

Galactic hopes

reviewed by [Jason Byassee](#) in the [June 26, 2013](#) issue



You are writing about *Star Trek* for a religious magazine?" My friend's question was not antireligious. He just knew that the *Star Trek* TV and film series have long been insistently nonreligious.

Part of the hope assumed in Gene Roddenberry's original campy space series was that technology and intergalactic tolerance would triumph over parochialisms such as nationalism and religion. There were holdouts, of course—the Klingons and the Romulans and other primitives opposed the UN of the 23rd century. But they could be subdued by Captain Kirk's hot-blooded American know-how, by First Officer Spock's cold-blooded Vulcan logic and by the *Enterprise's* phasers, photon torpedoes and warp speed. In the end *Star Trek* has not replaced religion, however, just repurposed it.

The opening sequence in the most recent installment, *Star Trek: Into Darkness*, proves my point about the religious importance of Trek, although it borrows more from Indiana Jones than Gene Roddenberry. A planet of primitives armed with bows and arrows is threatened by a volcano. The *Enterprise* is stopping the planet's apocalypse by using the primitives' superstition about a sacred text to lead them

away from the volcano and then stopping the volcano's eruption using "cold fusion" (the science is always pliable and nonspecific). A turn of events forces the *Enterprise* to violate the Prime Directive and reveal itself to a people who are not ready for such technology. As the opening comes to an end, the primitives have discarded their scroll in the dirt and drawn an image of the *Enterprise*. They proceed to gather around it for worship.

The film proceeds with clichéd themes. A terrorist bombing in London leads to two further terrorist attacks on Starfleet Command in San Francisco. The architect of these attacks is a genetically engineered superhuman from the past (Benedict Cumberbatch) who was once frozen with his comrades but has now resurfaced. His goal is to release his comrades and take revenge on Starfleet in a way that's more pernicious than any we could have imagined in the 1960s or in the subsequent *Star Trek* movies. Eventually, however, one bad guy winds up working against another bad guy until the *Enterprise* has been nearly destroyed multiple times and every good character beaten within an inch of his or her life or dangled from some unimaginable precipice. That's *Star Trek* boilerplate.

Still, this film exceeds the quality of many of its predecessors. It features the best of *Star Trek: The Next Generation*, with computers that are in the Apple age, wall-sized touch screens and invisible, malleable prison walls. The new cast is much prettier, younger and hipper than the original. The outfits, strangely, are more military. The action is crisper, the dialogue funnier and the metaphysical questions more substantial: In fighting terrorism do we become what we fear? Even if time is altered in some way, don't things still repeat themselves? What is more worth living and fighting for than friendship?

Into Darkness tips its hat repeatedly to the best of the *Star Trek* franchise. Producer J. J. Abrams seems to have a special soft spot for *The Wrath of Khan*, and no one can accuse him of insufficient homage to his sources. Trek nerds everywhere should celebrate: our ur-text is deferred to here and in some cases improved. "You better get down here. Better hurry," McCoy said in *Khan*; Scotty (Simon Pegg) says it now. This time no one says, "I have been and always shall be your friend." No one has to. Those of us who know the script hear it ringing in our Vulcan ears.

Into Darkness plays with questions about technology. In an especially delightful set piece, Scotty spends an entire scene communicating using a '90s-style flip phone. In one marvelous fight sequence, Uhura (Zoe Saldana) fires repeated phaser blasts into

the baddie, only to see him reel and recover. Then Spock (Zachary Quinto) decks him across the head with a chunk of metal. Old school but effective.

Into Darkness displays some advances in acting. Chekov (Anton Yelchin) is more Russian than before (I found his exaggerated accent annoying in the previous movie). Scotty is more Scottish and vastly funnier (Pegg has made his living more as a comedy actor than in sci-fi reprise). Uhura, portrayed in the '60s by a prominent African-American actress and notable for providing television's first interracial kiss, is foxier and smarter. She's also Spock's love interest, which is not an obvious feminist advance. (Does she really have to be someone's girlfriend to count?) Chris Pine's version of Kirk has all the swagger of predecessor William Shatner, but more depth and believability as a friend. Doctor McCoy (Karl Urban) is just as country as previously and, again, vastly funnier.

Chekov was significant because he was a Russian crewman during the cold war. Communications specialist Uhura was similarly a forward-thinking and edgy addition. Now it takes a historian to remember why these moves were progressive. Making actors younger, handsomer, smarter and funnier propels the action, but what future vision animates humanity now? As this film ends, the crew is embarking on its five-year mission "to explore strange new life forms, to seek out new civilizations, to boldly go where no one has gone before." But why? What do they hope to accomplish? What positive future exists other than kicking more ass, bedding foxier babes and delivering more weapons via cooler touch screens? Defeating terrorism is not enough—just as it is not enough in real life.

Secular hope has had little to work with since the collapse of communism as an alternative to the market and the market's colonization of every corner of the known galaxy. Even secular intellectuals wonder if religion is the only power left able to contest the triumph of the global market.

Those primitives worshiping from their sacred text may have been more right than they knew (though *Star Trek* doesn't think so). "It's a miracle," an officer intones after the ship is saved again despite great odds. "There are not such things," Commander Spock responds, in his funny and wise deadpan.

But the hot-blooded humans have proved him wrong again. Friendship is a miracle. So are sacrifice and a hope for a better world. These miracles tend to be intertwined; you can't have one without the others. Which makes me worry for the future of this franchise. And of our planet and our species.