Jindra, "*Star Trek* Fandom as a Religious Phenomenon," *Sociology of Religion* 55, no. 1 (1994): 28.

[66] Ibid., 32–34.

society, as a counter to 'pluralizing' trends that divide society."[67] Jindra's article and other works are not alone in taking this religious studies-oriented approach to *Star Trek* fandom.

It is not clear, however, that *Star Trek* fandom can be so simply and easily identified with more traditional varieties of religion. Moreover, the challenge runs deeper, arguing against the idea that fandom is analogous to religion. In regard to the narrower question of the equation of fandom to religion, Sean McCloud comments directly upon Jindra's thesis: it requires a much too broad and too vague definition of religion in order to fit the aspects of fandom into religious categories, and it stretches the parallels of the functions and natures of fandom and religion a bit too much. McCloud also objects that Jindra's interpretations impose a need for some sort of religion upon human nature, and thus fandoms become necessary religion-substitutes. Instead, McCloud proposes a different understanding of popular culture fandoms: they are means of self-identification.[68] In respect to the broader question of fandom in general mirroring religion, critiques are also present. One empirical study compared the loyalties, approaches, and background reasons for joining, along with several other categories, of secular fans to their fandoms (including sports and television shows) with those of religious members to their religions, and found that secular fans answered similarly to each other, and religious "fans"/members to each other. But, secular fans and religious

[67] Ibid., 49.

[68] McCloud, "Popular Culture Fandoms, the Boundaries of Religious Studies, and the Project of the Self," 193–196, 199–203.

members approached their respective communities differently. The conclusion seems to be that fandom is not identical to religion.[69]

So, it does not seem that the concepts of religion and fandom should be completely merged. They do not appear to be entirely overlapping concepts, although they may at times share many of the same traits. There are some similarities in practice, in regard to local and national congregating. Both forms have a certain way of seeing the world. In religion, that way is based on a sacred text, and in fandom, it is based on the philosophy and tenants expressed within the medium. In the case of *Star Trek*, a utopian vision of the future, the Prime Directive (an anti-intervention policy into the affairs of the new planets), and the fan-derived concept of IDIC (Infinite Diversity in Infinite Combinations) provide the guiding principles.[70] The practice and following of *Star Trek* fans at times even carried some of the multi-generational elements of traditional religion, strengthening its communal nature even more. Third to fifth generation fans, brought up in fandom and in the fan clubs, are not unheard of.[71] Evidently, despite not being identified exactly with the definition of traditional religion, fandom in general and *Star Trek* fandom in particular do have a strong claim upon participants, enough that fandom cannot be classified as a mere hobby. Perhaps it would be best to consider *Star Trek*

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[69] Stephen Reysen, "Secular Versus Religious Fans: Are They Different?: An Empirical Examination," *Journal of Religion and Popular Culture* 12 (2006): 1.

[70] Michael Jindra, "'*Star Trek* Is to Me a Way of Life': Fan Expressions of *Star Trek* Philosophy," in *Star Trek and Sacred Ground: Explorations of Star Trek, Religion, and American Culture*, ed. Jennifer E. Porter and Darcee L. McLaren (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1999), 221.

[71] Juanita Coulson, "Why Is a Fan?," in *Science Fiction Fandom*, ed. Joe Sanders (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1994), 8; Jindra, "*Star Trek* Fandom as a Religious Phenomenon," 35.

fandom under McCloud's thesis. It is not a religion, though it may share religious traits; primarily, it is a voluntary association that gives participants a new layer of personal identification.[72] It may not provide a specifically religious community, but it does provide a nonetheless important one.

In light of this definition, it is clear that fandom, although still a fringe aspect of popular culture in the 1960s and 1970s, was nonetheless a significant and growing cultural aspect. Clearly, both religion and fandom offered views of the world and of popular culture and progress that would seem to be at odds with each other at times. If the shows and films that caused this dissonance were really important enough to cause fans to adopt specific ways of viewing the world and their own identities, did these shows and films merit a response from orthodox religion? Science fiction as a genre was rapidly expanding its influence during these two decades. At the same time, religious people were trying to find a balanced way to respond to the secular culture of which sci-fi was a part. Were evangelical or mainline Christianity threatened by the large influence of science fiction, or did they respond to it positively and identify with the material like other fans? Because both forces were significant components of the broader American culture at the time, their interaction bears examination and these questions demand answering.

[72] McCloud, "Popular Culture Fandoms, the Boundaries of Religious Studies, and the Project of the Self," 199–203.

CHAPTER THREE

The *Christian Century* And Science Fiction Film And Television

In comparison with evangelicals, mainline Protestants in the mid-twentieth century tended to have less guarded attitudes toward popular culture. While evangelicals were to some degree defined by their openness to cultural engagement, their more theologically-liberal counterparts are usually seen as embracing culture with greater enthusiasm. This chapter examines the treatment of science fiction in film and television within the *Christian Century*, a mainline Protestant publication founded in the late nineteenth century and continuing in publication beyond the time period of this study, and argues that this perception holds true in regard to the treatment of science fiction, an especially modern and secular-seeming genre. A survey of articles from the *Christian Century*, spanning the time period from 1960 to 1980, on science fiction films and television shows including *Star Trek* and other popular franchises, reveals a considerable degree of acceptance. While articles in the *Christian Century* did express some degree of tension with popular culture and secular media, they were open to embracing films and television programs, such as those in the science fiction genre, that seemed to help humanity and religion locate themselves in the midst of a rapidly modernizing and technologically developing society.

In understanding why the *Christian Century* responded the way in which it did, one must first know a bit about the history and viewpoint of the publication. The magazine was first founded as a publication of the Disciples of Christ denomination in

1884. It was initially called the *Christian Oracle*, but the name was changed to the *Christian Century* in 1900, to represent its optimistic vision of what the next hundred years might hold for the faith.[73] After experiencing financial difficulties, it was bought in 1908 by a Disciples of Christ minister named Charles Clayton Morrison, who was the editor for around forty years. Initially, the publication remained aligned with the Disciples denomination; however, some theological issues, such as open membership to people from other denominations, began to arise. The *Century* became "undenominational" in 1917, after Morrison realized the potential breadth of his impact if he were to open up the publication.[74] The magazine remained nondenominational, though it favored more liberal strains of Protestant Christianity, and it would eventually come into conflict with fundamentalists and neo-evangelicals throughout the century.

By the 1950s, the *Century* was coming into confrontation with an emerging evangelicalism. Battles with and critiques of fundamentalism were no new thing for the *Century*; even prior to 1920, the magazine published against "the embarrassment and evils of denominationalism, revivalism, traditional theology, etc." and "the cult of fundamentalism with its verbal inspiration and infallibility."[75] These tensions did not fade during the years leading up to the late 1950s, and in some ways were highlighted by the commencement of the publication of *Christianity Today*. *Christianity Today* was an explicitly evangelical publication initiated in 1956 under the editorship of Carl F. H.

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[73] Linda Marie Delloff et al., *A Century of the Century* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1987), 3–4.

[74] Ibid., 18.

[75] Marsden, *Fundamentalism and American Culture*, 166, 168.

Henry of Fuller Theological Seminary, with the cooperation of other prominent neo-evangelical leaders such as Billy Graham, Harold Ockenga, and L. Nelson Bell.[76] Even by 1965, the *Century* was still publishing articles "Demythologizing Neoevangelicalism" and attacking the movement for being duplicitous.[77] However, the *Century* continued to lose ground in circulation to *Christianity Today.* As churchgoers began to identify less with the liberal Protestant left and more with the emerging conservative evangelicals, a shift in terminology occurred in the magazine's identification: no longer was it broadly Protestant, but "mainline."[78]

Yet, the *Century* was still influential. It remained the largest rival of *Christianity Today* for the time period covered in this study, and it still remained influential within Protestant society. As Elesha J. Coffman argues in her book on the *Century*, the so-called "mainline" did not sharply decline all of a sudden after the advent of *Christianity Today* and the neo-evangelical movement; rather, mainline Protestantism shifted its approach to society, but did not disappear from it.[79] The *Century* continues to be circulated to this day. Eventually, it drifted closer in perspective to its former rival, though remaining distinctly left of it. But, because of its remaining impact at the focus period of this study, it serves as a valuable comparison to the coverage of similar topics in *Christianity Today*.

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[76] Elesha J. Coffman, *The* Christian Century *and the Rise of Mainline Protestantism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 162.

[77] "Demythologizing Neoevangelicalism," *Christian Century*, September 15, 1965, 1115.

[78] Coffman, *The* Christian Century *and the Rise of Mainline Protestantism*, 213.

[79] Ibid., 217.

Furthermore, understanding the *Christian Century*'s approach to science fiction in film and television helps to clarify that of its rival.

It is important to note that the *Century* was not in all ways the total opposite of the fundamentalists it criticized. Fundamentalism was often characterized by a withdrawal from secular culture, and while the editors of the *Century* did not advocate total withdrawal, they did argue that consistent effort was needed to maintain Christian distinctness in the face of secular culture. Engagement with secular culture was allowable, but required spiritual discipline. One writer for the *Century* wrote, "It is time for Christians of a liberal bent unashamedly to show their commitment to a life style informed by reason, rooted in contemporary culture, enhanced by the arts, *and* inspired by that mystic Wonder which exceeds formulation in precise doctrinal statements or moral legalisms."[80] In the years leading up to the 1960s, film and television were viewed a bit skeptically in the *Century*, and were seen as encouraging violence and degrading family values.[81] The articles produced during the years from 1960 to 1980 exhibited a bit of a shift in this approach, though by no means is all concern about the potential dangers of the media absent. By the end of the 1970s, the *Century* commonly published articles on TV and film, extended reviews of current movies, and monthly updates on noteworthy upcoming television programs, all from a Christian perspective. At the beginning of the 1960s, some concern was expressed in the articles about religion's evolving role in a

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[80] Donald E. Miller, "Spiritual Discipline: Countering Contemporary Culture," *Christian Century*, March 19, 1980, 320.

[81] Michele Rosenthal, "'Turn It Off!': TV Criticism in the Christian Century Magazine, 1946-1960," in *Practicing Religion in the Age of the Media: Explorations in Media, Religion, and Culture*, ed. Stewart M. Hoover and Lynn Schofield Clark (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002), 144–145.

secular, technological society, and this concern about secular culture remains; however, the response of the *Century* seemed to be to try to maintain a balanced tension with culture, neither rejecting it outright nor embracing it wholeheartedly.

Maintaining this tension, the *Century* by the year 1960 was beginning to advocate an embrace of culture, albeit a discriminatory one. Issues of the magazine frequently contained a dedicated "Criticism" section that dealt variously with popular records, television shows, current cinema, plays, and musicals. The works treated were not always of a Christian perspective or dealing with Christian themes, although religious movies tended to get the most attention prior to 1965.[82] As the years passed, however, the genre of the films treated broadened significantly. The treatment of television in the *Century* was a bit more limited, especially in the early 1960s when television was rising in cultural importance.[83] However, from the early to the mid 1970s, the *Century* did contain a monthly section dedicated to previewing for its readers valuable, educational, or family-friendly content that would be aired that month. The frequency of discussion of television-related concerns increased in general during the 1970s: articles on cable TV, the dearth of value-shaping children's shows, censorship and values, televangelism, and violence and values in the media became ordinary fare.[84] By 1980, the *Century* openly

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[82] John G. Harrell, "Religious Films: Fact and Forecast," *Christian Century*, April 6, 1960.

[83] Rosenthal, "'Turn It Off!': TV Criticism in the Christian Century Magazine, 1946-1960," 141.

[84] Edward C. Peterson, "Cable TV: Now a Nationwide Issue," *Christian Century*, March 22, 1972; "TV: A Wasteland for Tots," *Christian Century*, April 26, 1972; James M. Wall, "Children's TV: No Haven for Elitism," *Christian Century*, November 7, 1973; James M. Wall, "Planning Television's Future," *Christian Century*, October 8, 1975; James M. Wall, "Who Shapes TV Values?," *Christian Century*, February 16, 1977; Ed

acknowledged the impactful element that television was in culture: "Television and other media also offer a coherent and emotionally satisfying view of the world to individuals caught in that gap between the public and the private."[85] Clearly, during this time period, commentary on film, television, and other media became an important part of the *Century*'s engagement of culture.

Thus, the question is, what manner or tone did the *Century* adopt in approaching these topics in popular culture? Were the commentaries primarily critical, or appreciative? Looking at the articles available, many commentaries made some sort of moral judgment, especially in the areas of excessive violent or sexual content. And, they often attempted to relate the material to religion's values, role in society, or representation in the media. In the area of children's television especially, there were some indictments against violence, since children were viewed as vulnerable and still in the process of moral formation.[86] Yet, the response of the *Century* was not all negative. In several articles throughout the 1960s, the *Century* attempted to articulate a vision of interaction with the media that approached it openly but also maintained Christian values and morality. These articles encouraged films with religious themes or educational purposes, but also provided guidelines and suggestions for censoring and rating secular

Hird, "Reader's Response: TV and Evangelicals: Uneven Reception," *Christian Century*, September 14, 1977; James A. Taylor, "Violence: Media's Desperate Remedy," *Christian Century*, October 5, 1977; Edward M. Berckman, "Superheroes, Antiheroes, and the Heroism Void in Children's TV," *Christian Century*, July 4, 1979.

[85] Gerald E. Forshey, "Reader's Response: Accounting for Television's Impact," *Christian Century*, September 27, 1980, 824.

[86] Wall, "Children's TV: No Haven for Elitism"; Berckman, "Superheroes, Antiheroes, and the Heroism Void in Children's TV"; "TV: A Wasteland for Tots."

films, assuming that the readers would be engaging with this secular content.[87] As a part of its efforts to help readers engage with popular culture while maintaining Christian integrity, the *Century* also published a number of articles in the 1960s on the FCC ratings regulations. Increasingly, the *Century* seemed to accept the idea that its readers would be engaging with secular films and television programs, and rather than rejecting this interaction, as fundamentalists might, it attempted to facilitate and shape it, but in a Christian fashion. Film, television, and other media were not inherently evil, this approach seemed to say, but must be ultimately brought back into relation with religion and a Christian view of humanity.

The genre of science fiction in film and television is of particular relevance because it captures many of these trends. Discussion of the genre in the *Century* was scant during the 1960s, like that of the rest of secular film, though it picked up toward the end of the decade. Going along with the general trend of film criticism, the 1970s volumes of the *Century* had much more to offer in terms of articles on the subject. And, sci-fi discussion is also helpful because it is a genre that encourages reflection on the human condition: by dealing with the trajectory of mankind in a modern or future world, it brings to the forefront concerns of Christians about what role religion can have in a technological society, or what commentary Christianity is equipped to make. By examining the commentaries that the *Century* does in fact make on sci-fi, one can better

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[87] John G. Harrell, "A Theology for Film Making," *Christian Century*, August 2, 1961; James M. Wall, "Toward Christian Film Criteria," *Christian Century*, June 16, 1965; Gerald E. Forshey, "Popular Religion, Film, and the American Psyche," *Christian Century*, April 30, 1980.

understand mainline Protestantism's views toward film and television, science and technology, and the future.

Although this study examines *Star Trek* in particular as a good example of a sci-fi television show with a large following and a continuing impact that did have an influence on the lifestyle and identification of fans, a brief look at the treatment of similar films and shows within the same genre in the *Century* is helpful to set the stage. Three examples of treatments of science fiction movies and programs in the *Century*, all released around the time at which *Star Trek* was first aired, serve to demonstrate the *Century*'s approach to the genre. These reviews—of *Our Man Flint* (1966), *Batman* (1966-68), and *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968)—demonstrated different strains within the science fiction genre as well as different approaches to its treatment by the *Century*. For *Our Man Flint*, a science fiction spy movie, no deep analysis was given, and the fight scenes and violence were considered primarily as surface-level entertainment. Some artistic commentary was present about the actors' performances, but by and large, the review could have easily been published by a secular magazine.[88] *Batman*, a television show about superheroes and villains, was analyzed in juxtaposition to the Christian tradition, with the commentator using the style of the show's humor to comment on the need for self-awareness in religion.[89] The third example, *2001: A Space Odyssey*, a film set in outer space and 30 years in the future, received by far the most complex commentary. The reviewer spent some time detailing the special effects, but also discussed what the film

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[88] Marion Armstrong, "Spiffy Spoof," *Christian Century*, April 13, 1966.

[89] M. Conrad Hyers, "Batman and the Comic Profanation of the Sacred," *Christian Century*, October 18, 1967.

says about humanity: "it has to do with…how by reaching beyond himself man can only hope to reach into himself—and how by reaching in he goes beyond. In discovering who *I* am I discover what *man* is."[90] The story and setting give the film a transcendent value. These three approaches to sci-fi film and television review—seeing it as entertainment, as revealing religious messages, and as making a commentary about humanity—would be employed in the *Century* to varying degrees throughout the 1970s.

Figure 1: Comic from "Violence: Media's Desperate Remedy"

In regard to commentary on *Star Trek* itself, one of the biggest sci-fi franchises until the advent of *Star Wars*, the *Century* did not have much to offer in terms of direct commentary upon the television program aired from 1966-1969. In some sense, this is not surprising: the show did not become a cult favorite until after it went into syndication.

[90] Fred Myers, "Sci-Fi Triumph," *Christian Century*, June 26, 1968, 845.

However, it is through the mentions of the program in other articles that one can see the extent of the show's impact. For instance, one commentary in the *Century* on a meeting of the World Future Society in 1975 used the program as a representation of a scientific vision of the future, one which needed to be more mingled with a religious perspective: the writer suggested "a synthesis of the Book of Revelation and 'Star Trek' is needed," indicating *Star Trek* alone is not enough.[91] Not all commentaries, however, saw *Star Trek* as emblematic of a poorly nuanced vision of humanity's future; on the contrary, as Figure 1 (above) demonstrates, *Star Trek* was seen at times as a positive vision of a scientific and technologically-driven future, but one that maintains the significance of humanity's place in the world. The comic showed a pair of presumably future scientists looking at images from the *Star Trek* television show, and proclaiming the main characters, Captain Kirk and First Officer Spock, as examples of "intelligent life."[92] In 1973, *Star Trek: The Animated Series* (1973-74) got a passing mention in an article on children's television, but not much commentary.[93] The *Century* also later acknowledged *Star Trek*'s prominent role in popular culture in its initial review of *Star Wars* in 1977. All in all, commentary on *Star Trek* as a television program contained some mixed reviews, but tended to be positive in the *Christian Century*, and by the later 1970s, reviewers were beginning to acknowledge both the show's cultural sway and its human insight.

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[91] Barry W. Lynn, "Humane Futurology," *Christian Century*, October 15, 1975, 910.

[92] Taylor, "Violence: Media's Desperate Remedy," 878.

[93] Wall, "Children's TV: No Haven for Elitism," 1092.

Moreover, it was not only the television show of *Star Trek* that received attention from the *Century*, but also the movie sequel to the series, released in late 1979. *Star Trek: The Motion Picture* (1979) received a detailed film review in the *Century* early the next year. First, the review briefly reminded readers of the franchise's significance: "'Star Trek' acquired cult status and loyal followers of all ages—so-called Trekkies."[94] Like the earlier commentary on *2001*, and like other sci-fi commentaries released in the time between the program and the movie, the *ST-TMP* commentary touched on the breathtaking artistic and special effects quality of the film, along with giving a brief plot summary. The most significant portion of the review, however, dealt with the philosophical message conveyed by the film: "for all its simplistic approach, *ST-TMP* provides a metaphor for contemporary American life that is singularly appropriate. Coming from Hollywood, where cuddly computerized robots originated, *Star Trek – The Motion Picture* not surprisingly suggests that 'answers' may be found in a synthesis of human and machine."[95] So, to break this discussion down, there are several important elements: 1) the review performed both the function of assessing the film as art and entertainment, and of relating its message to the human context; 2) the film was seen as an attempt to maintain human relevance in a technologically-driven secular world; and 3) while the film was not treated in explicitly mainline Protestant or even Christian terminology, its human focus was seen as reflecting concerns that are nonetheless important for religious people in a changing world.

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[94] Bea Rothenbuecher, "Current Cinema: *Star Trek: The Motion Picture*," *Christian Century*, January 16, 1980, 52.

[95] Ibid.

In the intermediate decade following the cancelation of *Star Trek: The Original Series* in 1969 and leading up to the release of *Star Trek: The Motion Picture* in 1979, the genre of science fiction continued to develop and release new films, and the *Christian Century* continued to increasingly publish reviews of them. Many of these reviews followed the format of the *Our Man Flint* review, giving only a cursory critical glance at the films, in language that could have come from a secular publication. For example, *Logan's Run* (1976), *Superman* (1978), *Alien* (1979), and *Buck Rogers in the 25th Century* (1979) were treated primarily in stylistic terms, criticized for acting style, prop and production quality, comedic timing, and plot devices.[96] Two other films, *Sleeper* (1973) and *The Final Countdown* (1980), both had brief mentions of how the films compare the conditions of the past and future, but not much was said on this point and they too were primarily critiqued stylistically.[97] The review of *Buck Rogers* echoed back a bit to earlier 1960s reviews, with a bit of moral commentary: "unremitting vulgarity in its humor makes *Buck Rogers* questionable family film fare."[98] Among the discussion of other sci-fi films in the 1970s, the *Century*'s review of *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* was the piece that stood out most from the others, placing a secular film within a Christian dialogue. The reviewer, C. Eugene Bryant, termed the film, in which alien life

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[96] "Current Cinema: *Logan's Run*," *Christian Century*, August 18, 1976; "Current Cinema: *Superman*," *Christian Century*, January 17, 1979; James M. Wall, "Current Cinema: *Alien*," *Christian Century*, July 4, 1979; Bea Rothenbuecher, "Current Cinema: *Buck Rogers*," *Christian Century*, June 6, 1979.

[97] "Current Cinema: *Sleeper*," *Christian Century*, January 23, 1974; Bea Rothenbuecher, "Current Cinema: *The Final Countdown*," *Christian Century*, September 24, 1980.

[98] Rothenbuecher, "Current Cinema: *Buck Rogers*."

contacts certain people on earth in a benevolent way, "a kind of pop-gospel message."[99] Bryant drew parallels between the message of the film and the Christian message, using eschatological language: at the culmination of the film, there is "the presence of a realized hope and the promise of a future which is the revelation of a new heaven and a new earth.…At its heart is the announcement of epiphany – the coming of something totally new."[100] So, it appears that while the reviewers of the *Century* saw the bulk of science fiction in entertainment-driven terms, they also embraced an effort to relate the sci-fi genre to the human condition or to religious realities when the depth of the narrative permitted such philosophizing.

Any discussion of science fiction film and television in the 1960s through 1980s would be incomplete without a treatment of *Star Wars*, all the more so since it too was subjected to the same kind of deeper analysis as *Star Trek: The Motion Picture* and *Close Encounters*. The *Century*'s summary of the film in its list of the best movies of the 1970s aptly encapsulated the magazine's treatment of the classic: "it [*Star Wars*] suggested that heroism is not dead and that the future of technology is going to be controlled by human purposes…[it] was the precursor of the optimism that gushed forth in *Rocky* and in other recent films."[101] The initial review of *Star Wars: A New Hope* cited its "notion of fun and fantasy" as the film's defining feature, with entertaining heroes caught up in a conflict

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[99] C. Eugene Bryant, "Encountering an Epiphany," *Christian Century*, February 22, 1978, 194.

[100] Ibid.

[101] Gerald E. Forshey, "Best Films of the '70s," *Christian Century*, March 5, 1980, 262.

against evil.[102] The next issue of the publication elaborated further, dedicating a front-page picture and an extensive review to the film, and claimed that "the alternative vision of *Star Wars*, a vision of fantasy as opposed to realism, strikes us with the force of stepping from the cave into bright sunlight."[103] The reviews' perspective was that the film was a success because of the optimism it displayed towards humanity's place in the future and in space. Goodness and morality were still defined in that future, and had hope of triumph. The *Century* published some pushback from readers, such as one who claimed that the film was racist (because Darth Vader was black), violent, and dealt in moral absolutes, and another who complained that reviewers were reading into the film too much deep theology and philosophy.[104] Yet, the *Century* did not retract its favorable view, and its review of *Star Wars: The Empire Strikes Back* (1980) nuanced but did not alter this positive perception: the evil and the good are more complex in the second film, but the basic message of "corruptible humans whose quest is to restore morality to a world on the brink of subjugation" remained.[105]

In summary, there are a couple of things one can say about the trend of the science fiction genre in film and television and how the *Christian Century* represented it in the years from 1960 to 1980. First, the amount of coverage increased. Not only did the

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[102] "Current Cinema: *Star Wars*," *Christian Century*, July 6, 1977.

[103] William Siska, "A Breath of Fresh Fantasy," *Christian Century*, July 20, 1977, 668.

[104] Greg Meyer, "'Star Wars' Dissent," *Christian Century*, November 9, 1977; Suzanne H. Stomberg and Clark Holt, "'Star Wars' Battles," *Christian Century*, January 4, 1978.

[105] Gerald E. Forshey, "Heroism's Dark Side," *Christian Century*, August 30, 1980, 770.

Century start to publish more reviews of and commentaries on film and television, but also sci-fi's share in that coverage increased as the genre's popularity rose. Second, the treatment of science fiction media that appeared in the *Century* was not altogether negative. Granted, some reservations about science fiction franchises such as *Star Trek* and *Star Wars* were expressed, but generally these come from readers, not the editors or reviewers. The bulk of the content pertaining to sci-fi appears on the contrary to be neutral to positive. Finally, most films received only brief reviews pertaining to their artistic merits; for some, however, such as *Star Trek*, *Close Encounters*, and *Star Wars*—films with deeper transcendent messages about the human condition—the reviews were overwhelmingly positive, and tended to try to connect the films to some broader religious or philosophical point about humanity.

Themes about how science fiction and space fantasies provide an optimistic vision of the future and show humanity's continued relevance in a changing age were often repeated in the *Century*'s commentaries. At the same time that it was interacting with these films and programs from the science fiction genre, the *Century* was publishing articles about "Learning to Live with Robots" and about "The Christian Function in a Technological Culture": clearly, there was some degree of apprehension about the continuing modernization of a secular world.[106] In reviews of non-science fiction films, commentators were writing that "the '70s are a time in which we seem to have lost our birthright. All the gains of the past are gone. We seem left without a stable identity. The

[106] Irving Hexham, "Learning to Live with Robots," *Christian Century*, May 21, 1980; Myron. B. Bloy, "The Christian Function in a Technological Culture," *Christian Century*, February 23, 1966.

ground under our feet seems always to be shifting."[107] Dystopian films warning about a possible cataclysmic future, and pessimistic films about a world with increasing tensions, such as *A Clockwork Orange* (1971) and *Hard Contact* (1969), played in the theaters.[108] On the other hand, there was science fiction, with a vision of humanity that offered a way forward into the future, one that included rockets and robots but also maintained the narrative of good and evil and morality and hope. By recognizing the value of such narratives in popular cultural dialogue, the *Century* opened itself to positive engagement with science fiction film and television.

[107] Gerald E. Forshey, "Mel Brook's Swiftian Six-Guns," *Christian Century*, July 17, 1974, 727.

[108] Charles M. Austin, "Stirring the Guttywuts," *Christian Century*, February 16, 1972; Ralph Moore, "The Next Human Step," *Christian Century*, June 18, 1969.

CHAPTER FOUR

Christianity Today And Science Fiction Film And Television

At the same time that the Protestant mainline engaged popular culture in a positive fashion, the evangelical movement found its footing in the 1960s. Evangelicalism arose out of the desire of conservative Protestant Christians to regain a prophetic voice in culture. While the mainline had the *Christian Century* to propagate its views, the evangelicals founded their own periodical, *Christianity Today*. Although both were Christian magazines and both professed a desire to interact with secular culture, the extent to which and the manner in which they did so differed. Particularly in the realm of film and television, *Christianity Today* was willing to engage culture, but perhaps with stronger reservations than the *Century*. As this chapter will demonstrate, *Christianity Today*'s responses to science fiction films and television shows capture the willingness of the publication to engage in theological dialogue with secular culture, while not entirely adopting that culture's perspective on humanity and vision of the future.

Christianity Today, founded in 1956, became one of the most widely read evangelical publications during the second half of the twentieth century. Its founders, already well-known at the magazine's commencement, wanted to issue a publication that would articulate an orthodox Christian faith while also helping conservative believers sift through a burgeoning secular culture and remain grounded in religion. Those founders included prominent evangelical leaders such as Billy Graham, Harold Ockenga, and Carl F. H. Henry. The magazine was financially backed by sympathetic conservative

Christians such as J. Howard Pew.[109] Under Henry's early editorship, the publication addressed a range of issues relating to the life of a Christian in a secular world. Political news, social movements, and theological disputes all received thorough coverage.[110] *Christianity Today* found early success in its circulation numbers: by the end of its first year of publication it had already surpassed the readership of the *Christian Century*, its largest rival.[111] By the 1960s, *Christianity Today* also had branched out internationally, in terms of both its readers and contributors.[112] It rapidly became a leading voice within the evangelical community.

The magazine attempted to foster interaction between popular (secular) culture and evangelical Christianity. The goal was to provide a cultural commentary for evangelicals, while also helping to reach into secular culture, in a way that the editors thought liberal and mainline strains of Christianity could not. An editorial from the first issue of *Christianity Today* stated the magazine's purpose clearly:

> Neglected, slighted, misrepresented, evangelical Christianity needs a clear voice to speak with conviction and love, and to state its true position and its relevance to the world crisis.…Through the pages of *Christianity Today* [evangelical scholars] will expound and defend the basic truths of the Christian faith in terms of reverent scholarship and of practical application to the needs of the present generation.[113]

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[109] Darren Dochuk, "Prairie Fire: The New Evangelicalism and the Politics of Oil, Money, and Moral Geography," in *American Evangelicals and the 1960s*, ed. Axel R. Schäfer (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2013), 46–47.

[110] Schäfer, *Countercultural Conservatives*, 52–53.

[111] Coffman, *The* Christian Century *and the Rise of Mainline Protestantism*, 186.

[112] Hans Krabbendam, "'The Harvest Is Ripe': American Evangelicals in European Missions, 1950-1980," in *American Evangelicals and the 1960s*, ed. Axel R. Schäfer (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2013), 243.

[113] Frank E. Gaebelein, ed., *A* Christianity Today *Reader* (New York: Meredith Press, 1967), 1.

The magazine's editors wanted to preserve the conservative theology inherited from fundamentalism, while also bringing conservative Christianity back into cultural relevance. Thus, *Christianity Today* was not a fundamentalist publication, but rather a neo-evangelical one.[114] In a 1960 article, Ockenga argued for the uniqueness of the evangelical position: it must be differentiated from Catholicism, liberal Christianity, and also fundamentalism "in areas of intellectual and ecclesiastical attitude."[115] The evangelical goal that Ockenga articulated in his article could easily be seen as an objective for *Christianity Today* as a whole: "to retrieve Christianity from a mere eddy of the main stream into the full current of modern life."[116] Thus, *Christianity Today* is a natural expression of the cultural turn of the larger evangelical movement.

Not only did *Christianity Today* distance itself from fundamentalism, but also it was distinct from liberal and mainstream Christianity. It insisted that its theological values remained the same as those of the fundamentalists, and that it was merely its cultural approach that had shifted. Thus, it was not in alignment with the vein of mainstream theological thought represented by the *Christian Century*. On the contrary, *Christianity Today* "began self-consciously as a competitor to the liberal *Christian Century*."[117] The two publications were at times at odds on theological, social, and

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[114] Schäfer, *Countercultural Conservatives*, 43, 53.

[115] Harold John Ockenga, "Resurgent Evangelical Leadership," *Christianity Today*, October 10, 1960, 12.

[116] Ibid., 14.

[117] George M. Marsden, ed., *Evangelicalism and Modern America* (Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans, 1984), 48.

political issues, and did not refrain from mentioning each other in articles and editorials. Both were admittedly still Christian and Protestant publications, and so did share issues in common at times, along with some basic beliefs; however, they can in general be classified as competitors, which is why a careful study of each is valuable. *Christianity Today* was specifically evangelical, while the *Christian Century* was broadly mainline Protestant (though this differentiation in terminology took time to solidify).[118] Accordingly, their divergent theological commitments affected their cultural interactions.

Like the *Century*, *Christianity Today* consciously attempted to engage with secular culture. The exact nature of this interaction was at times varied. It is important to note that while the magazine commented on culture, this did not mean that it embraced popular culture entirely; indeed, oftentimes the interaction was a prophetic condemnation of morally reprehensible elements. It was crucial to *Christianity Today* that evangelicalism retain its distinctive stance. Yet, the engagement continued, and the magazine was generally supportive of Christian involvement in secular culture, if at least for the purpose of evangelism. Initially, much of the cultural commentary focused on what would be termed the fine arts: painting, music, drama, and literature.[119] Some early articles praise artistic expression for its own sake, and its ability to express human, along with Christian, concerns.[120] In regard to film and television, the perspective was a bit more nuanced. Concerns over immorality depicted on the screen were certainly present in

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[118] Coffman, *The* Christian Century *and the Rise of Mainline Protestantism*, 203.

[119] Cynthia Pearl Maus, "Fine Arts and Christian Education," *Christianity Today*, August 29, 1960, 9–10.

[120] Thomas Howard, "Arts and Religion: They Need Not Clash," *Christianity Today*, January 21, 1966.

the material; yet, one article also insisted that "[films] are not inherently evil" but neutral instead, and other articles covered events such as a meeting of the "Fellowship of Christians in the Arts, Media, and Entertainment" and the establishment of a "Cinema Institute…to enable Christians to broaden their understanding and sharpen their skills in films and television."[121] By 1971, one article went so far as to recommend that pastors be somewhat versed in popular culture in order to better relate to their congregations and confront the negative aspects of that culture.[122] In sum, *Christianity Today* tended to approach popular culture from an open but reserved perspective: it was willing to acknowledge the impact and potential of cultural forms of expression, but also it wanted its readers to remain untainted by the negative aspects within secular culture.

Early editions of *Christianity Today* interspersed cultural commentaries throughout the articles or under "News" sections; eventually, however, the magazine created a dedicated column intended for cultural analysis. Under the title "The Refiner's Fire," the column first ran on March 16, 1973. The inaugural version of the column included a defense of its own existence: "Values for living are put forward and discussed not so much in academic treatises as in the creative arts, including drama, music, literature, and the visual arts, all of which have been dealing in religious dimensions more overtly of late."[123] Readers' responses to the announcement of the new feature were

[121] J. Melville White, "The Motion Picture: Friend or Foe?," *Christianity Today*, July 22, 1966, 10; Robert L. Cleath, "Penetrating the Media Through Christian Art," *Christianity Today*, December 19, 1969; "Religion in Transit," *Christianity Today*, November 6, 1970.

[122] Calvin Miller, "The Pastor as Cultural Apologist," *Christianity Today*, January 29, 1971.

[123] "The Refiner's Fire," *Christianity Today*, March 16, 1973.

positive, and they expressed hope that the serious engagement with the arts would continue.[124] The column was initially intended to run in every other issue, but in a little over a year it started to run in nearly every copy of *Christianity Today*. Topics covered included literature, poetry, music, film, art, and more. Initial discussions of film and television were limited, and mainly covered productions by evangelicals; it was not until the latter half of the 1970s that serious commentary on secular film and television became common. Still, the discussion had begun, and the act of commentary itself was a form of serious engagement with popular culture.

This is not to say that the dispute within *Christianity Today* on the merits and detriments of television and film had ended by the initiation of "The Refiner's Fire." On the contrary, like the larger relationship of the magazine with secular culture, the perspectives expressed in this area are complicated. Some articles produced during the 1960s and 1970s pointed to positive aspects of engaging with the secular media. A number of different responses to television and media were discussed in *Christianity Today*. Perhaps the most extreme response that received coverage was the boycott approach. The magazine covered more than one instance of a church destroying TV sets, and multiple articles argued that Christians would be better off without television.[125] A slightly different approach pushed not just for self-selection on the part of Christians but also for changes in censorship and morality guidelines from the stations, and articles

[124] Roland Mushat Frye and William F. Willoughby, "Eutychus and His Kin: Toward Better Shape," *Christianity Today*, April 13, 1973, 17.

[125] "Plastic Gods and Robot Men," *Christianity Today*, December 7, 1962, 24; "Burning the Box," *Christianity Today*, December 6, 1974; "How to Cope with Television," *Christianity Today*, April 21, 1978, 27.

urged believers to voice their opinions to the stations and to their elected representatives.[126] Yet another approach to interaction with the media argued that the media could be changed from within by creating alternative Christian productions.[127] Others argued that at the very least, a serious Christian critique could be given on secular programs and shows so that they were no longer isolated from a religious dialogue.[128] Finally, on the opposite end of the spectrum from the boycott stance, a few articles brought up the good programs in TV, such as documentaries and educational programs.[129] All in all, the perspective on film and television in *Christianity Today* was mixed: the articles presented some benefits, many dangers, and a plethora of possible responses.

To be sure, there were a good deal of negative reactions to secular media. The typical concerns of sex and violence came up often in the articles. A review of the 1961 Oscars noted heavy themes of sexual immorality.[130] Discussions of the prominence of pornographic films were very common throughout the time period studied. The debate over what constitutes realistic versus excessive violence was also covered, with one

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[126] "Memo to Networks: 'Clean Up TV!,'" *Christianity Today*, December 30, 1977; "Television: Checking Our Stewardship," *Christianity Today*, April 1, 1977.

[127] "TV: The Churches' Lament," *Christianity Today*, September 29, 1967; "Television: Checking Our Stewardship."

[128] "Talking Back to the TV," *Christianity Today*, August 25, 1972; Carol Prester McFadden, "Film: Fragments of Reality," *Christianity Today*, November 5, 1976.

[129] "Boycott of Television?," *Christianity Today*, November 24, 1961; Carl F. H. Henry, "Where Is Television Going?," *Christianity Today*, October 11, 1974, 43.

[130] "Sex and the Oscars," *Christianity Today*, May 8, 1961.

article arguing that the best response option was simply to turn off the TV entirely.[131] As in the *Christian Century*, the negative effect of the media upon childhood development and family values was also emphasized. In addition to the concern about violence and the secular worldview media presented, *Christianity Today* discussed the "stagnating" effect of television upon family life: parents become lazy, allowing television to take over the role of shaping their children's values.[132] In response to these pitfalls in the media, once more the magazine represented a variety of responses. The option of boycotting secular media altogether was present, but also the development of discernment and of a distinct evangelical voice received attention: "Christians need help in choosing the programs they watch….They need to cultivate judgment on what to make of the view of reality presented."[133]

However, the other side of the media debate, the side that saw the positive aspects of film and television, was also well-represented in *Christianity Today*. Although evaluations of films simply based on entertainment value were few and far between, and analyses of secular films and television programs are less common than in the *Christian Century*, *Christianity Today* had its own perspective on what it saw as the benefits of film. Primarily, positive evaluations focused on the fact that film and television are not inherently evil but rather morally neutral, and thus can be turned toward good ends and even used for evangelism. The magazine discussed visual media in general as pertaining

[131] "The Guns of August," *Christianity Today*, August 16, 1968; "For Better TV," *Christianity Today*, May 9, 1975.

[132] Kevin Perrotta, "Watching While Life Goes By," *Christianity Today*, April 18, 1980, 17.

[133] Ibid., 19.

to evangelism since its early days: digital curricula, audio-visual teaching aids, and filmstrips were advertised as useful tools for enhancing the Sunday School experience and evangelistic opportunities.[134] Continuing upon the tradition started by fundamentalist preachers, evangelicals also embraced the opportunity to use technological advances for mass evangelism on radio and television.[135] The need to increase the exposure of evangelical preaching and broadcasting on primetime television was a prevalent theme up through the 1970s.[136] Moreover, it was not just the small screen that was seen as a method for evangelism, but also the big screen. Countless religious and evangelical films were advertised and analyzed in *Christianity Today* during this time, more than space here allows for. A few of the more commonly-mentioned ones were *The Greatest Story Ever Told* (1965), *The Restless Ones* (1965), and *Jesus Christ: Superstar* (1973).[137] Toward the latter half of the 1970s, Francis Schaeffer also began to use films to present evangelical Christianity as a viable alternative to the secular world.[138] So clearly, it was

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[134] James K. Friedrich, "Teaching Can Be Pleasure," *Christianity Today*, February 27, 1961.

[135] "The Gospel in Orbit," *Christianity Today*, February 15, 1963.

[136] "What Hope for Religion on TV?," *Christianity Today*, October 14, 1966; Clarence W. Jones, "Television Airwaves- Evangelism's Frontier," *Christianity Today*, September 13, 1968; "Getting Time on the Tube," *Christianity Today*, May 7, 1976.

[137] Harold Lindsell, "*The Greatest Story Ever Told*," *Christianity Today*, February 26, 1965; Cheryl Forbes, "Film Evangelism: A Time to Change," *Christianity Today*, March 16, 1973; Cheryl Forbes, "Box-Office Religion," *Christianity Today*, August 27, 1971.

[138] Francis Schaeffer, "How Then Should We Live?: An Interview with Francis Schaeffer," *Christianity Today*, October 8, 1976.

not the dominant perspective in *Christianity Today* that all uses of film and television were entirely negative.

It still remains to be seen what sort of perspective *Christianity Today* took toward the genre of film and television that is the focus of this project: science fiction. Did the magazine view sci-fi as representative of a degraded modern world, or, like the *Christian Century*, did it find moral values within sci-fi that could coexist with Christian ones? Unfortunately, there is simply not as much material on the genre of science fiction in *Christianity Today* as there is in the *Christian Century*. Mentions, and especially deep criticisms, of specific secular productions as a whole were limited throughout the 1960s, and this holds true for sci-fi. *Our Man Flint,* a science fiction/spy movie mentioned in the previous chapter, received a sizable article relating some of the sci-fi elements to theological claims, and several later articles referenced *2001: A Space Odyssey*, produced in 1968, but beyond that, treatment of the genre is notably absent.[139] It is not until the mid 1970s that commentary on sci-fi films really began to pick up, and after that point, *Christianity Today* covered the highlights of the genre. In general, some entertainment-based commentary was given, but discussion tended to center more on the moral and theological aspects of the works under consideration. To examine the specifics of the analyses, this chapter will turn next to look at three examples that receive especially heavy treatment: *Star Trek*, *Star Wars*, and *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*.

The first serious treatment of sci-fi film and television occurred in "The Refiner's Fire." This article treated, among other sci-fi books and productions, the serialized

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[139] John Warwick Montgomery, "Cryonics and Orthodoxy," *Christianity Today*, May 10, 1968.

television version of *Star Trek*. The article was obviously aimed at a demographic unfamiliar with science fiction, as it first set out to define the boundaries and norms of genre, describing it as "technological fantasy."[140] It classified *Star Trek* as one of the more prominent examples of sci-fi at the time, due to its large fan base. As far as commentary on the content of the show goes, the article mentioned a specific episode ("Bread and Circuses") based on an Ancient Rome-like society on another planet, and related themes from that episode to the broader Christian context: "if there are other fallen civilizations, would God become incarnate for them? Or is his dealing with the human race unique?"[141] So, although the article went on to argue that science fiction in general tends to leave religion out or be negative to it, it did present *Star Trek* as dealing interestingly with the topic of religion. Other analyses of *Star Trek* in *Christianity Today* were not quite so favorable to the program. A review of *Star Wars* referenced the *Star Trek* television show as a limited version of sci-fi: "As science fiction became known to a wider public, it was in the form of debased imitations such as *Star Trek*. As a result many who noticed the genre for the first time remained ignorant of the philosophical, ethical, and even spiritual seriousness characteristic of so many of the best SF writers."[142] It seems that the writer of this second article placed *Star Trek* in the same category as the writer of the first article placed the majority of science fiction shows: that of being

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[140] John Vernon Lawing, "Sniffing Out Science Fiction," *Christianity Today*, February 27, 1976, 18.

[141] Ralph Senesky, "Bread and Circuses," *Star Trek* (Paramount Television, 1968); Lawing, "Sniffing Out Science Fiction," 20.

[142] Harold O. J. Brown, "*Star Wars*- Space Gondoliers," *Christianity Today*, September 23, 1977, 28.

theologically lacking. Both, however, demonstrated a tendency to analyze in terms of religious value rather than artistic merit, and both took seriously the notion that sci-fi can deal with religious themes.

The next franchise that received major attention in *Christianity Today* is *Star Wars*. In this case, there was much more space devoted to in-depth theological analysis of the films. Like the analyses in the *Christian Century*, the review of *Star Wars* that first appeared in *Christianity Today* centered around the dichotomy of good and evil presented in the film: “The idea in the *Star Wars* plot is epic, the struggle of good and evil with religious overtones on a cosmic scale.”[143] The article saw the concepts in the film as slightly simplistic, but as having hope for future improvement and expansion. Interestingly, the readers’ responses were even more strongly worded. One reader wrote to the magazine, “I see the movie much as I see the Bible, good versus evil; a continuing battle from Genesis to Revelation, where at last evil is conquered.”[144] Another reader in the same response section saw the theological implications of the film as dangerous because it represented the modern world’s turn to science as an ultimate source of knowledge: “Science fiction is without a doubt the modern mythology of our modern Babylonian tower building.”[145] Both, however, saw the religious overtones referenced in the initial article as clearly present in the film. Likewise, the review given of the second film in the *Star Wars* franchise, *The Empire Strikes Back*, drew parallels between

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[143] Ibid., 29.

[144] Paula L. Jones, Gene B. Crum, and Woodrow Nichols, “Eutychus and His Kin: That Old, Old War,” *Christianity Today*, November 4, 1977, 6.

[145] Ibid., 7.

religious themes in *Star Wars* and in Christianity. It did not argue that the concepts line up precisely with the themes of orthodox Christianity, but it did see *Star Wars* as valuable in that it introduces the themes that can lead to evangelical conversations: "Lucas says the choices we make in everyday life matter. It remains for the Christian to say why."[146] In sum, the reviews in *Christianity Today* did not treat *Star Wars* as a theological guide, but they did see it as presenting important theological issues.

The final example, *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*, also received significant treatment in *Christianity Today*. Reviewers saw the Steven Spielberg film as also imbued with religious themes, though perhaps in not quite such a positive sense. The reviewer—the same writer who penned the initial review of *Star Wars*—warned against "an openness to non-specific, contentless mysticism" that he believed the film demonstrates.[147] The review also dealt with some of the artistic merits (or lack thereof) in the film, arguing that there are some leaps in the storytelling and that the film is a poor example of science fiction. Insofar as it dealt with religious and spiritual matters, *Close Encounters* is interesting, but it must not be taken as a guide for humanity; it is a "symptom" and not a "cure" of the modern age.[148] Another writer took a similar perspective, seeing the film as reflecting religious themes within a secular context. The film gives "an offer of a secular experience of transcendence" that draws on religious

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[146] David Singer, "*The Empire*: A 'Force' That Fails to Fill the Void," *Christianity Today*, September 19, 1980, 29.

[147] Harold O. J. Brown, "Fantasy of Alien Good: *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*," *Christianity Today*, 1978, 46.

[148] Ibid., 48.

imagery but that must ultimately be countered by grounded Christian truth.[149] Each author had a slightly different emphasis, but both saw *Close Encounters* as a part of a theological discourse that revealed a longing for the supernatural in human nature, but as a message that needed to be confronted by evangelical beliefs about the ultimate supernatural Being.

Even beyond the discussion of specific films and programs, *Christianity Today* began to comment on the genre of science fiction as a whole, as theologically and philosophically valuable. Although not as laudatory toward the genre as the *Christian Century*, *Christianity Today* was willing to engage the themes it brought up. Primarily, science fiction reveals what is lacking in humanity, and demonstrates the basic existence of sin and the yearning for God.[150] Interestingly, evangelical theology, with its convictions about human corruption, perhaps played some role in the magazine's interpretation of science fiction's vision: whereas the *Century* positioned sci-fi as an example of a modern future that preserves a place for human goodness, *Christianity Today* was more inclined see the genre as presenting fallen human nature and the precariousness of the modern world: "The sci-fi film asks whether the knowledge gained in science is worth the risk of misfortune."[151] Despite its hesitancy to accept the sci-fi vision of the world as the ideal one, *Christianity Today* still did not dismiss the

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[149] John R. Stott, "Transcendence: Now a Secular Quest," *Christianity Today*, March 23, 1979, 36.

[150] Lawing, "Sniffing Out Science Fiction," 20; Brown, "Fantasy of Alien Good: *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*," 46.

[151] Paul Leggett, "Science Fiction Films: A Cast of Metaphysical Characters," *Christianity Today*, March 21, 1980, 32.

importance of the genre. Rather, it saw sci-fi as a valuable cultural expression that must be met with serious dialogue. *Christianity Today* recognized "sci-fi film's role as a cultural barometer, reflecting our changing view of ourselves and our varying perceptions of the cosmic order of things" and called for a "serious response from those of us who find both identity and hope for the future in Jesus Christ."[152] In its dealings with sci-fi, *Christianity Today* fulfilled its broader cultural goal: it engaged with the genre, while maintaining its distinctively evangelical convictions.

In summary, two trends emerge from the analysis of these reviews and others. First, the sheer volume of commentaries increased over time. With the origination of "The Refiner's Fire," film commentary in general went up, and within a couple of years, commentary on sci-fi in particular had also risen. Evangelicals were no longer just reading about evangelical films, but they were beginning also to interact with secular ones in a constructive manner. It appears that the boycott strategy had fallen behind an approach that encouraged engagement, at least within the context of the magazine's responses, if not the broader evangelical context. Second, when *Christianity Today* engaged with a science fiction film, it tended to prioritize theological discussion over entertainment-based commentary, although this latter component was not entirely absent. One reader in fact went so far as to complain, writing that the reviewers should just let the film in question, *Close Encounters*, stand as good entertainment.[153] Clearly, the magazine tended to take science fiction programs and films at more than just face value.

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[152] Leggett, "Science Fiction Films: A Cast of Metaphysical Characters."

[153] Woodrow Nichols, Lawrence E. Schanz, and Duane L. Burgess, "Eutychus and His Kin: Close Encounter of the Right Kind," *Christianity Today*, April 21, 1978, 5.

Some reviewers saw some franchises as making more significant claims than others; however, in all of the commentaries, religious themes came up in some way. The magazine seized upon the large-scale claims that *Star Trek*, *Star Wars*, *Close Encounters*, and others were making, and put those themes within the context of a religious discussion for its readers to better digest.

Science fiction films and television touch on spiritual themes and enter into religious debates; in turn, *Christianity Today* entered into secular discourse in order to continue those debates. Although treatment of science fiction was not so ubiquitous as in the *Christian Century*, it was both present and serious within *Christianity Today*. The magazine did not take science fiction as an unmixed good, nor did it embrace the religious components of the genre quite so unreservedly as its competitor. Because *Christianity Today* was still theologically conservative, it had a different vision of human nature and thus of humanity's potential: there was still too much wrong with humanity for science fiction alone to solve. However, the magazine did not condemn the genre, but rather openly engaged it in theological commentaries where the opportunity was presented. Although *Christianity Today* did not see science fiction as theologically ideal, it did see it as presenting an opportunity for culturally relevant theological discussion, within an evangelical context and with an evangelistic goal.

CONCLUSION

This project has explored the interactions of evangelical Christianity and of mainline Protestantism with science fiction film and television. Of course, reviewers even within a publication may differ at times on exactly how a film or program should be interpreted. But, the general trend that can be seen here is that there was engagement, it was often positive—though to differing degrees from the evangelicals and the mainline—and that theology matters in how one approaches popular culture. Especially given the context of the time period in question and the tensions with a rapidly technologically-progressing world that emerged during it, science fiction, along with the reactions it inspired, is an especially fruitful area in which to examine this cultural interaction. As thoroughly as possible, this project has attempted to argue that through these specific interactions of evangelicalism and the mainline with science fiction, one can see the broader trends of how the two movements approached popular culture, and to what extent they believed secular answers to the world's problems were valid. Science fiction offers a window into broader styles of cultural interaction.

The two publications, the *Christian Century* and *Christianity Today*, treated science fiction film and television in similar but distinct ways. The *Century* critiqued the programs and movies from an entertainment-driven standpoint, while also elaborating on themes of morality, futuristic hope, and the perseverance of themes of good and evil. Where comparisons to Christianity and its doctrines could be made, the magazine was willing to do so; overall, however, it tended to generalize the doctrinal specifics. The

main tone of the *Century*'s criticism of science fiction was positive, with most of the criticism being artistic with a small portion of morality complaints. *Christianity Today* should not be considered as an opposite of the *Century* in its criticism. It was not overwhelmingly negative toward the genre, and was in fact willing to likewise engage positively. However, the criticism it did offer was more theologically-driven. *Christianity Today* expressed more concern over the specific theology being communicated through science fiction, and the false hopes it might inspire in a redeemed future apart from Christ's salvation. *Christianity Today* was willing to engage science fiction productions in a serious conversation, but it accepted them only with reservations.

Perhaps this difference in approach was partially due to different theological commitments. Evangelicals held a more thoroughgoing view of the depravity of human nature. They believed that the primary concern of the Christian should be to work towards the salvation of souls, not society, since society was fallen (though, this belief was increasingly tempered with the willingness to also engage in some social reform and in political affairs). Science fiction offered a way forward for society, but did not always accurately pinpoint the problem with the soul. Thus, *Christianity Today* tended to criticize the theological expressions in science fiction that it found dangerous, arguing that orthodox theology must still be maintained. However, as a part of its willingness to also dialogue with secular culture, *Christianity Today* still appreciated some of the good in science fiction. It simply did not embrace the genre as wholeheartedly as the *Christian Century*, which viewed it in more theologically general terms. The *Century*, coming from the perspective of the Protestant mainline, had a more optimistic view of humanity,

derived partially from its eschatological perspective, that caused it to see science fiction's projection of the future in a more positive light.

This study is relevant because it provides an example of one specific way in which evangelicals and their mainline counterparts approached secular culture. The examination of science fiction film and television and the responses to these fits within the larger narrative of evangelical cultural engagement. This study demonstrates one specific way in which evangelicals reached in to culture: not only did they interact with culture on specifically theological or missional discussions, but also they dialogued about themes in popular culture, either that evangelical congregants would encounter, or that could be used to lead to doctrinal conversations. Although evangelicals, and also the mainline, retained some reservations about possible morality concerns in film and television, this did not lead to a complete rejection of all content. Where the content was positive or at least theologically interesting, both movements were willing to engage. They may have differed in exact perspective on the value of science fiction productions, but each was at the very least open to engaging the genre in a serious dialogue, for the benefit of their readers.

Because this interaction with popular culture is such an interesting dynamic, there are areas in which this study could be expanded through further research. First, going through smaller publications other than the two main ones treated would have been beyond this project's scope; however, a more in-depth treatment of the interaction between either evangelicals or the mainline and science fiction film and television could incorporate any of the other dozens of religious publications circulated at the time. These may or may not contain treatments of science fiction which could add nuance to this

study. It would be interesting to see if any denominational publications included reviews or articles on the genre, and if the differing theological commitments of the various denominations impacted the degree of openness to positive engagement. Second, there was also mention in both the *Christian Century* and *Christianity Today* of written works of science fiction. A study could look beyond the film expressions of the genre and compare these to sci-fi literature and the accompanying reactions. Third, but also related to this second point, a study could look at how the publications treated C. S. Lewis. Lewis was a Christian and received frequent mention, not only as a fantasy writer but also as a sci-fi one.[154] A study could be done comparing the magazines' treatment of secular science fiction with that produced from a Christian perspective. In sum, there is plenty of room for further exploration of evangelical or even mainline approaches to popular culture within these and related realms, that would provide more nuance and examples of how evangelical openness toward cultural interaction played out.

Throughout the course of this project, science fiction film and television have served to highlight the ways in which evangelicals and their mainline counterparts in the 1960s and 1970s understood the world around them. It was a world dominated by secular culture, that could either be resisted like the fundamentalists did, embraced like liberal veins of Christianity did, or engaged by thoughtful critique. Evangelicals opted for this latter approach. Science fiction was not all good, but neither was it all bad. With practice and guidance, the ordinary reader could be led toward sound distinctions. Science fiction, regardless of the accuracy of the theological claims it made in the perspective of

[154] Lawing, "Sniffing Out Science Fiction," 20; John W. Duddington, "The Red Herring of a Three-Story Universe," *Christianity Today*, November 5, 1971; Chad Walsh, "The Literary Stature of C. S. Lewis," *Christianity Today*, June 8, 1979.

Christianity Today, at minimum raised interesting ones. These claims could be, and often were, challenged, at least within *Christianity Today*. But they could also be used to draw parallels to Christian commitments, to highlight the tendencies of the modern world, or to spark a dialogue about religious or scientific concerns, if the content of the program was intellectually deep enough. By not rejecting science fiction film and television entirely, but rather taking a discerning approach to it, evangelicals demonstrated their desire to engage with popular culture in more relevant ways, without abandoning their theological commitments.

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