

Frakking with Toasters: Human/Cylon Love in *Battlestar Galactica*

Kimberly Yost

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The *Battlestar Galactica* universe is empty. Dark. Cold. Hostile. A group of 50,000 humans travel erratically through the vacuum of space seeking a new home planet spoken of only in scripture. Their planetary system has been obliterated in a nuclear attack by the Cylon machines that are intent on hunting them to extinction. They have little food, water, medicine or weapons. The plan is to run, hide, and do what is necessary to survive as a species while clinging to the shreds of their civilization and humanity.

And so begins the science fiction television program *Battlestar Galactica* (2003-2009). In the ancient tradition of travel adventure stories, the series depicts the challenges of people in search of a way home. Although the series treats this theme literally as the humans seek the mythical planet Earth, the spiritual resonance of the program also leads to the understanding that the concept of ‘home’ may be more than just a planet with breathable air and clean water. Home can also be understood to mean the reconnection with God(s)¹. In the Judeo-Christian faith traditions, reconnecting with God, or entering the Kingdom of Heaven after corporeal death, requires salvation. This eschatological quality of the series provides a means of salvation through redemption for humans and Cylons. Redemption is gained through love. In short, the power of love becomes a catalyst for redeeming both humans and Cylons.

This section examines the depiction of “mixed” relationships between humans and Cylons in the television series *Battlestar Galactica* (2003-2009). The ethical and emotional struggles of the individuals in these complicated relationships offer a dynamic portrayal of the positive and negative consequences of love when the stakes are greatest. While the series contains an allegorical aspect to racially mixed relationships in contemporary societies, this story

¹ The primary conceit of the narrative is to depict the religious traditions of humans as pantheistic, while the Cylons are monotheistic.

convention is used in notable ways by meeting and then exceeding the socio-political implications to become a meditation on what it means to be human and the nature of love. The series accomplishes this through exploring various romantic relationships between humans and Cylons, where partners are both aware and unaware of their differences. In addition, the series challenges the reflective viewer to confront internal biases and genre expectations by using romantic relationships to develop the characterization of Cylons from ruthless, soulless enemies to essential allies in the quest for survival. The relationships of Helo and Sharon Athena, Baltar, and humans and Cylons are considered here, though viewers of the program will realize there are other characters and storylines that further demonstrate the themes of love and redemption.

An Understanding of Redemption

Deacy (2006) argues, “film studies has consistently shunned the insights and contributions made by scholars in theology, religious studies, and biblical studies [where]...the religious nature and orientation of film is substantially overlooked, if not altogether dismissed, as a viable or authoritative interpretation” (p. 149). However, there is no single lens through which to study or debate the contributions of theology and, in this particular instance, redemption within film (Deacy, 2006).

Redemption has several meanings, though Doran (2010) asserts “any articulation of redemption must remain irretrievably elemental, esthetic, dramatic, [and] ultimately narrative in form” (p. 50). The term is historically understood to mean the payment of a debt or ransom (Clark, 2003). Yet the abstraction of the word may be more easily understood as forgiveness, both given and received, that also holds a quality of “removing shame” (Clark, 2003, p. 77). Additionally, in the context of redemption and human activity, the *Biblica Judica* maintains “redemption is salvation from the states or circumstances that destroy the value of human

existence itself” (Clark, 2003, p. 76). Redemption is a process that occurs through interaction between “person and person, person and community, person and God, and a community and God” (Clark, 2003, p. 78) that moves the actors from alienation to reconciliation. Within a wholly Protestant Christian context, “redemption involves the restoration of the torn fabric of personal relationships between God and his ‘fallen’ creation” (Deacy, 2006, p. 152). It requires self-awareness, humility, and action. One cannot be passive and must pursue forgiveness by restoring relationships and being open to those serendipitous moments when debts can be forgiven.

As the pursuit of redemption requires forming or repairing personal relationships, in the bleak environment of *Battlestar Galactica* physical and emotional connections bring a small bit of comfort. Sex is depicted as romantic affection, but also as pathological womanizing, empty physical release, or enactment of fantasy. Love is represented by romantic love, parental love, filial love, self-love, civic love, and God’s love. These forms of sex and love are illustrated through the various relationships between humans and Cylons, which are complicated by partners being aware and unaware of their differences. However, the story turns away from the type of “technophobic hedonism” of past films, such as *Logan’s Run* or *The Matrix*, where humans engage in sex as an act of proclaiming their humanity (Kuhn, 1990). The Cylons of *Battlestar Galactica* are as capable of physical desire and emotional passion as the humans, which simultaneously allows for the possibility of redemption while challenging our understanding of what constitutes being human.

Particularly within the *Battlestar Galactica* universe where humans and Cylons are positioned as adversaries in a cosmological drama of redemption, the series becomes a meditation on what it means to be human. This is confounded by the Cylons’ evolution from

shiny mindless machines, commonly referred to by humans as ‘toasters’, to twelve models that look and act like humans. These Cylons have the full range of human emotions and vanities, eat, sleep, get sick, and have sexual desires. But they do not die as humans can. The humanoid Cylons have the ability to replicate themselves in the millions and when their bodies die, they can download or ‘resurrect’ themselves with their memories and personality intact into a new identical body.

The humanoid construction and ‘immortality’ of Cylons complicates our understanding of human and non-human. As Vandenberghe (2002) explains, “living bodies move by themselves and (normal) persons talk; non humans do neither. They are neither animated as incarnated souls, nor do they express themselves. They belong to another ontological region – the region of material nature, not the one of animated nature and certainly not the one of the spiritual world” (p. 53). However, he continues by stating, “if we want to correctly understand the Being of those beings, we have to ascertain the ‘conditions of possibility of those ontologies themselves’ [Heidegger, 1927] and ‘light up’ the pre-ontological ground on which the question of the essence of humans and non humans arises” (Vandenberghe, 2002, p. 53). *Battlestar Galactica* does, indeed, ‘light up’ the question of what constitutes being human and provides us with a myriad of possibilities on which to reflect upon this fundamental subject. One such possibility being that of redemption.

An important point within the construct of the redemptive process lies an implication of being bounded by time. *Battlestar Galactica* plays with this temporal theme through the oft-repeated scriptural phrase: all this has happened before and will happen again. Yet, as Clark (2003) points out, “the act of forgiving breaks fixed positions and unbreakable cycles” (p. 80). Consequently, it suggests that this Nietzschean condition of eternal recurrence as a core piece of

the story can be defeated through redemption. In addition, temporality and redemption is not progressively linear or just concerned with the present. Redemption in *Battlestar Galactica* must occur in terms of the past, present, and future in order for the cycle to be broken.

The science fiction genre is an especially appropriate mode of exploring these ideas as the genre has traditionally explored themes of technology, human nature, and displacement (Kuhn, 1990). In this particular story of apocalypse, the “imagery reflects and subverts dominant social and culture arrangements” (McMahon, 2008, p. 272). Moreover, episodic television allows time for reflection between episodes, which, as Appel (2008) notes, can “stimulate moral evaluation” (p. 64). Importantly, “SF [science fiction] television can be construed as a project of working through the ways we deal with our selves and our others” (King & Hutnyk, 2009, p. 240).

Loving the Other: Helo and Sharon Athena

As the humans prepare to battle the Cylons, newly inaugurated President Laura Roslin, previously the Secretary of Education, confronts Bill Adama, the Commander of Galactica and the fleet of passenger and cargo ships that have been gathered together, with the hard truth that the war against the Cylons is lost and the best recourse is to run and “start having babies” (*Miniseries*, 2003). However, Roslin is unaware that having babies is also the purpose of the Cylons who believe they can only reproduce with the help of humans.

The Cylon leadership, consisting of a single representative of each model, is embarking on a mission to create life by human means of sexual procreation. They have determined they cannot reproduce biologically between themselves and require male humans as partners, but success hinges on feelings of romantic love. Consequently, a Cylon female must entice a human male to fall in love with her in order to become pregnant. This storyline may sound familiar to

those who are knowledgeable about science fiction film – evil aliens mating with humans for nefarious ends. However, the Cylons are pursuing procreation because of their monotheistic faith that instructs them to be fruitful and multiply. It is their love for God that compels them. Consequently, the full arc of the story presents complex ideas about faith, survival and redemption.

To this end, on the irradiated planet Caprica, former seat of government, we witness the Cylon plan to breed with humans through the “mixed” relationship of Helo and Sharon. Karl “Helo” Agathon, a lieutenant marooned on the planet after giving up his seat on the last ship out, is found by his pilot, Sharon Valerii. Helo is unaware that Sharon is a Cylon and the woman before him is not the same Sharon he knows from Galactica. As they spend days together eluding the mechanical Cylons and trying to find a way off the planet after their ship is discovered, the relationship begins to evolve. Helo is physically attracted to Sharon, but represses his desire since he knows Sharon has been having an affair with another man that Helo respects. In many ways, Helo is the traditional illustration of the “virgin astronaut” (Sobchack, 1990) commonly found in science fiction film who functions as a stereotyped American male. He is not intended to be sexually active, and if he is, it is because he has been seduced. Indeed, Sharon is put under pressure from her fellow Cylons to succeed in the attempt to get Helo to fall in love with her so that she can conceive, and so seduces him. However, no preparations were made for the eventuality that Sharon would fall in love with Helo.

Helo soon discovers this woman he thought he knew and has grown to love is a Cylon. He has the opportunity to kill her, but cannot bring himself to do so. Seemingly, this would be too close to feeling like murder, even though she is a machine. Through the burgeoning

romantic love the couple creates, Sharon does become pregnant, betrays her Cylon minders, and escapes with Helo back to the Galactica.

Heterosexual relationships in science fiction film as Sobchack (1990) states, “are tepid – more obligatory than steamy” (p. 104) and those that deal overtly with female sexuality “generally do so outside the articulated context of human heterosexuality and within that of racial and spatial miscegenation” (p. 104). *Battlestar Galactica* walks this fine line of an erotic consensual heterosexual relationship and introduces notions of mixed race children.

Helo and Sharon marry, even though many members of the fleet shun their mixed relationship. This marriage is an important step in redemption, not only through the official legal and religious sanction of physical intimacy and legitimization of children, but also, as Ward (1998) points out “creates the temporal space and the moral field for creative interaction [where] the external covenant with God and the internal covenant of human beings with each other coexist” (p. 60). It is based on an Augustinian viewpoint, but distances the notion of sexuality and the human’s fall from grace and reintegrates sexuality within the domain of humanity (Ramsey, 2001).

Beyond her marriage to Helo, Sharon is determined to prove her loyalties are now with the humans and eventually is commissioned as a fighter pilot, just like the other Sharon, and given the call sign Athena. In effect, Sharon Athena ‘pays the debt’ of Sharon Boomer’s betrayal² by uniting with the humans and fighting against the Cylons. Still, there are many people who continue to view her suspiciously and she must work harder and take more risks than other pilots to show her commitment to the community. Sharon Athena remains an Other until

² Sharon Boomer’s betrayal is when she ‘activated’ as a Cylon agent and attempts to assassinate Commander Adama.

the community is ready for the reconciliation step and forgives her as an act of forgiving all Cylons.

After their child is born, President Roslin and Commander Adama are fearful of the implications of a hybrid child and conspire to tell Helo and Sharon their child died. Roslin hides the child within the fleet and several years pass before Helo and Sharon discover their daughter is alive. Their discovery occurs when they are told Hera has been abducted by the Cylons who want to invasively study her genetic structure as a means to create their own children. Their parental love is furiously reignited and they begin the search to retrieve their daughter. This includes a dramatic moment when Helo shoots Sharon Athena so that her body will die and be resurrected within the Cylon fleet where she can search for her daughter. Although death and resurrection is painful for Cylons, Sharon Athena's love for her child overrides these considerations and her mistaken feelings of guilt for abandoning her daughter are redeemed.

Loving the Self: Gaius Baltar

Love is a strange and wonderful thing... You'd be happy you experienced it at all. Even if it was with a machine.

Celebrity scientist. Pathological womanizer. Politician. Pariah. Prophet.

For those knowledgeable of the series, Gaius Baltar may be the first thought in a conversation about sex, love and redemption. Baltar's muse is a Model Six Cylon, recurring as a scientist and sex partner on Caprica, also known as Caprica Six later in the series; a non-corporeal fantasy vision who insists she is an angel of God sent to watch over him; a brutalized prisoner known as Gina; and Natalie, a rebel Cylon leader. Beyond these partners, Baltar also has sex with a myriad of women – too numerous and anonymous to completely list.

The Cylon Six embodies the trope of the 'blonde bombshell alien' who is sexually promiscuous, highly desirable, and ruthless. Yet this is the woman who Baltar desires and,

eventually, loves. At first, the fantasy vision Angel Six is dismissed by him as a reaction to his guilt in being responsible for giving her the defense codes in exchange for sex. He lives very much within the arena of fear and most of his decisions and actions are based on the fear that someone will discover his culpability in the attack. Nonetheless, he is able to be seduced by this hallucination and is caught in several comically awkward sexual moments by others who, of course, cannot see the woman. Angel Six is manipulative, ruthless, domineering, and coerces Baltar to say and do things for which he is not comfortable. She tells Baltar she is an angel and repeatedly voices the platitude “God is love”. Baltar comes to depend upon her, not just for fantasy sex, but also companionship and someone to listen to his musings. At first, the character gives the impression of a plot device to allow the viewer to know what’s going on inside of Baltar’s head, but Angel Six functions in larger tangible ways. She seems to have a mission to pull Baltar kicking and screaming through the cesspool of his narcissistic self-delusions to a place where he can potentially engage in an authentic mature loving relationship and gain redemption.

Baltar attempts to achieve an authentic relationship with the model six known as Gina, who was discovered to be a Cylon on the Battlestar Pegasus, imprisoned, brutalized, and raped. Baltar befriends Gina and eventually gets her out of the brig and onto a luxury ship. Gina remains traumatized by her experience and Baltar simply doesn’t have the tools to really help her – particularly when he has a preconception of who she should be, that is, his memory of Caprica Six. In her despair and rage, Gina detonates a nuclear missile that kills her and thousands of humans, but also leaves a radioactive trail for the Cylons to track the humans. The nuclear weapon came from Baltar, so once again he bears some responsibility for the imminent annihilation of the human race.

Baltar's story includes a period as the leader/prophet of a monotheistic cult, though his spirituality begins as a pretense to gain power, safety, and sex after the debacle of his presidency and his acquittal on charges of crimes against humanity. His ego is buoyed as Angel Six encourages him to "take on the old gods" at which point, he goes to the ship hold serving as the temple for the human pantheistic faith of the Lords of Kobol and destroys it. His newfound piety is questioned and he responds, "I have committed unconscionable crimes, and I have been offered one last chance at redemption, because I chose to accept my fate and not fight it anymore" (*The Road Less Traveled*, 2008). Still, it is not his fate – his future as an instrument of God – he needs to accept, but himself.

The series suggests, that for Baltar, redemption is not going to be possible through loving another person or Cylon. For Baltar, it is self-love and love of God that are key to his redemption. This is a redemption of the present. Baltar must discover the love he holds for himself as he is *now*. Self-love in this context has no overtones of narcissism, but pertains to acceptance and forgiveness. Baltar must acknowledge who he is – not the man he presents to the world. As Clark (2003) explains, "forgiveness must come out of confronting one's own feelings and belief systems. A person must let go of pride and be willing to accept the consequences of his or her actions" (p. 79).

Baltar comes full circle in his acceptance of himself, and thus, acquires redemption at the end of the story. Once the surviving humans and Cylons have found Earth, Baltar and Caprica Six bid a final farewell to their Angel doppelgangers and head toward a valley Baltar spied. In response to why there, Baltar replies that it looks like good bottom land and, with a catch in his throat, he explains, "I know a little bit about farming" (*Daybreak Part 2*, 2009). By accepting his

past, he is able to repair his relationships to himself and to God in order to project an acceptable future.

Loving the Community: Humans and Cylons

The most important actions for redeeming the past and future involve the systemic process of humans and Cylons to overcome their differences and join together to survive.

“Forgiveness is a... complicated process” (Clark, 2003, p. 78), where one must “let go of the hold one has on another person because of the debt of an offense ...Forgiveness seeks to reunite persons through overcoming personal estrangement... [and] involves the removal of barriers” (p. 78). For this, the cultivation of trust is imperative.

Removing barriers of estrangement between humans and Cylons has prompted, in effect, a civil war within the Cylon community. One faction wants to join with the humans to find Earth and survive as a species. Another group continues to hold their resentment and want to go their own way in the universe. The joining faction, which are the Cylon models who have had the most intimate relationships with humans, wants to do so because of their spiritual faith. They are determined to give Cylons a new life based on love. In essence, the Cylons who wish to align with the humans are trying to come to terms with their newly found sense of guilt for destroying the Colonial planets and killing billions of humans, as well as breaking the cycle of destruction and rebirth.

As the difficulties facing the humans grow ever more dire, a deal is struck and the humans and Cylons work together against the non-allied Cylons in the effort to find Earth. The allied Cylons help take down the resurrection ship. Cylons are now faced with the existential quality of humanity. They will die. They will not come back. As Sharon Boomer states “there is now no difference” (*Resurrection Ship, Part 2*, 2006). The Cylons are seeing their imminent

deaths as an act of faith. This is a turning point. As this barrier of difference is destroyed, humans begin to thaw toward the Cylons and trust them a bit more.

The alliance of humans and Cylons discover Earth, but it proves to be an empty rock that was nuked thousands of years ago. Everything is thrown into question. They have spent five years working toward a goal that proves to be unattainable. In fact, Baltar (in his role as religious prophet) tells his followers, “Perhaps we are not the ones who are in need of forgiveness... Perhaps it is God who should come down here and beg our forgiveness” (*A Disquiet Follows My Soul*, 2009). There is renewed bullying and marginalization of the Cylons, suicides, the crew doesn’t seem to actually be at their posts and trash is strewn through the ship. A mutiny occurs where Vice President Zarek has the government’s Quorum representatives gunned down. Galactica’s hull is discovered to be full of cracks. The stakes are getting very high and they have no place to go.

At this point, redemption must become an act of repairing the relationship of the community. Both humans and Cylons are estranged from their God(s) and each other. Survival will depend on virtuous commitment, trust, and forgiveness. Consequently, the redemptive process comes to fruition as the community gathers to battle the Cylons and reclaim Hera for the alliance of humans and Cylons. Hera is the symbol of unity and innocence that provides a catalyst for reconciliation and redemption. Roslin and Adama deeply regret their deception in proclaiming Hera dead and mobilize nearly half the remaining fleet to battle the Cylons. In doing so, Roslin and Adama seek the forgiveness of Helo and Sharon Athena and deepen the community connections that signal reconciliation within the process of redemption.

Not surprisingly, Baltar still has difficulty coming to terms with who he is and Apollo’s suggestion that Baltar has never done anything altruistic may be his motivation for joining the

crew going to retrieve Hera. Perhaps, this is his destiny as the Angel Six has repeatedly stated he is the protector of the child. Or perhaps he hopes to die in the battle which would negate having to come to terms with his actions. Notably, it should be difficult for Baltar to know who he is. He is the son of a farmer and distanced himself from that heritage to the extent that he moved to a different planet and taught himself to speak with a different accent. Certainly as a scientist, the irrationality of a God(s) was not something he seemed prepared to accept. But Baltar has taken a weird and wonderful journey across great distances of his soul. His redemption is encapsulated in a speech to Cavil, the leader of the non-allied Cylons, at the end of the final battle with the Cylons:

I see angels, angels in this very room. Now, I may be mad, but that doesn't mean I'm not right. Because there's another force at work here. There always has been. It's undeniable. We've all experienced it. ... Whether we want to call that God or Gods or some sublime inspiration or divine force that we can't know or understand, it doesn't matter... It's here. It exists, and our two destinies are entwined in its force... God's not on any side... [breaking the cycle of destruction and rebirth] is in our hands. It requires a leap of faith. It requires that we live in hope, not fear. (*Daybreak Part 2*, 2009)

Baltar's speech demonstrates the need for reconciliation with God(s) which produces the final act of redemption for the humans and Cylons – finding home. Even though Hera is rescued, the *Galactica* ship is damaged beyond repair. The ship jumps away into the unknown to coordinates that are a simply a wild guess. The jump takes them to the orbit of a blue planet. The new Earth.

The series resolves as the human and Cylon survivors are fanning out across this new planet with nothing more than what they can carry. The idea of rebuilding their urban

civilization is dismissed. The fleet ships are being flown into the Sun and destroyed. Baltar and Caprica Six cross to a valley to become farmers. Adama spends quiet moments with Roslin as she succumbs to cancer. Helo, Athena, and Hera are a complete family unit happily embarking on a new life.

These scenes are particularly touching in that “many people cherish the idea that good eventually triumphs over evil, thereby restoring meaning and purpose to our lives” (Arnault, 2003, p. 158). Arnault’s (2002) contention is that “popular discourses of redemption often dilute, if not preempt, the realities of cruelty and turn victims and their suffering into ‘object lessons’” (p. 181). This is a pervasive story element in much of our popular culture and *Battlestar Galactica* falls into the pattern. The coda to the series tells us Hera’s fossilized remains are found 150,000 years later and she is hailed as the mother of all humans. But the coda is also a world of late stage capitalism, urbanization, and robots. The Angels Baltar and Six are strolling through this landscape and discussing how the planet is ripe for the story to begin again. It would seem the cycle has not been broken. Here lies the objectified lesson of *Battlestar Galactica*.

Discussion

As the science fiction genre is rooted in narratives that explore contemporary society, the creators of *Battlestar Galactica* purposefully developed this series as an artistic response to the terrorist attacks of September 2001 and used the narrative to explore American social and political issues in the ensuing years. The culture of the Colonies is depicted as similar to contemporary Earth. In particular, the colonial planet of Caprica is resolutely implied to portray the United States, replete with the arrogance and imperfections of the economic, political, military, and social systems. However, it can be argued that the similarities to our contemporary

world are meant to be comforting, so that the larger subtext of the narrative can be discerned without undo struggling past the unfamiliarity of an imagined universe. As viewers, our collective unconscious is activated, so that we know what we are watching and are enabled in our reflections and meaning making.

The production is strikingly different from the original series, technological advancement notwithstanding, as the design is imbued with a dark, gritty visual aesthetic enhanced by handheld cameras that impart a documentary-like texture. The “you-are-there” quality and sense of immediacy imparted by the filming techniques cultivates the ability of the narrative to exhibit the frailties and shifting dynamics of the characters and themes being explored. We become invested in the characters and sensitive to their dilemmas by witnessing their struggles and failings with the immediacy of visual/auditory storytelling. This is not mere manipulation, but the creation of an environment for reflection about our own lived experiences.

We find ourselves reflecting on “states or circumstances that destroy the value of human existence itself” (Clark, 2003, p. 76). We are led to question our relationships with our selves, our others, our planet, and our gods. The eschatology of the show and salvation comes through the dialectical conception of Hera – this synthesis of opposing forces – which was a result of romantic love. Parental love and community forgiveness furthers Hera’s capacity to be the point of redemption – the salvation – of a future for humans and Cylons. All of which leads to a stronger relationship with God.

A question posed in the first episode is whether we, as humans, are worthy of survival. The final episode implicitly revisits this question and leaves each of us to find the answer. But as drama allows us to take a story personally and be changed by it, the insight of the series is that

we have the ability to act in loving and forgiving ways to break the cycle of alienation and bring our relationships with others and God to reconciliation and achieve redemption.

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