What does science fiction have in common with the Bible? More than we might expect. Both grapple with profundities. Both ask, among other key questions: How did we come to be? Where are we headed? How should we conduct ourselves? Where do we put our faith? The answers are not necessarily agreed upon, of course; two people who reference the same science-fiction saga, or cite the same biblical text, often draw very different conclusions about the meaning. That varying interpretations arise from a common source forms another link between the fields. Thus, science-fiction fandom, with its canons, debates, and conundrums, has intriguing and instructive overlaps with the domain of religion.

Lost and found?
Take Lost, the much-debated TV drama created by J. J. Abrams, Jeffrey Lieber and Damon Lindelof. Airing from 2004 to 2010, it focuses on present-day survivors of a commercial airplane crash on a remote and mysterious tropical island. The site turns out to include other human inhabitants, apparitions of dead people, a smoke monster, haunting whispers, a polar bear, and additional phantasms. These bizarre elements compel some main characters to ask, “Where are we?” Other principal players probe deeper, into the question of what the higher purpose might be of finding themselves in that unusual environment.

Matters of faith are discussed from the earliest seasons, which incorporate flashbacks and eventually flash-forwards that take place elsewhere, while the characters use rudimentary and sophisticated science, among other strategies, to deal with their plight. Religion becomes central in the final season, which hinges on “flashes
sideways” into what we at first assume to be a parallel timeline. The “flashes sideways,” however, could be called “flashes upward,” as in the series finale we ascertain that they revealed glimpses of an afterlife. Although we learn that the main characters all died at different times, they reunite in a realm formed through the strength of their emotional ties and personal bonds with one another — and subsequently gather in a religiously pluralist church there before departing into the light to find out what is next.

Depicting characters in eternity makes sense for a show that delves into the intersection and collision between science and spirituality. Indeed, the last season envisions a postmortem existence in tandem to actual lives (and several deaths). But although the ending is about as definitive as television can depict, the finale isn’t truly final. Just as with “happily ever after” stories in which the two protagonists kiss as the sun sets behind them, a nagging question may be bracketed out but still persists: And then what happened? After all, absolute outcomes are not possible in storytelling. Even in a saga that continues into an afterlife, the question of what happened next never goes away.

Reactions to the finale tell us something important about how the notion of an afterlife is perceived in our time. Viewers who consider Lost to be about ontological problems and their eventual solutions were disappointed with the loose ends. Viewers who feel the show is primarily about the characters and their relationships tended to be satisfied with the wrap-up.1 These contrasting opinions equate to two approaches to life and to religion. Some people assert that the cosmos confronts us with enigmas to solve. Other people contend that we can never figure everything out but that we can and must interrelate with fellow humans in significant ways.

It follows that the phenomenon of literalism that imbues one sort of modern-day religiosity about Lost in particular and science fiction in general. Lost, we discover, contains an illumination at the heart of the (un)earthly island. The radiance is spoken of in both scientific and spiritual terms. Does this dual assessment undergird one venerable theosophical tenet about spiritual light or reinforce them by suggesting that we can literally “see the light” if we simply find the right place to look? In other words, does Lost vindicate the person of science or the person of faith, or depict them both as partly correct and partly wrong? A case can be made for all these positions.2 And as the characters debated such matters, viewers joined in the conversation, asking their own questions and evaluating the answers provided both by the show’s writers and by one another.

**Space: the final frontier?**

The idea that gods, as well as demons, might be time travelers, or aliens, or some combination of the two, preoccupies other TV shows. In Gene Roddenberry’s 1966-69 Star Trek, in which the crew of the Starship Enterprise explores the galaxy and defends the United Federation of Planets in the future, the episode “Who Mourns for Adonais?” from the second season features the Greek god Apollo demanding worship from the voyagers. He turns out to be one of a number of aliens who visited Earth some 5,000 years earlier and formed the basis of the Greek myths.3 Numerous episodes of Doctor Who, the still-running British series created by Sydney Newman in 1963 about the titular time-traveling alien who battles evil, address similar topics. In The Myth Makers (1965), which riff on Homer’s Iliad, the Doctor and his companions are mistaken for gods and give the Greeks attacking Troy the idea of making a wooden horse and hiding inside it. In “The Daemons” (1971), the horned gods and demons that humans feared down the ages were, actually, aliens. And in “The Time Monster” (1972), the Greek god Kronos and the lost civilization of Atlantis are posited as real.4

What’s more, the 1994 movie Stargate, directed by Roland Emmerich, who cowrote the screenplay with Dean Devlin, builds on a similar premise, one that the 1997-2007 TV spinoff, Stargate SG-1, explores further. A secret military team discovers an interstellar teleportation device, revealing that the gods humans once worshiped are in fact aliens who did not merely enslave humans on Earth, but transported the chat-tel to serve them on other worlds as well.5

It’s true that many scholars deem science fiction as fundamentally opposed to religion, morphing the spiritual and supernatural into matters of science. Yet as Douglas Cowan, who specializes in religion in film, television, and popular culture at Renison University College at University of Waterloo, avers, “Often it appears as though religious sensibilities are presented as little more than straw characters in science fiction — useful for demonstrating the futility or puerility of religious beliefs, but little more. … Critics who dismiss or deride the religious elements in science fiction often do so on the basis of a very narrow definition of ‘religion,’ a superficial understanding that limits their critique in terms of both the breadth of human experience and the depth of religious commitment. The reality is that the human quest for transcendence takes an astonishing variety of forms and shows little sign of diminishing in importance anytime soon.”6 So science fiction like Star Trek, Doctor Who and Stargate gives expression to a fundamental human storytelling instinct and a desire that our myths and stories still be true in some sense, even as we recast them within the framework of modern scientific understanding. Put another way, we long for a universe filled with monsters and magic, even if we now expect them to be delivered by scientific means.

**The almighty text?**

In addition to TV and film, science-fiction literature also tackles the same ground. In the 1969 novel Behold the Man, author Michael Moorcock imagines an ill-at-ease protagonist who, discontent with his modern life, goes back to first-century Judea to look for Jesus but increasingly assumes the role himself. “Since he had never been able to bear to think that Jesus had been nothing more than a myth,” the narrator recounts, “it became a duty to himself to make Jesus a physical reality rather than the creation of a process of mythogenesis.”7 The story of Jesus turns out to be both false in some aspects and true in others, albeit accomplished by a different individual, as Moorcock contemplates whether myth creates reality or the reverse — or both, as is uniquely possible in stories featuring a vicious circle through a time-travel paradox.

In “Let’s Go to Golgotha,” a 1974 short story by Garry Kilworth, the Jesus story winds up true but with a twist. The plot envisages a future in which time travel allows tourists to visit important moments in history. A family goes to first-century Jerusalem to witness the crucifixion, being given appropriate clothing and a script to follow to blend in with the crowd. But as the new arrivals join in the call for Jesus to be crucified, they realize that all those present are likewise time-traveling tourists, with no one from the local population among them. Kilworth’s rendition of a scene from the Gospels becomes an alternative explanation,
Perhaps tongue-in-cheek, at least one New Testament passage that many historians find problematic: Jews under Roman rule demand- ing yet another of their own be executed in a horrific manner. Historians often suspect that this story has less to do with what actually happened and more to do with the aim of later Gospel authors to shift blame away from the Romans. Kilworth, then, highlights genuine inquiries about the nature of biblical stories.

Science fiction also imagines the possible future of religion, as alluded to above. Frank Herbert conceives of an intensely religious future in his *Dune* novels, whose first installment appeared in 1965. The stories follow a family fulfilling messianic roles on a distant planet thousands of years from now. *Star Trek* (in all its permutations on TV and later in novels and movies) tends to portray humanity's future as secular, with no chaplains on Starfleet vessels and no overt religiosity. Yet like *Dune* it ponders the possibility that humans (and/or other intelligent beings) could in essence become gods. If mortal beings (whether through evolutionary processes or technological interventions) develop the ability to control matter with their minds, teleport from place to place, and prolong their lives beyond the normal range, then the question arises: Will these traits meld with traditional definitions of divinity?

George Zebrowski takes this possibility to the nth degree in his 1979 science-fiction novel, *Macrolife*, an epic also set in the future. In it, all intelligences combine into one collective, which manages to survive the destruction of our universe in a "Big Crunch" and then wait expectantly, uttering hopefully, "Let there be light," as the cosmos rebounds and the process begins again. This aggregate merges with an even greater collective intelligence that had survived in a similar way through previous universes' deaths and rebirths over the epochs. Through the echo to the first chapter of Genesis, Zebrowski hints that the "God" of a universe might simply be an intelligence that emerged out of previous ones. Indeed, science fiction has always had room for natural gods: beings not independent from the universe but which become godlike (such as the foppish self-styled general Trelane in "The Squire of Gothos" in a 1967 episode of *Star Trek*) and akin to the powerful but not all-powerful entities of traditional human polytheistic religions (such as Ra of the Egyptians, himself a character in *Stargate*). In Ray Bradbury's story "The Fire Balloons," from his 1951 collection *The Illustrated Man*, human priests go to Mars to evangelize its surviving natives. But the beings have no need of the message, since they long transcended bodily existence, and, therefore, sin. In the end, the mission leader requests permission to return to learn from the spiritually evolved beings on some future occasion. If we ever encounter more advanced races in the universe, it seems inevitable, to Bradbury and others, that we will embrace their religious views as well.

**Losing belief, finding faith?**

Granted, the goal of some science fiction, no matter the genre, is escapism. But broaching sacred themes through the manipulation of time provides useful thought experiments about the nature of faith in the 21st century. What would it take to make us lose our faith? Or find faith? Or change faith?

For instance, if we went back in time to the tomb where Jesus was buried to see the biblical resurrection, what, if anything, would we make the characters' decisions and experiences in this life more or less consequential? No. In fact, one figure, granted a peek of his afterlife via exposure to a high level of electromagnetism, initially thinks that the better world he had seen made this one unimportant. But later he changes his mind. So, too, in many religious traditions today, an afterlife has been presented as a hope for the eventual accomplishment of justice and a final achievement of perfection.

Yet these pious delineations of what that existence might be trouble some philosophers and theologians in much the way that the ending of *Lost* does for its nay-sayers. For if such an after-existence represents a finality, then it would have to involve our ceasing to be the dynamic and changing entities we are now — in which case, can it really be "us" that continue to exist? And if that postmortem existence is not radically different from our own, then can it offer any sort of resolution to the aspects of our present existence that worry us?

So science fiction is a wonderful window into how humans perceive religion in the present. While some people debate the literal truth of stories about past miracles, other people regard truth as something deeper, something not susceptible to confirmation or disconfirmation as a result of new discoveries, whether derived from time travel or an archaeologist's spade. While some of us hope that a powerful entity will come along to save humanity, others of us wonder how we can rise to the challenge and attain not merely the technological capability, but also the moral excellence, to fill that role ourselves. Science fiction, then, serves as an excellent starting point for conversations about our faith in the future and about the future of our faiths.