



‘Unraveling the Mystery’ Assessing *The Big Bang Theory* as a Secular Fictional Universe¹

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Abstract: This essay seeks to meet the need for identifying and responding to secular worldview perspectives in popular culture from a Christian apologetic perspective. The focus in this case is on naturalism, scientism, and anti-religious attitudes, with the highly popular sitcom *The Big Bang Theory* (season 11) as a case study. The methodological approach is a content analysis with worldview theory as the hermeneutical perspective. The findings of the analysis suggest that naturalism and weak scientism seem to be the underlying worldview perspectives in *The Big Bang Theory*. Supernatural beliefs are rejected as irrational, but despite that the overall trust is in science, there are moments where other sources of truth and meaning seem to be given credibility. From these conclusions we identify both points of contact and points of tension to Christian faith, representing both opportunities and challenges for Christian cultural apologetics, both in relation to science and religious faith as well as the relation between them.

Keywords: Popular culture, worldviews, *The Big Bang Theory*, naturalism, scientism, cultural apologetics

Introduction

‘The characters ... are so funny (in part) due to their extremely “scientistic” worldviews, entirely framed by their practice of science. The humor manifests as their scientific approach unfolds in everyday life.’

- Massimo Pigliucci²

The quote above is an excerpt from a philosophical analysis of *The Big Bang Theory*. It illustrates the

key role of secular worldviews in the flow of the story in this highly popular sitcom. According to Massimo Pigliucci, it is not just the characters’ nerdy personalities that make the audience laugh, but even more how they illustrate what clinging to a secular worldview – such as scientism – looks like.³ This indicates that secular worldviews are influential in the fictional universe of this sitcom.

The Big Bang Theory serves as a significant example of how traces of secular worldviews, such as naturalism and

scientism, often are found in popular movies, television series and other fictional stories. This points to the need for Christian cultural apologists to analyse the key role of secular worldviews in contemporary popular culture and to offer a relevant response. Thus, *The Big Bang Theory* is a natural choice as a case study in relation to ‘Science, Natural Theology, and Christian Apologetics’.⁴

Nigerian author Ben Okri points out that ‘[stories] are the secret reservoir of values. Change the stories individuals and nations live by and tell themselves, and you change the individuals and nations’.⁵ Furthermore, when considering how common secular perspectives in popular fictional stories often seem to correspond to influential secular presuppositions in many Western academic and educational contexts, the cultural apologetic task turns out to be even more significant. When faced by the same underpinning secular worldviews in both contexts, the need for *double listening* becomes obvious.⁶ This task includes uncovering traces of such worldviews in these influential cultural texts as well as formulating a normative response based on appropriate biblical texts.

Many of the background beliefs that our Western culture presses on us regarding Christianity, often making the Christian faith seem implausible, are being presented through the stories and themes of entertainment and social media rather than by argument. ‘They are assumed to be simply the way things are’, as Timothy Keller points out. Furthermore, according to Keller, most of these stories are secular or relativistic.⁷

Thus, a key task for contemporary Christian cultural apologists is to uncover and challenge secular values and beliefs, such as naturalism, existentialism, and

secular humanism, in popular culture as well as in academic and educational contexts. For Christian youth, such secular stories often create a deep feeling of cognitive dissonance in relation to their personal Christian convictions,⁸ which is yet another key reason for analysing and evaluating the different perspectives from a biblical perspective.

In this essay, then, we seek to meet the need for identifying and responding to secular worldview perspectives in popular culture from a Christian apologetic perspective, with the highly popular sitcom *The Big Bang Theory* as a case study. This sitcom, with a total of 12 seasons ending in May 2019, has a wide spectrum in terms of its audience, both regarding age⁹ and country. We have chosen season 11 as our research material, due to this season being the latest published in DVD format at the time of starting our research.¹⁰ Building on key findings from earlier research on previous seasons, we will be focussing on traces of naturalism, scientism and anti-religious attitudes.

This leads to the following two research questions:

1. How are naturalism, scientism and anti-religious attitudes being expressed and portrayed in season 11 of *The Big Bang Theory*?
2. What opportunities and challenges do these secular beliefs, ideas and motifs represent for Christian cultural apologetics?

In order to answer these two research questions, the article contains three major sections.

The first major part of the article introduces some foundational theoretical perspectives on worldview theory and popular culture, on sitcoms in general and *The*

Big Bang Theory specifically, on naturalism, scientism, and anti-religious attitudes, and on Christian apologetics. This leads to an outline of the methodological approach for content analysis with worldview theory as the hermeneutical perspective.

The second major section of the article contains a worldview analysis of the selected season of *The Big Bang Theory*.

The third major part of the article presents a normative response to the series from a Christian cultural apologetic perspective, before concluding with summary and reflections.

Foundational Theoretical Perspectives

Worldview Theory and Popular Culture

The term *worldview* can be understood in different ways. This article is informed by the concept of worldview proposed by Naugle (2002) and developed and applied by Sire:¹¹

A worldview is a commitment, a fundamental orientation of the heart, that can be expressed as a story or in a set of presuppositions (assumptions which may be true, partially true or entirely false) which we hold (consciously or subconsciously, consistently or inconsistently) about the basic constitution of reality, and that provides the foundations on which we live and move and have our being. (Sire 2015, 141)¹²

The emphasis on 'commitment' and 'a fundamental orientation of the heart' indicates that everyone has a worldview, whether religious or secular in its foundational convictions. Furthermore, this

understanding of how worldviews are often grasped as stories, not only as rational propositions, is, of course, highly relevant to the worldview analysis of fictional, visual universes and to the whole process of meaning-making. As will be shown below, Sire's worldview concept opens constructive avenues of explorations and has proved to be very fruitful when developing a toolbox for content analysis of media messages.¹³

In a media-saturated culture like ours, it is vital to relate to the stories from the perspective of what's being communicated. The influence of the stories of popular culture can hardly be overstated. Popular culture may be defined by being commercial and known, liked and used by 'the masses', as well as being aimed at offering entertainment and distraction from everyday life (Endsjø and Lied 2011, 16). But, although it is aimed at entertainment, the implicit and explicit messages are not neutral, but convey a wide spectrum of different perspectives, values, and beliefs.

As Philip Pullman stated in his Carnegie Medal acceptance speech:

All stories teach, whether the storyteller intends them to or not. They teach the world we create. They teach the morality we live by. They teach it much more effectively than moral precepts and instructions.¹⁴

This means that popular culture is 'a place of debate and negotiation, it gives us examples of how our contemporaries are thinking' (Turner 2013, 23). Therefore, popular culture is a useful indicator of *the Zeitgeist*, the 'spirit of the times'. It both mirrors and moulds our way of thinking and living, express pointers to different worldviews and plays a key role in the worldview formation of young people.¹⁵

Stories, then, are powerful, whether

fictional or factual. Because of popular culture and the popular media's vast impact in our culture, we ought to pay close attention to what is portrayed, when it comes to values and preferences, truth and reality. After all, as Walt Mueller claims about today's youth: 'They are being catechized through regularity and repetition into a series of cultural beliefs that result in behaviors . . . now and for the rest of their lives.'¹⁶ The stories of popular culture, which are 'known by the masses', is therefore a natural starting point when reflecting on underlying perspectives, including views on (natural) science and religious beliefs.

Popular Culture, Sitcoms and *The Big Bang Theory*

Among the variety of media stories in popular culture, the sitcom proves to be highly popular. The term is short for situation comedy, and the genre is marked by how it centers around a story that unfolds from episode to episode, where we follow a set of characters over time and in their mutual environment, like a home, workplace or a circle of friends. The term sitcom can be traced to the 1950s, first in radio and then in television. Originally the sitcom was organized in individual episodes, where the storytelling largely was static, and the characters barely changed over time. In more recent decades, however, the sitcom has increasingly been characterized by a coherent and recurrent storytelling that may well last over a whole season, where both the story and the characters can change and develop over time.¹⁷

A helpful description of sitcoms is 'realistic fiction' (cp. Tony Watkins 2010¹⁸), meaning that the storytelling and the characters resemble real life, in so far as the viewer can relate to events and situations

that are portrayed. But at the same time, it is fiction, simply because it is not realistic since the sitcom has a tendency so exaggerate, both related to the events, the characters and the humoristic elements.

David Lodge describes sitcoms as 'light, family entertainment, which aims to amuse and divert the viewers, not to disturb and upset them.'¹⁹ Lewis and Molloy expand on this, stating that 'the comedy reveals a culture's viewpoint through the lens of laughter' (2015, 90). Verbal humour is one of the most important features of sitcoms, often initiated and enforced by a laughter-track or live studio audience. The poet T.S. Elliot was convinced that the culture we consume just for fun, with no thought of grappling with heavyweight issues, has an enduring effect on us. He believed this was true precisely because of the fun element.²⁰

Comedians recognize the power of laughter and how laughter can make it easier to portray themes or views the audience normally would reject or be offended by. As the American stand-up comedian and social critic George Carlin says, 'Once you get people laughing, they're listening, and you can tell them almost anything'.²¹

Carlin expanded on this idea in an interview:

Most of the time, when you talk to people about, let's call them 'issues,' okay? People have their defences up. They are going to defend their point of view, the thing they're used to, the ideas that they hold dear, and you have to take a long, logical route to get through to them, generally ... But when you are doing comedy or humour, people are open, and when the moment of laughter comes, their guard is down, so new data can be introduced more easily at that moment.²²

The Big Bang Theory is most definitely a sitcom that makes people laugh, all over the world, 'using satire, comedy, intertextual references and even burlesque to offer its perspective on the "geeky" world of brilliant scientists (and their friends)' (Lewis and Molloy 2015, 89).

The Big Bang Theory has been one of the early 21st century's most popular TV series worldwide.²³ Created by the renowned directors Chuck Lorre and Bill Prady²⁴, the series premiered on CBS in USA September 24, 2007, and concluded on May 16, 2019, having broadcast a total of 279 episodes over 12 seasons.²⁵ In Norway, the TV series played its final season during the spring of 2019, and in both USA and Norway the sitcom continues to play in reruns.

'*The Big Bang Theory* has been the defining comedy of its generation,' Kelly Kahl, President for CBS Entertainment, said in a statement as the decision to end the show was announced.²⁶ Furthermore, the huge popularity and influence of the series is seen in the decision to produce the spin-off series *Young Sheldon*, where viewers follow the major character Sheldon from *The Big Bang Theory* as a young boy living in Texas with his family. In February 2019, CBS renewed this series for a third and fourth season, with the third season running in USA during the autumn and spring of 2019/2020.²⁷

Set in Pasadena, California, *The Big Bang Theory* has a focus on science and scientists, particularly physics and physicists. The four main male characters, theoretical physicist Sheldon Cooper (Jim Parsons), experimental physicist Leonard Hofstadter (Johnny Galecki), aerospace engineer Howard Wolowitz (Simon Helberg), and astrophysicist Rajesh (Raj) Koothrappali (Kunal Nayyar) are all employed at Caltech (California Institute of

Technology). The same is true for Sheldon's girlfriend (and later wife), neurobiologist Amy Farrah Fowler (Mayim Bialik), and Howard's wife (his girlfriend in the early seasons) microbiologist Bernadette Rostenkowski (Melissa Rauch). The characters frequently banter about scientific theories or news and make science-related jokes. These intellectual nerds (as they are portrayed) have their humorous counterpart in the beautiful and street-smart Penny (Kaley Cuoco). In contrast to all the other characters, her and her father's last name is never revealed. Penny dreams of being an actor and is now married to Leonard, being his girlfriend in the early seasons. Stuart Bloom (Kevin Sussman), the owner of a comic bookstore, is also a recurrent character.

Co-director Chuck Lorre explains what they intended with the series:

From the very beginning, the goal was *really* simple: to cause laughter. That's why we made the show and why we wanted to build a show around these characters. I love the characters because, despite how intelligent they were, they felt left out. They felt like outsiders looking through the glass at life going on without them ... The characters aren't related but they behave and operate like a family even to the point of making each other miserable. But no matter what, they created a surrogate family. That underlies the comedy and may ultimately be more important than the jokes.²⁸

It is interesting to observe that over recent years there has been a shift in certain themes and characters portrayed in sitcoms, one of them being the portrayal of nerds. In fact, *The Big Bang Theory* is reckoned as the most widely known, and popular, television program currently supporting this trend.²⁹

Key Aspects of Naturalism, Scientism and Anti-Religious Attitudes

Key findings in earlier research on *The Big Bang Theory*, whether from a rhetorical, a philosophical, or from a worldview perspective, pointed to dominant traces of naturalism, scientism and anti-religious attitudes.³⁰ As for the latter, these attitudes primarily relate to the Jewish and the Christian faiths. When analysing section 11, we will have the same focus. In the following, we will outline key aspects related to these three thematic areas.

In relation to *naturalism*, the term in short denotes a worldview or belief system which denies the supernatural. Naturalists tend to 'view supernaturalism as clinging to non-scientific, non-empirical justifications for beliefs, the opposite of objectivity' (Carlson 2017, 469).

Since the Enlightenment, naturalism has been a powerful influence in the academy as well as gradually also in popular Western culture, and now increasingly also globally. It emerges in different configurations, and carries different labels, such as scientism, secular humanism, and Marxism, but with a common underpinning notion of the denial of the supernatural. The cosmos is seen as being ultimately one thing; matter, existing as a uniformity of cause and effect in a closed system.

Human beings are therefore seen as only being part of the natural cosmos. Our uniqueness is accounted for in different ways by different strands of naturalism. Physicist Sean Carroll, in his bestselling book *The Big Picture*, explains the naturalistic view of humans in this way:

We humans are blobs of organized mud, which through the impersonal workings of nature's patterns have developed the capacity to contemplate and cherish and engage with the intimidating complexity of

the world around us... The meaning we find in life is not transcendent...³¹

Furthermore, while naturalists must include human actions within their causally closed view of physical events in the universe, some hold that this 'determinism' is consistent with a non-libertarian, 'compatibilist' understanding of human freedom.

As indicated above, naturalism is still an attractive worldview for many, despite being challenged both by secular alternatives (such as postmodernism) and by religious worldviews. At least two primary reasons may be given for why naturalism continues to be influential. It gives the impression of being a worldview that is honest and objective, and which has a consistent, coherent system.

Furthermore, as stated earlier, the naturalistic worldview accommodates different variations on the naturalistic theme – for instance Marxism and secular humanism – and is thus more widespread than one might think in the first place. Even though the latter form of humanism is completely framed within a naturalistic view of reality, not all naturalists are secular humanists. But all secular humanists are naturalists when it comes to the fundamental view of reality. Due to the emphasis in secular humanism on human dignity, freedom and reasoning, this fact is easily overlooked.³²

What, then, about *scientism*? In the first place it is helpful to distinguish between 'strong' and 'weak' scientism.

Strong scientism claims that some proposition is true and / or rational to believe if and only if it is a scientific proposition ... There are no truths apart from scientific truths, and even if there were, there would be no reason whatever to believe them.

Advocates of weak scientism allow for truths apart from science... But those advocates still hold that science is the most authoritative sector of human learning. Every other intellectual activity is inferior to science. Further, there are virtually no limits to science. (Moreland 2017, 629)

Accordingly, scientism may appropriately be described as:

the idea that science can and should be expanded to every domain of human knowledge or interest, including the social sciences and the humanities, or alternatively the idea that the only kind of knowledge really worth having is that provided by the natural sciences (Pigliucci 2012, 131).³³

Anti-religious attitudes appear in very different modes and shapes. It covers a wide spectrum, from various intellectual, moral, and social objections to Judeo-Christian beliefs, through popular myths and misconceptions, to hostility, indifference, and political correctness. It has been pointed out that *The Big Bang Theory* often conveys religion in general as old-fashioned and fundamentalist, whereas Christianity specifically is largely presented as 'a "god-of-the-gaps" approach' to reality (Barkman and Kowalski 2012, 150).

At the plausibility level, anti-religious ideas contribute to the marginalization of Christian beliefs, institutions and practices. This illustrates that 'central areas of modern society are secularised and secular outlooks on life are highly influential' (L. Dahle, 2015, 387). Thus, Christian ideas appear as less meaningful and Christian institutions and practices as more marginal.

Many influential media stories include popular stereotypes and myths about the

Christian faith, where anti-religious attitudes often are predominant. 'This includes popular fictional stories where secular worldview perspectives are portrayed positively, Christians are being stereotyped, and Christian faith and practices are excluded.' (L. Dahle, 2018, 142)

Introducing Christian Apologetics

Christian apologetics focuses traditionally on defending and commending the biblical Gospel. Thus, the emphasis is both on justifying key Christian truth claims and on communicating the Christian worldview as authentic and relevant in secular and pluralistic contexts.

An influential definition of Christian apologetics is offered by William Lane Craig in his classic textbook *Reasonable Faith*:

Apologetics specifically serves to show to unbelievers the truth of the Christian faith, to confirm that faith to believers, and to reveal and explore the connections between Christian doctrine and other truths... [It is] the broader task of Christian apologetics to help create and sustain a cultural milieu in which the gospel can be heard as an intellectually viable option for thinking men and women. (Craig 2008, 15, 17)

When using the term Christian apologetics in this article, we are focusing on 'the art of apologetics'.³⁴ This is closely linked to the notion of 'cultural apologetics', highlighting that our understanding of apologetics needs to incorporate the concepts of beauty and goodness as well as the concept of truth, together with a holistic understanding of humanity. As Joseph Woodell argues:

Apologetics is the task of helping people see not only the truthfulness, but also the attractiveness of

the Christian faith... Christianity is true, for it corresponds to reality; but being true, it is also both (morally) good and (aesthetically) beautiful... Adding aesthetics to the apologetic toolbox can only help the apologetic enterprise.³⁵

Accordingly, theological aesthetics will be central to our approach in this article. This growing thematic field is concerned 'with questions about God and issues in theology in the light of and perceived through sense knowledge (sensation, feeling, imagination) through beauty, and the arts' (Thiessen 2004,1). We will return to these key issues in our apologetic response to *The Big Bang Theory* below.

Introducing the Methodological Approach

The selected methodological approach in this essay is *content analysis informed by worldview theory*, already applied by us in previous studies.³⁶ As stated above, the term *worldview* is here understood in line with David Naugle's proposal, and as developed and applied by James W. Sire.

Our starting point is that all media messages may be seen as texts, whether verbal, auidial or visual. These texts provide 'scripts' or 'templates' that model the way life is, or should be' (Turnau 2012, 27). In order to identify these 'scripts' or 'templates' – and thus analyse media messages from a worldview perspective – we use a methodology developed by Margunn S. Dahle which consists of four interlocking levels.³⁷

The first two levels belong to *the preparatory stage*. At *the emotional level* the focus is on the emotional response that is created by the media message, whereas *the aesthetic level* means looking at the dramaturgical and artistic elements in the media message; the plot, music, editing,

acting and so on. After all, in the words of David Porter, in any visual media message 'more is said than what is spoken' (1988, 15).

The third phase is *the worldview level*, which is the focal point of the analytical framework. This level 'combines the identification of key worldview elements and traces of influential worldview traditions and trends' (M.S. Dahle 2017, 64).

The first step at this level is to identify key characteristics of the observable praxis in the fictional universe, such as behaviour and conversation, through a focus on plot, character and dialogue. Building on David Howell's insights regarding worldview formation, where 'Self', 'Peers', 'World' and 'Beyond' are key areas around which the worldview is being developed, sustained or changed (Howell 1997), it has proved to be useful to categorize the observable praxis in this way. Thus, paying attention to 'what is being said and done' related to oneself ('Self') and friends / family ('Peers'), and to the relationships to authorities and the wider society ('world'), as well as to the future and beyond ('Beyond').

The second step at the worldview level is to identify key worldview elements in the observable praxis, such as foundational views of ethical values, humanity, reality and faith (defined as trust and search for meaning). These traces of worldviews, then, are sought to be matched with different worldview patterns, both religious and secular.

Thus, by focusing on the observable praxis within the categories of 'Self', 'Peers', 'World' and 'Beyond' in selected scenes in season 11, we will seek to identify how the traces of naturalism, scientism and anti-religious attitudes function in the flow of the story. The key findings will be compared to what Kro identified

when analysing season 6,³⁸ before widening the perspective to the whole television series when reflecting on our own findings as well as on those identified by other researchers.

The fourth level is *the normative*. This constitutes *the follow-up stage*, where the aim is to give a 'relevant Christian response, critically asking whether the identified worldview elements are consistent with a biblically informed Christian worldview' (M.S. Dahle 2017, 64), including pointing to elements of contact and elements of tension. Thus, the normative level moves on from worldview analysis to theological engagement, which will be further explained below, when dealing with the apologetic response to key findings in *The Big Bang Theory*.

Analysis of *The Big Bang Theory*, Season 11: The Worldview Level

It is appropriate to offer three preliminary remarks before applying a worldview analysis (i.e. the third analytical phase introduced above) to season 11 of *The Big Bang Theory*.

First, our remarks and reflections above, on sitcoms in general and *The Big Bang Theory* specifically, serve as pointers towards the first and second analytical phase, i.e. the emotional and aesthetical levels. The sitcom genre relies heavily on emotional communication with the TV audience, especially in this case in its conscious use of humour, irony and satire. Aesthetically, this sitcom has a coherent and recurrent storytelling over the whole season, where both the story and the characters change and develop over time.

Secondly, our worldview analysis of selected scenes in season 11 builds on our long-term engagement with and assessment of the whole TV series. This leads to

some final overall reflections on this fictional universe as a totality.

Thirdly, before the analysis of season 11, an introductory analysis of the opening theme used throughout *The Big Bang Theory* seems to be a natural starting point. The opening theme – or the title theme – has a key role in establishing a show's unifying identity as well as in aiming towards capturing and keeping the attention of the audience.

Key findings related to the theme song

The opening theme song was ranked sixth out of ten popular credit sequences in 2010.³⁹ The aesthetics are captivating, with the visual as well as the music catching the attention of the audience. The images, visualizing the lyrics of the song performed by *The Barenaked Ladies*, make the impact even larger, despite a very high speed.

The actual lyrics runs as follows:

*Our whole universe
was in a hot, dense state
Then nearly 14 billion years
ago expansion started Wait!
The Earth began to cool
The autotrophs began to drool,
Neanderthals developed tools
We built the Wall
We built the pyramids
Math, Science, History,
unraveling the mystery
That all started with a big bang
Bang!*

This title theme song is written by Ed Robertson, a member of the band *The Barenaked Ladies*.⁴⁰

The opening theme sequence points to different fields of human enquiry and academic study. Whereas the reference to Big Bang belongs to cosmology, evolution is part of biology, and the focus on human achievements is related to history. The underlying unifying perspective is

secular, with no ultimate references to any gods or God. The view of history, as well as of humanity, is marked by optimism, which indicates a positive view also of the future. Thus, when relating to the category 'Beyond', we identify clear pointers to a secular, naturalistic worldview. Human progress is highlighted, with science and technology as authorities to the extent that it points towards scientism. Thus, the category 'World' points to secular perspectives. As the final line fades out, the main characters in the show sit down on a sofa, smiling and eating, obviously having a good time. 'Self' and 'Peers' get the final note.

Within the framework of the lyrics and all the different images underlining this secular view of cosmology, evolution and human progress, one gets the impression that the characters are part of a long line of progress, and therefore the future is bright. Further, the image of the group points to a close friendship, which seem to indicate the need for fellowship as well as a view of humanity as superior within nature. Thus, the key beliefs and ideas underpinning the theme song are interconnected and fit into a secular worldview perspective, and at the same time its ending seems to illustrate a tension between a naturalistic view of reality and a secular humanistic view of humanity.

It should also be mentioned, that whenever there is a shift of scenes in an episode, a certain part of the intro, where molecules are being displaying, is shown. In this way, the viewers are constantly reminded of the theme song, the focus on natural science, and the pointers towards a naturalistic worldview.

The Big Bang Theory: A brief introduction to season 11

Season 11, the second to last season of

The Big Bang Theory, ran in the USA during the fall and spring of 2017/2018,⁴¹ and marked the ten-year anniversary of the show. During season 11, Howard and Bernadette, in addition to Penny and Leonard, are married, whilst Raj is still single, searching for true love. In the first episode of this season, Sheldon proposes to Amy, and one main storyline throughout the season is their engagement, culminating in the wedding as the season's end.

Howard and Bernadette have their second baby during this season. Although we never see the children, their struggles related to pregnancy, parenting and family life are central to the storyline. Penny and Leonard wonder whether they should 'take the next step' too. Thus, a running theme in the whole season is linked to such family issues, as well as the relationship between family life and careers.

Career as an independent theme is also highlighted, not the least with Leonard and Sheldon who are questioning the foundations and trustworthiness of their choices of science. However, after a period of wondering if 'supersymmetry'⁴² really is the answer to the mysteries of the universe, Sheldon has a flash of inspiration and excitedly work on a new theory of 'super asymmetry', seemingly restoring everyone's faith in science again.

Key findings in *The Big Bang Theory*, season 11

Key findings related to 'Self' and 'Peers'

In a sitcom like *The Big Bang Theory*, with the story unfolding around a group of close friends and colleagues, the most natural move is to begin the analysis by focusing on the part of the storyline dealing with different aspects regarding their relationships to themselves, each other and their families.

However, their families are not visible as family units in the series. This is also true of this season.⁴³ On the contrary, this group of friends acts as a surrogate family. This makes it even more interesting to ask oneself in what ways traces of naturalism, scientism and anti-religious attitudes may be identified in this category of 'Self' and 'Peers' in their observable praxis in season 11.

As well as being key to the flow of the storyline, the dialogues between the characters are vital when it comes to identifying pointers to their views of themselves, and of love, life, and what it means being human. In this season, with Bernadette being pregnant and primarily out of work, we get glimpses of her view of self-identity and self-esteem. She used to think of herself as a smart, educated, and successful woman, whereas now she is bewildered. The way she and Amy talk about the change, is purely naturalistic, referring to changes in the structure of the brain. *'I liked the old structure of my brain. But then, I liked a lot of my old structures'*, Bernadette replies to Amy's explanations.⁴⁴

This conversation moves towards a conclusion which is meant to be of comfort to Bernadette, with Amy referring to the many positive changes in the structure of the brain brought about by the pregnancy. Still, Bernadette is not satisfied, accusing her friend for being condescending. Taking the naturalistic worldview perspective to be the only explanation for the changes, even though also some of the changes in the brain structures are positive, doesn't seem to be satisfying when it comes to her view of self-identity and self-esteem. Taking into consideration that career and image seem to play a key role regarding her self-identity and self-esteem, Bernadette finds herself in a vul-

nerable situation.

Raj seems to be just as dissatisfied when it comes to love being explained in – or reduced to – naturalistic terms. When a colleague says: *'Raj, we're scientists. We don't need to feel threatened just because we understand the mechanisms that give rise to romantic feelings. It doesn't take anything away from the experience.'*⁴⁵ Raj couldn't disagree more, being convinced that love isn't science, but *'an acknowledgement of a mystery that's greater than ourselves'*. Thus, he shows dissatisfaction regarding a naturalistic perspective when it comes to this part of life. Raj seems to long for a more coherent worldview where experience and explanation of love fit together.

Not surprisingly, love is central in many conversations in this season, with Amy and Sheldon being engaged, planning for their wedding. Emotions aren't that important to Sheldon, though, and he's willing to put aside the thought of upsetting anyone and leave emotions totally aside when deciding who are to be invited for the wedding based on empirical metrics only. The reason being that in his view people are at a wedding to perform specific functions. An underlying perspective here seems to be an ignorance of emotions and a stress on reason. Again, this can be seen as a pointer towards Sheldon taking the naturalistic worldview at face value, whereas Amy seems to be dissatisfied about the split that is being revealed in a naturalistic worldview.⁴⁶ Like Bernadette and Raj, whom we referred to above, Amy seems to long for a more coherent worldview.

The strong emphasis on reason is of course very much in line with their work as scientists. The view of reason as the defining aspect of a human being is a recurrent theme in the conversations,

alongside the fear of not being in total control. As an example, Sheldon is very worried about his sleep-talk and whether or not he can fully trust his mind.

Furthermore, their identity seems to be anchored in reason and the ability to do science, thus viewing physics as 'the real thing'. After Leonard had been totally honest in a radio interview about their struggles in their research, Leonard and Sheldon are close to an identity crisis.⁴⁷ 'Physics is all we're cut out for', Leonard states, and continues: 'I mean, if we weren't physicists, what would we be?' Sheldon underlines that nothing can be compared to physics, since physics 'answers the question: what is the nature of the universe?'

Underneath, there seems to be a longing for anchoring the identity in something different from their career. Amid this crisis, they turn to Penny, who is the only one in the group of friends not working with science. The reason being, as stated to her by Sheldon: 'You manage to hold your head high, despite your checkered past.'⁴⁸

Key findings related to 'World'

In *The Big Bang Theory* as a whole, natural sciences seems to be an undisputable source of facts and truth about reality as a whole. Science seems to be regarded as honest, objective and coherent. The validity of other theories or sciences are determined by whether they coincide with the natural sciences, or more specifically with physics. Even the title of the TV series and its theme song, as pointed out earlier in this analysis, clearly points to the natural sciences as indisputable and sufficient explanations of reality.

The naturalistic view of reality is being conveyed in different ways throughout the series. One example is when Raj says

the following (when presenting a virtual tour among the stars at the planetarium); 'Space is the mirror of the soul. Are we looking beyond, or are we looking within? ... When we gaze out at the immensities of space, we understand them because there are immensities within us as well.'⁴⁹ One may interpret his statement either as a reflection of Raj's Hindu background⁵⁰ or as a naturalistic view, the latter being the most plausible due to what's being portrayed in the series as a whole. In other words, just as the universe is nothing more than nature, which is made up by matter, and nothing exists outside this nature to uphold it, so human beings are also nothing more than products of nature, like any other animal.

The same basic beliefs seem to be prominent with Sheldon, who acts as the foremost champion of faith in natural science and its undisputable truths. During season 11 though, he finds himself surprisingly interested in geology, although with mixed emotions:

I am a respected theoretical physicist. I aspire to win a Nobel Prize someday. But nobody's gonna take me seriously if they find out I've been dabbling in geology ... They're very different. Physics answers the question: what is the nature of the universe? Geology answers the question: what'd I just trip over?⁵¹

Here Sheldon, despite a transitory interest in geology, seems to make a clear distinction between different natural sciences, some of them being more significant than others. In his view, physics is the 'real science', it is where you would go to find the 'real' answers. This implies that, according to Sheldon, geology cannot answer any of the fundamental questions to the origin of the universe, its purpose

or meaning. In other words, physics is being asserted as an undeniable authority, not only for the whole of reality, but also within the field of natural sciences. It is physics, Sheldon claims, not geology, which answers the fundamental questions for understanding reality – and ultimately the meaning of life.

This view of science, seemingly providing meaning even to the most mundane business, also comes across during Sheldon and Amy's planning of their wedding. Being unable to choose their maid of honour and best man, they decide to use science to solve their problems, and thus also leaving feelings (from both sides) aside. A choice Sheldon is very happy with this:

Boy, if I had known getting married was going to involve so much science, I'd have proposed years ago ... If experimenting on humans is morally wrong, then I don't want to be morally right.⁵²

In this regard, science (if taken at face value) seems to be a source of excitement and joy and, in addition, an over-all source of meaning. This is where the characters trust to find the best answers, and ultimately the truth. It also surpasses the value of human beings (if they have a specific value) and of morality (if there ever was such a thing).

Although the entire season 11 (and the entire TV series) points to trusting the natural sciences for ultimate truth and meaning, there are also glimpses of how this naturalistic foundation is cracking. In season 11 we find Leonard as a guest on a radio show. When he is asked about his profession as an experimental physicist, he reveals that although millions are being spent on expensive research projects, the different projects aren't producing

any final results or answers to the ultimate questions about the universe. As Leonard is saying '*We've been collecting tons of data that could revolutionize the way we understand the universe*'⁵³, but he must admit that the data is not giving them the final answers they are looking for. When the radio presenter then asks what they actually have found, Leonard replies:

Uh, nothing, actually ... But I remain confident. We've got the best equipment and the best minds all working on it ... Although, some days I'm, like, ugh, we've spent so much money. Why haven't we found anything? What are we doing?⁵⁴

In this scene Leonard apparently doubts his profession and whether he contributes significantly to the wider society. This is ultimately enhanced when he turns to Sheldon for encouragement;

Sheldon: '*Look. (sighs) Not all science pans out. You know, we've been hoping supersymmetry was true for decades, and finally, we built the Large Hadron Collider, which is supposed to prove it by finding these new particles, and it-it hasn't. And maybe supersymmetry, our last big idea, is simply wrong.*' Penny: '*Okay. So, you guys are upset because the collider thing disproved your theories?*'

Leonard: '*I-It's worse than that. It hasn't found anything in years, so we don't know if we're right, we don't know if we're wrong. We don't know where to go next.*'⁵⁵

This appears to be an unexpected turn of events in the context of the entire TV series. The undisputable trust in the natural sciences (and especially physics) to be the ultimate source of truth about reality and meaning runs throughout every season of the series, almost never questioned,

or challenged. It is highly interesting, therefore, that here in season 11 this seemingly ultimate trust in the natural sciences as the foundation of authority seems to crack, at least slightly. This seems to shake the characters, so that they even consider changing their career paths or research areas, and they also seem to some extent to question the foundations of their naturalistic worldview. They seemingly admit that although natural science has given answers to lots of mysteries in the universe, it might not – or cannot – give the answers to everything.

This state of mind seems to affect the characters for parts of this season. Even Sheldon, though he is not questioning natural sciences as such, seems to question to what extent theoretical physics really can provide him with the ultimate answers he is searching for. Hence his ‘dabbling in geology’. However, in the final episode of the season, while Sheldon and Amy are getting ready for their wedding, he and the other scientists seemingly have their ‘faith’ in natural sciences restored:

Sheldon: *‘My equations have been trying to describe an imperfect world, and the only way to do that is to introduce imperfection into the underlying theory.’*

Amy: *‘So, instead of supersymmetry, it would be super asymmetry?’*

Sheldon: *‘(Gasps) Super asymmetry. That’s it! ... So, if I make slightly asymmetric knots with sheets in four dimensions, I can bootstrap the whole idea to a large asymmetry in 11 dimensions.’*

Amy: *‘Maybe even at the initial moment of creation, the fundamental forces lacked symmetry.’*

In the end, the TV series provides no conclusion to the deep questions and sincere doubts expressed by the characters when

facing the limitations of the natural sciences. Instead, the faith in science seems to be restored, and the scientists embark on a new path towards a theory they hope will give the answers to the functions and foundations of the natural universe. In other words, a naturalistic worldview seems still to have a stronghold as an ultimate authority.

The key findings related to ‘the World’ in season 11 confirms the overall impression of the whole series, when it comes to a deeply rooted trust in natural science as an objective, reliable and ultimate source of truth. This deep trust is somewhat shaken when Leonard admits that science has not been able to produce the desired answers to the ultimate questions about the universe, leading several of the characters to question their career paths. At the end of the season however, this trust, and everyone’s ‘status quo’, is seemingly restored, and the questions of the ultimate reliability and possible weaknesses of the natural sciences remains unanswered. This leaves the overall impression that the natural sciences still is the most trustworthy foundation for understanding reality.

Key findings related to ‘the Beyond’

As we saw earlier, ‘the Beyond’ relates to views on and attitudes towards the future and the religious. The major focus in this section will be on the latter part; i.e. views and attitudes in season 11 of *The Big Bang Theory* towards religion and expressions of religious faith in general, and towards Christian faith especially.

But first, some reflections on views of the future in this TV series. This can be understood in a threefold way; the future of the universe, humanity, and the individual (or personal) future. The view of the future of both humanity and the uni-

verse seem to be dominantly positive. As pointed out in relation to the theme song, and as generally confirmed in the entire storyline, the view of history and human beings are marked by fundamental optimism. The general development of society, largely due to the influence of natural science, is bringing us forward and making us more enlightened.

When it comes to the individual, personal future, the focus is the here and now, in so far as there seems to be no purpose or meaning inherent in the future, which in any way would or should affect the life here and now. On the other hand, what was identified in relation to naturalism and the natural sciences as authorities, or more specifically, the events that lead especially Sheldon and Leonard to doubt the foundations of their science and ultimately their career paths, has underlying implications for their view of their future. They seem to ask questions about how and if they can succeed as scientists in the future, and whether their science will bring any meaningful contributions to the wider society. But, as their faith in science is restored when they discover the possibility of a theory of super asymmetry, their faith in and positive view on the future is seemingly restored accordingly.⁵⁶

It should be noted that religion is portrayed mainly in relation to the religious backgrounds of the major characters. Howard is Jewish, married to Bernadette who is Catholic. Raj has a Hindu background. Sheldon grew up with his mother, Mary, in a devout evangelical Christian home. All the characters except Mary have seemingly left their religious faith, but the religious backgrounds are still expressed in different ways throughout the storyline.⁵⁷

When it comes to views on various

religious aspects and on religion in general, this is not a dominant theme in *The Big Bang Theory*. But in contrast to many other popular contemporary TV series, religion and religious aspects are portrayed and discussed explicitly. The clear overall impression, when taken at face value, is that traditional religion is devalued, whether through Howard's syncretistic, subjective attitude towards his Judaism or through Sheldon's condescending interaction with his mom's conservative evangelical Christian beliefs. From a rhetorical analytical perspective, one could claim that the TV series presents a mixed attitude, sometimes critical and sometimes somewhat respectful, toward religion (Lewis and Molloy, 2015:88). But the underlying strong naturalism seems to deride religious faith of any credibility or objectivity, as 'clinging to non-scientific, nonempirical justifications of beliefs' (Carlson, 2017). The series clearly portray a wide gap, and even a clear contradiction, between religion (including the Christian faith) and science.

It is interesting that this negative portrayal, almost without exception, is aimed at theistic religions, and more specifically Judaism and Christian faith.⁵⁸ Expressions and beliefs from Judaism is mainly connected with Howard. In earlier seasons Howard expressed a subjective Jewish faith, detached from the Jewish tradition and dogmatic content (Kro 2014). In season 11, Howard's connection to Jewish faith only comes across in religious rhetoric used to underline humorous points, like: 'Well, *these hands were made to do three things: close-up magic, writing code, and the dirty shadow puppet show that got me kicked out of Hebrew school.*'⁵⁹ or 'Don't care. Clean slate. Happy Yom Kippur to me.'⁶⁰ Or when Penny suggest names for their new

baby: ‘*You know, I always thought Christian was a nice name*’, and Howard responds: ‘*I don’t know. Sounds a little too uncircumcised.*’⁶¹ The comic frame of Howard’s religious rhetoric partially seems to be observance of Jewish rituals and religious holidays and is central to the playful irony in Howard’s Jewish identity. Thus, this reflects his Jewish background, but does not indicate that he has any personal commitment to the Jewish faith. In other words, ‘Howard’s religion rests primarily on cultural identification rather than personal practice’. (Lewis and Molloy 2015, 95)

When it comes to portrayals of religion and views on religion or religious faith, the religion with the most focus is undoubtedly Christianity. Even though Sheldon in season 11 seems to have an overall softer attitude towards his Christian mother than in previous seasons, his resistance towards religious beliefs in general, and Christian beliefs especially, continues. It is also in connection with Sheldon’s relationship with his mother that the views and attitudes towards religion as a whole – and Christian faith specifically – are most clearly expressed, and where the alleged contradictions between Christian faith and science are expressed.

Sheldon’s mother, Mary, who is a devout, evangelical Christian, comes across as loving and caring, but at the same time, in contrast to the young scientists, she appears as an unintelligent creationist and traditionalist, who reads her Bible literally. (Lewis and Molloy 2015, 93). Undoubtedly, Sheldon loves his mother, but he clearly rejects her religious faith, as expressed already in the first episode of season 11:

Sheldon: ‘*Mother, I have some good news to share.*’
 Amy: ‘*[giddily] We’re engaged!*’
 Mary Cooper: ‘*I am so happy for*

you two, but I’m not surprised. I’ve been praying for this.’
 Sheldon: ‘*Well, God had nothing to do with it. It happened because I was kissing another woman, and it made me realize I wanted to be with Amy.*’

Mary Cooper: ‘*More than one woman was interested in you? I might have prayed a little too hard.*’

Sheldon: ‘*I want to let you know right now that we are not getting married in a church.*’

Mary Cooper: ‘*That’s all right, Sheldon. Anywhere Jesus is, is a church.*’

Sheldon: ‘*Well, he won’t be at our wedding.*’

Mary Cooper: ‘*He’s in my heart, so if I’m there, he’ll be there.*’

Sheldon: ‘*Okay, well, then he’s your plus-one. You don’t get to bring anyone else.*’

Mary Cooper: ‘*That’s fine. Love you.*’

Sheldon: ‘*Love you, too. Bye.*’

Mary Cooper: ‘*[They hang up] Lord, thank you. Even though you can do anything, that was mighty impressive.*’⁶²

The conversation, although the satirical and comical are prevalent, shows the tension between Sheldon and his mother’s faith. Mary brought Jesus and prayer into the dialogue, and Sheldon didn’t like it, clearly illustrating Sheldon and his mother’s different convictions and perceptions. As illustrated here, prayer seems to be a recurrent theme of tension, colliding with Sheldon’s naturalistic view of reality, where miracles or any other divine intervention in our world is out of the question. The same conclusion seems to be the case when it comes to the presence of something divine:

Mark Hamill: ‘*We are gathered here today in the sight of family, friends and Almighty God.*’

Sheldon: *‘That’s too religious.’*

Mark Hamill: *‘That lady over there made me say it.’*

Sheldon’s mother: *‘He heard you, and he can’t un-hear you.’*⁶³

Both here, and in the previous scene, God is almost portrayed as a ‘God of surveillance’. The omniscient God, who in Mary’s eyes watches over his creation, but in Sheldon’s perspective seems – if he was real – to intrude in his private life.

Sheldon also seems to make fun of his mother’s Christian belief, comparing it to something as mundane and shallow as a profile in social media; *‘My mother is pushing for my brother, Georgie, to be my best man, and I hate to disappoint her again. I already rejected her Saviour and her LinkedIn invitation.’*⁶⁴

While religion or religious beliefs are constantly challenged or made fun of, the natural sciences are never object to the same kind of critical treatment. The overall impression is that there is a stark contradiction between science and religious faith, exemplified through the tension between Sheldon’s natural science as a theoretical physicist and his mother’s conservative, tradition-bound Christianity.

In conclusion, religion and religious aspects may not be among the most frequent themes highlighted in *The Big Bang Theory*, but the fact that religion and religious aspects are portrayed to the extent they are, makes the series stand out. Whether it is Howards Jewish identity, Sheldon’s evangelical, Christian upbringing, or Raj’s Hindu background, the way *The Big Bang Theory* ‘enjoy making fun of the characters and their active or indifferent attitudes toward religion and spirituality, there is no particularly evident malice toward any specific faith or belief system.’ (Lewis and Molloy 2015, 99). At the same time, the way religion is viewed

as irrelevant and only appealing to the apparently ignorant and simple-minded, like Mary, religion and religious faith nevertheless seem to have low credibility and consequently cannot be a believable source for trust or truth about reality (Kro 2014, 56). *The Big Bang Theory* may not devalue religious human beings, when showing the characters’ religious affiliations, but the series clearly devalues religion as a source of ultimate truth and meaning. *The Big Bang Theory* seems to convey an overall belief in the natural sciences as an indisputable and ultimate source of truth and thus as the only credible view of reality, while at the same time excluding any notion of a supernatural divinity. Thus, religion and religious beliefs have no ultimate authority and no credible grasp of reality.

Analysis of *The Big Bang Theory*, Season 11: The Normative Level

Foundational Theological Aesthetical Concerns

In this follow-up phase, we offer a normative theological perspective, where points of contact and points of tension are identified, and a tentative apologetic response to these is formulated.

In line with previous research, our discussion will be informed by the following foundational theological aesthetical concerns:

- (a) Movie as a contemporary art form reflects the dual nature of humanity, both as gloriously made in the image of God and as being guilty sinners.
- (b) Movies are significant listening posts in the art of double listening, which provides us with key insights about the human dilemma and about influential

worldview messages.

- (c) The consumption of movies has a key role in worldview formation across generations but seems potentially to have a special influence on children and youth, thus providing us with a special window into significant meaning-making processes through visual storytelling and interpretation. (M.S. Dahle 2019, 15-29)

As mentioned earlier, the art of double listening to the Word and the world was formulated as a missional concept by evangelical theologian John Stott. He advised Christian preachers and communicators ‘to see some of the most notable films and plays, since nothing mirrors contemporary society more faithfully than the stage and the screen’ (1982, 193).

The Big Bang Theory is undoubtedly a highly significant contemporary television series, also in view of the worldview messages communicated in and through this fictional universe. The opportunities and challenges represented by these worldview messages need to be taken seriously by Christian theologians, communicators, and apologists.

Apologetic Tasks: Exploring Key Points of Contact

Despite its dominant secular worldview messages, *The Big Bang Theory* includes some implicit pointers to Christian truth. The deep fascination in the series with science and technology points to structure and order in the universe, which – according to Christian apologetics – is explained most satisfactorily by a Christian natural theology. Furthermore, the key role of humour in the TV series points to some uniquely human features, as a signpost to humanity created in the image of God.

Such key points of contact may be seen

as ‘signals of transcendence’, to use Peter Berger’s rich term. These signals include ‘such typical human experiences as hope, play, humour, order and judgment’ (Guinness 2015, 142). They are

phenomena that are to be found within the domain of our ‘natural’ reality but that appear to point beyond that reality ... In short, a signal of transcendence points beyond one belief and points toward another belief – or at the very least, it points towards what might be true or would have to be true if the signal’s pointing is to have any satisfactory ending. (Guinness 2015, 134)

It is the calling of the Christian apologist to trigger these signals by helping people ‘to hear, to listen and to understand those signals, and then to help them follow to where they lead’. (Guinness 2015, 147). Thus, exploring ‘play, humour, [and] order’ in the fictional universe of *The Big Bang Theory*, as well as Sheldon’s and Leonard’s doubts about natural sciences as the ultimate source and answer, could lead towards a gradual discovery of credible and attractive arguments and stories found in natural theology and Christian apologetics.

Furthermore, although Sheldon’s mother Mary is treated by his son as a fundamentalist traditionalist, she comes across as a humble person, always wanting ‘to give Jesus credit’. She is transparent and open in talking about her Christian faith, and she is always ready to defend it. Even though she comes across as naïve and clearly is the Christian ‘fool bearer’ (Guinness 2015, 67f) in the series, she is nevertheless portrayed as being personally authentic in her beliefs. As viewers, we might even get some sympathy for Mary and her beliefs, thus beginning to wonder whether her son could be unfair in his

unrelenting critique of her traditional Christian faith. If so, a classical Christian faith might be well worth exploring.

Apologetic Tasks: Exploring Key Points of Tension

The analysis above has identified the secular worldview perspectives of naturalism and scientism as being dominant in this season of the TV series. However, [through] the lens of *The Big Bang Theory*, we can see how attempts to develop a thoroughgoing scientific worldview are bound to fail, calling for more balanced approaches to understanding the world around us’ (Pigliucci 2012, 129)

Exploring such points of tension illustrates the apologetic approach called ‘turning the tables’, in this case showing how naturalism and scientism fail. This strategy ‘turns on the fact that all arguments cut both ways. It therefore proceeds by taking people seriously in terms of what they believe and disbelieve, and then pushing them towards the consequences of their unbelief’. (Guinness 2015: 109) This includes challenging ‘scientific believers’ ‘whether they can know enough science to tear the mask off nature and stare at the face of God.’ (Kowalski 2012, 2)

This apologetic approach of ‘turning the tables’ is an illustration of ‘the fool maker’ (Guinness 2015:72f), where the naturalist and the scientist are shown to be ‘fools proper’ (Guinness 2015:66f). If so, there is no fundamental contradiction between the natural sciences and the Christian faith. On the contrary, Christians would argue that the natural sciences – ultimately – only make sense within a traditional Christian worldview with a belief in a personal Creator; having created nature as ordered and intelligible and human beings in His image as rational,

curious, and creative.⁶⁵

Furthermore, Christians would argue that biblical natural theology and Christian apologetics contain coherent and credible arguments for the central truth claims of a Christian worldview. Thus, the portrayal in this humorous fictional universe of Sheldon’s Christian mother Mary as naïve and superstitious, may illustrate widespread secular prejudices about Christians, but has no bearing on the actual intellectual foundations of the Christian faith. Such challenges to secular prejudices about Christianity, may open exciting avenues of fruitful exploration of central Christian truth claims.⁶⁶

Conclusions

Answering the Research Questions

1. *How are naturalism, scientism, and anti-religious attitudes being expressed and portrayed in season 11 in The Big Bang Theory?*

We may now briefly summarize the findings of our worldview analysis above.

The first overall impression is that this season is characterized by naturalism and strong scientism. Any supernatural beliefs are rejected as superstitious and science seems to be the only valid source of truth and meaning. When we look closer, however, naturalism and *weak* scientism seem to be the underlying worldview perspectives. Supernatural beliefs are rejected as irrational, but although the overall trust is in science, there are moments where other sources of truth and meaning seem to be given credibility. Like when Raj reflects that love is not science, but ‘*a mystery that’s greater than ourselves*’. Or when Sheldon and Leonard doubt the foundations of their science and they wonder whether answers must be found

elsewhere. But as the overall storyline show, they still hold science as the most authoritative source of truth and meaning, as do advocates of weak scientism.

The creative use of humour, irony, and satire at times weakens the overall portrayal of naturalism, scientism, and anti-religious attitudes as the dominant worldview messages in *The Big Bang Theory*. Nevertheless, it could be argued that these secular worldviews messages probably remain in the viewers' perceptions as defining ultimate truth and meaning for the major character in this TV series, and therefore may be considered as attractive secular worldview alternatives for the viewers themselves.

2. *What opportunities and challenges do these secular beliefs, ideas, and motifs represent for Christian cultural apologetics?*

We may now briefly summarize key opportunities and challenges. Regarding points of tension, it is important to bear in mind that even though they present challenges in the first place, a challenge can be turned into an opportunity.

The main challenge is the strong view of contradiction between science and religion in general and Christian faith in particular. Religion is viewed as a matter of blind beliefs, whereas science is viewed as being based on facts. Thus, only scientists have a proper foundation for knowledge and truth, contrary to religious people who are superstitious and simple minded, believing in myths and fairy tales. A consequence of this is that only scientific explanations are viewed as reliable, which then leads to reductionism and fragmentation.

As pointed out in our analysis, most of the characters seem to struggle with this fragmentation on different levels and areas

of life. This then illustrates how a challenge to Christian faith can be turned into an opportunity for Christians to demonstrate a coherent worldview. From there, one may be given an opportunity to acknowledge the truths of science, as well as identifying its limitations. Furthermore, opportunities may be given to make obvious that science also carries with it an element of faith, and thus is not neutral.

The most obvious point of contact is found in the fact that there is actually a structured and orderly universe to be explored. From a biblical viewpoint the reason is found in God, the Creator. Further, need for fellowship, love, care, encouragement and affirmation, as well the dissatisfaction regarding science' lack of fulfilling the need for coherence that is being portrayed in *The Big Bang Theory* serve as key points of contact.

Regarding portrayal of Christian faith in *The Big Bang Theory*, Sheldon's mother has the courage to proclaim her faith, even though she comes across as quite naïve. From an apologetic perspective this serves as an opportunity for inviting people to explore what Christianity is all about, and also challenges the notion of privatizing one's faith.

So What? Some Final Reflections on Key Cultural Apologetic Tasks

The Big Bang Theory 'reveals a creative interpretation of the culture of scientific nerds and geeks as well as culture perspectives (including religion) of a vast majority of viewers of the show.' (Lewis and Molloy 2015, 91). Maybe it is true that *The Big Bang Theory* mirrors the majority of the viewers' perspectives and attitudes towards culture, including science and religion. However (as pointed out earlier), popular culture, including *The Big Bang Theory*, not only mirrors, but also

moulds the viewers perspectives and attitudes, including towards the issues highlighted here. That clearly shows us that popular culture plays a key role in the worldview formation of young people, and therefore challenges Christians to reflect on popular culture as a key apologetic task, with a view towards identifying both opportunities and challenges for communicating Christian faith to young people today.

The strong belief in science we have seen in *The Big Bang Theory* conveys both an opportunity and a challenge for Christian cultural apologetics, when it comes to the foundations of faith, truth, and the view of reality as a whole. In viewing the sort of faith conveyed in science in *The Big Bang Theory*, one could describe this as 'functional religiosity', meaning that the foundations are secular, but the functions are virtually religious. This provides the characters with a shared frame of reference for their worldview, where

natural sciences and naturalistic perspectives guide their view of reality, human beings, and values. This aspect also demonstrates the notion that everyone has a worldview, and for some that worldview is so firmly rooted in naturalistic notions that they resemble a religious faith, but with a secular foundation. This could be an opportunity for Christian cultural apologetics to disclose the popular notion that religion equals blind faith and science equals facts.

When this essay was published, *The Big Bang Theory* had finished their last season. The series continues to be popular through replays and streaming, and the secular perspectives of the series remains influential in popular culture. This is illustrated by the popular spin-off series *Young Sheldon*, with a storyline focussing on Sheldon's childhood, and with the same overall secular perspectives and attitudes as *The Big Bang Theory*.

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Notes

- ¹ The expression ‘unraveling the mystery’ is from the opening theme song of *The Big Bang Theory*. It was also used in the title ‘Unraveling the Mystery: A Big Bang Farewell’, ‘a retrospective special episode of the twelfth season ... aired on May 16, 2019, following the series finale.’ (https://bigbangtheory.fandom.com/wiki/Unraveling_the_Mystery:_A_Big_Bang_Farewell; retrieved 12th Oct. 2019)
- ² The quote is from Pigliucci 2012, 128.
- ³ See further Pigliucci 2012, 128ff.
- ⁴ ‘Science, Natural Theology, and Christian Apologetics’ is the overall theme for this supplementary issue of *Theofilos*.
- ⁵ Quoted in Richardson, R. and B. Miles (2003), 1.
- ⁶ ‘We listen to the Word with humble reverence, anxious to understand it, and resolved to believe and obey what we come to understand. We listen to the world with critical alertness, anxious to understand it too, and resolved not necessarily to believe and obey it, but to sympathize with it and seek grace to discover how the gospel relates to it.’ (Stott 1992, 28)
- ⁷ See Keller 2016, 5-6.
- ⁸ See L. Dahle 2018.
- ⁹ Viewership for *The Big Bang Theory* has been ranged from 14+ (<https://www.common sense media.org/tvreviews/the-big-bang-theory>; retrieved 12th Oct. 2019). Statistics from 2018 show that among youth and adults ranging 18-54, about half of the people interviewed watched the series ‘sometimes’ or ‘daily/weekly’. In other words, the series is popular among adults as well: (<https://www.statista.com/statistics/876495/big-bangtheory-viewership-age/>; retrieved 12th Oct. 2019).
- ¹⁰ At the time of writing, season 12 aired on American and Norwegian television channels, but not streamed in Norway.
- ¹¹ See M. S. Dahle and B. Hinderaker 2020.
- ¹² This definition is a development of Naugle’s proposal that a proper understanding of worldview must include the intellectual ideas (the content), the spiritual-moral dimensions (the heart) and the semiotic signs (the carriers of meaning). (See further the analysis and summary of Naugle’s worldview concept in Sire 2015, 46-55.)
- ¹³ See further M. S. Dahle 2010 and M. S. Dahle 2019.
- ¹⁴ The whole speech is found at <https://damesauthor.blogspot.com/2013/10/philip-pullmans-carnegiemedal.html> (retrieved 12th Oct. 2019).
- ¹⁵ See further M. S. Dahle 2017 og M. S. Dahle 2019.
- ¹⁶ In a blog post at <https://cpyu.org/2018/03/08/a-passionate-appeal-to-parents> (retrieved 12th Oct. 2019).
- ¹⁷ Some of the most well-known examples are *Friends* (1994-2004), *How I Met Your Mother* (2005-2014) and *Modern Family* (2009-), in addition to *The Big Bang Theory* (2007-2019).
- ¹⁸ In a blog post ‘Why bother with soap?’ <http://www.tonywatkins.co.uk/media/television/why-bother-withsoap/> (Published 2010, 3rd Sept.2010).
- ¹⁹ Quoted in Mills 2015:1. According to Brett Mills, theories about humour have traditionally been spilt into three camps; superiority, incongruity and relief, even though the three categories overlap, with varying degrees of relevance to media communication. Furthermore, Mills points out that many analyses place the humour of sitcoms within the category of superior theory. Here humour arises from attaining a position of ‘sudden glory’, in which laughter reinforces positions and is inevitably defines as a negative social phenomenon. In this way the jokes of sitcoms have been seen to confirm hegemonic ideologies. (See Mills 2015, 90)
- ²⁰ See Turner 2013, 15.
- ²¹ Quoted in Turner 2013, 16.
- ²² ‘Paradigm Shift Interview’ by Philip H. Farber; (retrieved 29th May 2019).
- ²³ An illustrating example is the 2017-2018 season, where *The Big Bang Theory* was the most watched TV series in US with an average of 18.634 million viewers, only beaten by NBC’s *NFL Sunday Night Football*. (See <https://deadline.com/2018/05/2017-2018-tv-series-ratings-rankings-full-list-of-shows-1202395851/>; retrieved 12th Oct. 2019.)
- ²⁴ Lorre and Prady serve as executive producers for *The Big Bang Theory*, along with Steven Molaro and Steve Holland. We should also note the well-known series *Dharma & Greg* (with both Lorre and Prady), *Two and a Half Men* (with Lorre) and *Gilmore Girls* (with Prady).
- ²⁵ See further https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Big_Bang_Theory and https://bigbangtheory.fandom.com/wiki/Main_Page.
- ²⁶ See <https://tvline.com/2018/08/22/the-big-bang-teory-ending-season-12-final-episode/>.
- ²⁷ ‘Young Sheldon’ is one of the most-watched shows on broadcast and the second most-watched comedy, behind only ‘Big Bang.’ <https://variety.com/2019/tv/news/young-sheldon-renewed-season-3-4-cbs-1203146124/> (retrieved 12th Oct 2019).

28 <https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/live-feed/big-bang-theory-series-finale-explained-chuck-lorre-how-it-ended-1211557> (published 16th May 2019; retrieved 25th May 2019).

29 See further Cooper 2014.

30 See esp. Pigliucci 2012, Barkman and Kowalski 2012, Kro 2014, and Lewis and Molloy 2015.

31 Quoted in Lennox 2019, 18.

32 See esp. the discussion on naturalism, secular humanism and Marxism in Sire 2019, 66-93.

33 McGrath refers to philosopher Ian Kidd's insightful observation that 'three basic 'impulses' can be discerned as lying behind the rise of scientism: 1. An imperialist urge ..., 2. A salvific urge ... [and] 3. An absolutist urge ...' (McGrath 2019, 57)

34 'Christian apologetics is both a science and an art. It is an academic discipline, rigorously grounded in Christian theology, and passionately concerned to demonstrate and defend the truth of Christianity. But it is also a craft, a creative attempt to ensure that the gospel proclamation meshes as closely as possible with the needs and concerns of human existence.' (McGrath 1992, 265) Thus, whereas the science of apologetics is a branch of systematic theology, the art of apologetics is an integrated part of practical theology.

35 Quoted in Williams 2019, 79-80.

36 See M. S. Dahle and I. T. Kro 2013, and M. S. Dahle and I. T. Kro 2018.

37 See M.S. Dahle 2010, M.S. Dahle 2017, and M.S. Dahle 2019.

38 See further Kro 2014.

39 See https://bigbangtheory.fandom.com/wiki/The_Big_Bang_Theory (retrieved 12th Oct. 2019).

40 In writing this song, Robertson was influenced by Simon Singh's *Big Bang: The Most Important Scientific Discovery of All Time and Why You Need to Know About It*, often nicknamed 'The History of Everything'. The title theme is the first verse of a whole song.

See further <https://www.songfacts.com/facts/barenakedladies/the-big-bang-theory> (retrieved 12th Oct. 2019).

41 In Norway the season aired a few months later, mainly during 2018.

42 *Supersymmetry* may be defined as 'a hypothetical symmetry among groups of particles containing fermions and bosons, especially in theories of gravity (supergravity) that unify electromagnetism, the weak force, and the strong force with gravity into a single unified force' (<https://www.dictionary.com/browse/supersymmetry> ; retrieved 12th Oct. 2019).

43 It should be mentioned that Sheldon's mother and brother, as well as Bernadette's father and Amy's parents, are part of this season, but – in line with this fictional universe as a whole – the family members are not being described as clear family units.

44 Episode 18: 'The Gates Excitation'.

45 Episode 9: 'The Bitcoin Entanglement'.

46 Episode 12: 'The Matrimonial Metric'.

47 Episode 18: 'The Retraction Reaction'

48 Episode 7: 'The Geology Methodology'. Here, her 'checkered past' means 'the ups and downs' of her past.

49 Episode 14: «The Separation Triangulation»

50 Throughout the series, Raj's Hindu background is seldom mentioned, and when it is, it is mainly as a cultural identification. Religious practices only come into play when it serves his best interests. (See also Lewis and Molloy 2015, 97.)

51 Episode 7: The Geology Methodology.

52 Episode 12: The Matrimonial Metric.

53 Episode 2: The Retraction Reaction.

54 Episode 2: The Retraction Reaction.

55 Episode 2: The Retraction Reaction.

56 Further on, related to aspects of the future, Howard and Bernadette's reflections around having another baby and managing family life, and Penny and Leonard talking about the possibility of having children, reveals aspects of the future, but with no clear links to this article's focus on naturalism or scientism, and will therefore not be explored any further here.

57 For Leonard, Penny and Amy, there are no clear pointers to any kind of religious upbringing. Their view on religion seems to be benign indifference, pointing towards more atheistic or agnostic upbringings, except for the times Penny reveals an openness to supernatural, more New Age-related experiences, such as psychics.

58 It is interesting to note that Islam is never mentioned, thus apparently not subject to the same kind of sceptical treatment as the other theistic religions.

59 Episode 5: 'The Collaboration Contamination'.

60 Episode 15: 'The Novelization Correlation'.

61 Episode 16: 'The Neonatal Nomenclature'.

62 Episode 1: 'The Proposal Proposal'.

63 Episode 24: The Bou Tie Asymmetri.

64 Episode 12: The Matrimonial Metric.

65 See e.g. Lennox 2009, Lennox 2011, Lennox 2019, and McGrath 2019.

66 The first titles of the new popular-level *Questioning Faith Series* illustrate such fruitful explorations: *Can science explain everything?* (John Lennox); *Am I just my brain?* (Sharon Dirckx); *Is Jesus history?* (John Dickson); *Why does God care who I sleep with?* (Sam Allberry); and *Where is God in all the suffering?* (Amy Orr-Ewing). (See further <https://www.thegoodbook.com/series/questioning-faith/>; retrieved 16th Nov. 2020.)