

BOOK REVIEW

The Humanism of Doctor Who: A Critical Study in Science Fiction and Philosophy, by David Layton. McFarland & Company, 2012. 364pp, Pb. \$40.00, ISBN-13: 9780786466733; Ebook, No price given, ISBN-13: 9780786489442.

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Just after 5.00pm on Saturday November 23rd 1963, as a 12 year old boy I settled down to watch the very first episode of a new BBC science fiction serial about an old man and his three companions travelling through space and time in a battered blue police box. It was the day after President Kennedy's assassination and the shock still lingered—so much so that the BBC repeated the episode the following week.

In such circumstances did *Doctor Who* enter the popular imagination. Half a century later, the show continues to exercise a hold not just over that first generation of viewers but of their successors worldwide as they eagerly follow the Doctor's latest adventure in saving humanity.

But why does he bother? After all, although the Doctor is humanoid he is not a human being. He owes no patriotic allegiance to Earth, but is nonetheless forever intervening in godlike fashion to rescue it. The premise is that for one reason or another he shares in its *humanness* with all that implies.

In *The Humanism of Doctor Who*, David Layton, associate professor of English at DeVry University, Pomona, California, sets out to explain what this means. In a rich and accessible survey of the philosophical themes he sees as running through the series, Layton persuasively argues that the worldview of both the series and its eponymous hero is framed above all by secular humanism. It drives the Doctor's actions and motivations and leads him perennially to affirm the essential goodness of the human race despite the evidence he encounters to the contrary.

In 330 closely argued but nicely written pages, the book presents a topography of the Whovian (yes this really is the adjective) philosophical universe through an analysis of ten themes: the nature of humanism, existence, knowledge, archetypes and mythology, religion, science, good and evil, ethics, politics and justice. In each of these discussions, Layton shows how the philosophy of *Doctor Who* is predicated on a thoroughgoing humanistic understanding of the world and the universe. He demonstrates his case with numerous examples and dialogues drawn from the programme's multiple series, arguing convincingly that its humanistic assumptions have remained pretty consistent over time. His contention that this mirrors their increasing acceptance within British (Western?) society over the period is perhaps unsurprising, but nonetheless accurate.

All chapters make for an illuminating read, though with Layton's chapter on religion, I found myself agreeing and disagreeing with his conclusions at one and the same time. First, although I think he is right to see the religious stance of *Doctor Who* as "atheist with a pious relationship to the universe," I am not sure he sees that this statement creates its own inherent problem. For although it appears to eject religion by the front door in reality it simply smuggles it in through the back. After all, what is "a pious attitude to the universe" if not a quasi-religious—almost mystical—statement that undermines the kind of philosophical materialism that Layton sets out elsewhere as fundamental to humanism?

Secondly, Layton's treatment of the origins of religion, based as they are on a combination of myth and ritual, evolutionary and symbolic explanations that were popular in the early and mid-twentieth century (in turn based on nineteenth century theories), has a decidedly dated and superficial feel to it. His discussion of Freud and Jung simply add to this. In contrast to much of the book, the uncritical acceptance of this bundle of theories presents a one-sided picture that requires much sharper critical thought. As the discussion stands, it suggests that Layton has selected only those hypotheses that are sympathetic to his interpretation.

Thirdly, more positively, I think Layton offers a perceptive insight when he notes that although the humanism of the programme has been consistent in its philosophy, its treatment of religion as an existential phenomenon has undergone a shift in the post-2005 period. The "detailed critiques of faith" that were common in earlier series have given way to something a little more nuanced. Although remaining sceptical, the show's writers in the last decade have allowed a more positive role for religion as a kind of social glue, "replacing the traditional faith-reward system of religion with a

social-functional system.” (143) Whatever one may think of the adequacy of this as a theory of religion, it is at least more subtle than what went before.

My biggest criticism of Layton’s chapter on religion, however, is not so much that he treats the subject with partiality, but that he does so on the basis of a bias against religion based not on the sort of dispassionate and objective discussion he advocates as the essence of humanism but on a series of *a priori* assumptions that rule out the credibility of religion from the start. In this, *Doctor Who* simply stands proxy for Layton himself, so that in the final paragraph of the chapter the objectivist mask slips and the value-laden reality makes its appearance:

Though the program never outright attacks either any one religion or religion in general, it does repeatedly demonstrate flaws in the religious worldview. It also demonstrates that a *positive humanism*, a secular worldview based upon science, reason and the desire for truth, is a superior worldview to religion, which is based upon emotion, faith, and the desire to isolate oneself from the unknown rather than to investigate it (155, Layton’s italics).

This is a far cry from the “Critical Study” promised in the subtitle—which is a pity since there is much here that demonstrates how popular culture is always inhabited by philosophical worldviews and values whether recognized or not.