

And that word is "Doctor":
Doctor Who and the Contemporary Vocabulary of Christian Humanism
Sarah E. Katka, Mid-America Popular Culture Association Conference, 10/12/12

In the Dr. Who episode "The Last of the Time Lords," Martha Jones declares, "I traveled across the world, from the ruins of New York to the fusion mills of China. Right across the radiation pits of Europe. And everywhere I went, I saw people just like you, living as slaves. But if Martha Jones became a legend, then that's wrong because my name isn't important. There's someone else. The man who sent me out there, the man who told me to walk the Earth. And his name is the Doctor. He has saved your lives so many times and you never even knew he was there. He never stops, he never stays, he never asks to be thanked. But I've seen him, I know him, I love him. And I know what he can do."

I am not the first to remark upon the messianic overtones/undertones of the new Doctor Who television series. In fact, in 2008 the Church of England recognized these themes and held a conference introducing its vicars to the series as a means to engage with their younger parishioners through interaction with contemporary culture. So this paper is not intended to unveil a wildly brilliant new theory, but rather it will investigate how a very old idea, Christian humanism, has found utterance in something new, the new Doctor Who series. This paper will also explore the implications of this old idea in new clothing for the continuing discourse between the arts and religion, between Christianity and culture. For the purposes of this paper I am confining my investigation to the new television series only.

In the preface to *Readings in Christian Humanism* Martin E. Marty defines Christian Humanism as "the interest in human persons and the positive affirmation of human life and culture which stems from the Christian faith" (Marty, 23). In other words, Christian humanism -- which acknowledges its impulses and archetypes come from Christian tradition -- gives great worth to humanity because of its theology. Dinesh D'Souza discusses the implications of Christian Humanism, without using the term, in his book *What's So Great About Christianity?* He approaches the topic in two ways. First, D'Souza claims Christian theology affirms the value of human life. "The preciousness and equal worth of every human life is a Christian idea. Christians have always believed that God places infinite value on each human life He creates and that He loves each person equally" (68). D'Souza's second tenant is that Christianity reinforces the value of normal, seemingly unremarkable people. "This is what the philosopher Charles Taylor calls the 'affirmation of ordinary life.' It is the simple idea that ordinary people are fallible, and yet these fallible people matter. . . our culture's high emphasis on the relief of suffering . . . derive[s] from this basic Christian understanding of the dignity of fallible human beings" (55). This understanding of the intrinsic worth of human life is the foundation and center of Christian humanism. And I believe it also the center of the best of Doctor Who.

There are several other theological issue which undergird Christian humanism. The first is the work of Christ as evidenced by the Incarnation (the act in which Jesus, the Son of God, took on the nature and physical body of a human being and was born and lived among humankind). Martin Marty summarizes this doctrine.

Christian humanism takes its starting point, not within the human situation as such, but within the fact of divine activity extended toward the human race in Jesus. The next implication for Christian humanism is that God has committed himself to the good of humankind in the most complete and radical way imaginable: He has come to the human family in the person of his own Son, Jesus of Nazareth, an authentic human person" (Marty, 25).

To put it in more mythological terms, but terms which perhaps communicate with more effectiveness, a god leaves behind the trappings of godhood to live and die as one of his own mortal creations. It is almost unthinkable, but the Incarnation is an essential component of Christian humanism.

Another theological construct underpinning Christian humanism is that of the indwelling and ongoing work of the Holy Spirit. This particular doctrine is often overlooked in the formulation of Christian Humanism because far too often being spiritual is conflated with being less physical -- and clearly humanity is inseparable from physicality. Christian humanism does not deny the necessity and beauty of the physical but it also insists that however inseparable

humanity is from the physical it is equally inseparable from the Spiritual - a separation many theories seem too eager to make. Steven Guthrie makes a strong argument for this connection between Spirit and humanity in his book *Creator Spirit: The Holy Spirit and the Art of Becoming Human*. "The spiritual is not opposed to the human. Quite the opposite. There is in fact a deep and intimate connection between *Spirit*-uality (the work of God's Holy Spirit) and our own deepest and truest humanity. We might even say that the Holy Spirit is the *humanizing* Spirit, the breath of God that transforms dust into living soul" (Guthrie, 34-5). Guthrie's work serves to recover the old adage, "I'm only human." We are not most human when failing, but we are most human when succeeding, when doing good, when overcoming. Spirituality does not undermine our humanity rather it enhances and enriches it.

These three concepts -- the worth of every human life, the importance of the Incarnation of Christ, and the impact of the continuing work of the Holy Spirit -- provide a working vocabulary with which to discuss representations of Christian humanism. While I would love to revel in all the different ways in which this idea is evidenced in Doctor Who, I will for sake of time confine this discussion to one episode (though I don't promise not to mention others). The episode "Turn Left" is, I think, particularly fruitful for this discussion.

In the true spirit of Doctor Who I must, before I go much farther, say, "Spoilers"! If you haven't watched "Turn Left," well, I am about to shamelessly reveal all the good bits. "Turn Left," the eleventh episode of season four, features Catherine Tate as Donna Noble and David Tennant as Doctor Who. Actress Billie Piper makes a guest re-appearance as Rose Tyler.

In the episode "Turn Left" Donna becomes host to a bug-like alien that attaches itself to her back. The alien, as Rose says, "Feeds off time. By - by changing time, by making someone's life take a different turn, like, meetings never made... children never born... a life never loved." For Donna this change in time is the simple choice to turn right, towards a stable job and a normal life, and not left, towards the temporary job where she would eventually meet the Doctor. Donna's choice leads to series of cataclysmic events beginning with the death of the Doctor and escalating through the obliteration of London when a spaceship crashes into Buckingham palace, the upheaval of America which is decimated by Adipose (who procreate by stealing the fat of other races), the death of the Torchwood team as they save the earth from the harmful fumes released by the ATMOS devices, and finally the extinguishing of the stars. The premise being that without the Doctor there is no one left to protect the Earth from powerful, hostile alien forces. Rose Tyler is pulled from her existence in a parallel dimension to help the Donna of the new timeline realize her own importance and go back to the moment she changed time and set things right. In order to set things right the Donna of the new timeline must sacrifice her own life in order to force the original Donna to turn left.

The work of this paper is to consider what new insights might be gained if we use the ideas of Christian Humanism as a theoretical lens through which to view this episode. One profitable methodology is to view the main characters -- The Doctor, Donna, and Rose -- as archetypes.

The first and most obvious archetype is Doctor Who as Messiah -- again, this is not a new observation. The Messiah figure is a savior, the one who must sacrifice himself for the people, the one who protects the people. This is, of course, the heart and soul of the character of Dr. Who. The Doctor is the defender of the earth. He protects the inhabitants of the planet from annihilation by the Dalek, by the Cybermen, and by, my personal favorite, the Weeping Angels. But the Doctor does more than rescue humanity generally, he also is in the business of showing individual human beings that they can be better -- more. He takes Rose Tyler on a journey of transformation from shop worker content with normal life to the woman who in an act of love and compassion swallows the heart of the TARDIS and destroys the Dalek. He helps Martha move from a woman whose aspiration is to become a physician to a dynamic leader who rescues the Doctor and the human race from The Master. While on paper these sound slightly overblown, they are in practice inspirational. It is the Doctor's messianic role in the lives of individuals, more even than his role in saving the entirety of humanity (repeatedly), that opens up the conversation regarding Christian humanism. The lives of the Doctor's companions and the lives of humanity are first of all worth saving, but their worth is always both intrinsic and, yet, multiplied by the Doctor's presence. Rose Tyler speaks most directly to this. "We need the Doctor more than ever. I've - I've been pulled across from a different universe, because every single universe is in danger. It's coming, Donna. It's coming from across the stars and nothing can stop it." Rose is able to maintain this double vision -- she understands that the salvation of humankind rests on the work of the Doctor, but she finds nothing odd in the fact that she is complicit in that salvation.

In some ways then Rose Tyler becomes a type of either the Holy Spirit or the Evangelist (and in using this term I am intentionally alluding to John Bunyan's work, *Pilgrim's Progress*). It is Rose Tyler who encourages Donna to take her family out of London at Christmas in order to avoid the nuclear holocaust that levels the city. It is Rose that ultimately must convince Donna of her place within the overall plan and her importance in that plan. More importantly she must convince Donna of her right to be important. Picking up with the last quotation --

ROSE: It's coming, Donna. It's coming from across the stars and nothing can stop it.

DONNA: What is?

ROSE: The darkness.

DONNA: (frustrated) Well, what do you keep telling ME for? What am I supposed to do? I'm nothing special. I mean, I'm... I'm not, I'm nothing special, I'm a temp. I'm not even that, I'm nothing!

ROSE: Donna Noble, you're the most important woman in the whole of creation.

Rose offers Donna a different way of assessing her own self-worth. She asks Donna not to find her worth in her own ability to get a job or provide a stable life for herself or her family, but rather in the value she has intrinsically, by the value that is invested in her by the actions of others, and by her own place in a plan much larger than herself.

ROSE: He was a Time Lord. Last of his kind.

DONNA: But if he was so special, what was he doing with me?

ROSE: He thought you were brilliant.

DONNA: Don't be stupid.

ROSE: But you are! It just took the Doctor to show you that, simply by being with him. He did the same to me. To everyone he touches.

Ultimately Rose successfully convinces Donna not only of her own value, but also of the need for the intervention of the Doctor to save the world from the chaos and destruction she has experienced in the altered timeline.

This leaves the character of Donna as a type of Every(wo)man. And at this point it is impossible not to draw parallels between the structure of "Turn Left" and that of John Bunyan's classic work *The Pilgrim's Progress*. In John Bunyan's tale Pilgrim is instructed by Evangelist to flee from the City of Destruction if he wishes to get rid of the burden on his back. Pilgrim flees. He immediately faces the dangers of the Slough of Despond. His journey is not easy and he is hampered by the weight of the burden on his back. Finally Pilgrim makes it to the Cross where his burden rolls away. Free from the weight he continues his journey onwards to the Celestial City. This is, clearly, an incredibly reductive summary of *Pilgrim's Progress*. However, I think it serves to indicate the correlations between the two storylines. Donna is the Pilgrim asked to flee from the destruction of London in order to make the journey toward losing the burden on her back, literally the bug-like alien that has attached itself to her back. Her journey is marked by trouble and struggle, but the ending is glorious. Not perhaps as glorious as Bunyan's Celestial City, but still an ending full of hope and security.

Hopefully, the pattern of influence of Christian humanism is apparent. The intrinsic value of human life: Donna's "ordinary" life, the lives of every inhabitant of planet earth are found intrinsically worth rescuing. Enough so that the entirety of time and space is disrupted to do so. The influence of the Holy Spirit: Donna's humanity is invigorated by the influence of a force calling her to imagine herself as more -- calling her to do more for others. The incarnation - leading to the death of the messiah: Here is where this particular episode become complex because this motif is doubly imaged. The first iteration is in the death of the doctor who is made alive again to rescue humanity in time and space. The second iteration is Donna who is born into a second timeline and dies to reestablish the original. I think the pattern is fairly clear. And not just in this episode - consider the incarnation and "glorification" (to use a theological descriptor) of the Doctor in "Human Nature" and the "Family of Blood," the personal power Martha finds in her relationship with the Doctor in "The Sound of Drums" and "Last of the Time Lords," or the worth given to one little girl in "The Eleventh Hour" (Fish fingers and custard, anyone?). I could go on, but for sake of time I had better not.

Is simple recognition of this patterns sufficient to justify this paper? Probably not. But the recognition of a pattern does do real work in the world especially as those patterns are connected to and imbedded in stories. Stories themselves are fraught with import both personally and culturally. Stories regulate, inform, entertain, define, refine and educate us as individuals and societies.

In Winning the Story Wars: Why Those Who Tell (and Live) the Best Stories Will Rule the

Future, author Jonah Sachs says, "I began to grasp what myth experts had postulated: human beings share stories to remind each other of who they are and how they should act. The tales are deeply ingrained in our DNA, and no matter where or when you were born, certain patterns of stories will influence you enormously. When we hear stories based on these patterns, we feel more like we're remembering something forgotten than learning something new" (Sachs, 4).

Jonathan Gottschall, author of *The Storytelling Animal: How Stories Make Us Human*, agrees, "No matter how far we travel back into literary history, and no matter how deep we plunge into the jungles and badlands of world folklore, we always find the same astonishing thing: *their stories are just like ours*. There is a universal grammar in world fiction, a deep pattern of heroes confronting trouble and struggling to overcome" (55). I chose these two authors because neither has any connection to or investment in Christianity, so in terms of this argument their insights are disinterested.

Of course, religion, Christianity, is all about story - understanding, believing, and living story. Even Russell Davies, writer of many of my favorite Doctor Who episodes, and self-professed atheist, understands the profitable impulse of religious storytelling. "I think religion is a very primal instinct within humans, a very good one, a part of our imaginations" (Wynne-Jones).

Annette Simmons makes a fascinating connection between the art of storytelling and the work of faith. "Once people make your story, *their* story, you have tapped into the powerful force of faith. Future influence will require very little follow-up energy from you and may even expand as people recall and retell your story to others" (Simmons, 3). Simmons is not speaking of a religious faith. Her work is actually in building corporations through the use of story. However, I think that the parallels to spiritual faith are not inappropriate.

What Christian humanism has gained at its nexus with heroic science fiction is the ability to speak about things that are uncanny -- the tension of eternity, the necessity of a messiah, the wonder of humanity. As theology these are fraught with tension. As science fiction they are as natural as breathing. As theology they are offensive. As story they resonate "truthiness." In story forever is as normal as "happily ever after." In story we expect a rescuer-messiah -- and when he/she doesn't come we call it a tragedy one of the darkest words in our language. In story we expect the ordinary person to be able to attempt and do the extraordinary. In stories it's easy - in theology it's hard. And of course, the writers of Doctor Who are not the first to recognize these benefits -- C.S. Lewis, J.R.R. Tolkien, Ted Dekker, and many other writers have taken advantage of this paradigm. (And I have to interject here that I think that it is interesting that in this moment we have also seen a revival of interest in both Lewis and Tolkien through the film versions of their novels.)

What the revival of the vocabulary of Christian humanism in this moment seems to indicate is that Christianity still has something to offer culture. Even Gottschall, who is openly skeptical of religion, admits that, "Even now, in this brave age of brain science and genomics, God is not dead, dying, or really even ailing. Nietzsche would be disappointed. Most of the world's people don't look up at the sky and find it -- like the poet Hart Crane -- 'ungod'" (119). And while Gottschall and many other writers would be quick to point out "the darker side of religion," Christian humanism celebrates the benefits Christianity offers. Christian humanism says we are not alone, our lives are not pointless, we are capable of great good, we are worth worrying about no matter how insignificant we might feel. In this moment of political, religious, and economic upheaval these seem like very valuable stories. And who knows, in times like these, maybe we really do need a Doctor?

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