

**SEARCHING FOR THE TRUTH AROUND
THE NEXT TWIST –
WHY DO WE LIKE *THE X-FILES*?**

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Explaining *The X-Files*

The current popularity of the paranormal cannot be denied. An eclectic *smorgasbord* of unusual and anomalous phenomena, it encompasses everything from Near-death Experiences to UFO sightings, alien abductions, a fascination with all things occult and an often uncritical acceptance of New Age-related claims. The evidence of this popularity is clear for all to see. From the amount of shelf-space given to New Age, Mind-Body-Spirit and paranormal-related book titles in High Street bookshops, through to new and nearly-new television programmes which deal with the subject in serious and not-so-serious ways, the message is clear: parapsychology and the New Age have come of age. And of the many programmes – factual and fictional – which cater for the ever-growing band of enthusiasts, one of the most popular among the viewing public is the much acclaimed series *The X-Files*, created by Chris Carter.

It is hard to know quite how to categorise *The X-Files*. Carter himself has asserted several times that he has created a *religious* programme. I shall be testing this assertion as part of what follows. What is not in question, however, is the programme's phenomenal success. At the time of writing, it is entering its third series on British terrestrial television, having topped the BBC2 ratings so consistently during its second series that it was moved (unusually in mid-season) to a prime BBC1 slot. With five Emmy awards in this year's presentations – the highest, by a long way, for any television series – it is clear that the programme enjoys both popular and critical acclaim. Yet, in the midst of all the accolades that it has attracted both in the US and in Western Europe, many have expressed bafflement as to why *The X-Files* should be so successful. Is it simply due to the upsurge of interest which many are showing in the West for all things paranormal? Or is the answer more complex than this? And what is the programme's success telling us about ourselves as a viewing public who seem to have such a love for it?

Attempting to find an answer to these related questions we must firstly look to the content of the programme itself and to its dense, twisting and shifting plot. Central to the unfolding drama are two FBI agents, Dana Scully and Fox Mulder. Mulder has an assignment to investigate the Bureau's mysterious, classified and unexplained X-files, a group of cases linked by their apparently paranormal and clearly anomalous content.

Yet, as the series has progressed, it has become apparent that the real truth about these files is much stranger than this. To begin with, there appears to be much more than simply the paranormal content that links these files. As each series has developed, a much darker truth has consistently emerged. It transpires that the Earth has been regularly visited by extra-terrestrials, whose existence is seemingly well-known by a select few at the very top of

the Bureau but effectively covered up. Darkly hinted at is the suggestion that there has actually been some connivance between 'them' and those very select few of 'us' who are 'in the know'.

As Mulder penetrates deeper into the conspiracy, so Scully, at first sceptical and having been assigned to watch and report on him for her FBI bosses, gradually herself becomes aware of the extent to which there has been a cover-up. Together, Mulder and Scully then embark on an odyssey that takes them to the heart of what turns out to be a subterfuge of – literally – cosmic proportions.

Yet every time *proof* of the conspiracy seems close – either in the form of computer tapes containing unambiguous evidence of what has been happening, photographs of extra-terrestrial craft and occupants, or even 'implants' inserted by extra-terrestrials into unfortunate human abductees during so-called 'abductions' – it is snatched cruelly and sometimes brutally away. For those in power seek to continue their policy of deception and denial.

As the programmes enter their third series, proof of the 'cosmic conspiracy' seems as far away as ever. Yet there is constant hope that the conspiracy *will* be revealed. This is nowhere better shown than at the end of the opening credits where, for a few seconds, the slogan *The Truth is Out There* is flashed across the screen. It suggests a Truth waiting to be found, if only Mulder and Scully can keep on looking. Indeed, *The Truth is Out There* has become something of a slogan and by-word for the programme itself.

In this paper I shall seek, as an admirer of the series and as a theologically-trained social scientist, to make some suggestions as to why the programme should be so successful. Because it attempts, in part, to bring what I believe to be the issues of depth and transcendence to an audience which might not otherwise engage with these things, I have consciously adopted a broad popular style in the writing of this piece. In this way I hope to bring to bear on the programme a style of analysis which 'fits' its own style.

Indeed, and in particular, I shall be seeking to explore the levels at which *The X-Files* reaches and resonates with its followers and viewers. Does it engage, on a deep level, with issues and needs that elevate it beyond 'mere' science fiction? If so, which needs? Why do so many of us find such apparent 'hokum' so appealing? Is the programme's popularity saying anything important about late 20th century Western culture? ... about us? If so, what?

Fashioning a New Mythology

On one, obvious, level *The X-Files* is 'pure' Science Fiction. It contains all the paraphernalia of Science Fiction: strange otherworldly forces, spaceships, aliens, the possibility of 'other worlds' and so on. Yet, as we shall see, Science Fiction is much more than the sum of its parts. And Science Fiction has never been more popular. The books, magazines, television programmes and films which belong to this genre attract a huge audience. *The X-Files* is but one part of a literary and cinematic subculture that is immensely popular and growing. Indeed, its own popularity may be partly explained by perceiving it simply as one high quality product aimed at a market that does not always receive merchandise of such a high standard. Science Fiction aficionados will quickly tell you that there is nothing worse than 'bad' Science Fiction. But, for sheer inventiveness, imagination and quality of acting and writing, *The X-Files* is very good indeed, as the bestowal of so many Emmy Awards demonstrates and confirms.

Yet there may be more to it than this. For the current popularity of Science Fiction in general may be telling us a great deal about *ourselves*. Robert Short, writing in *The Gospel From Outer Space*¹, suggests that we best perceive the current popularity of Science Fiction as a “cultural fashion”, and he quotes Mircea Eliade who has written, tellingly, that “a cultural fashion is immensely significant, no matter what its objective value may be ... the success of certain ideas or ideologies reveals to us the spiritual and existential situation of all those for whom these ideas or ideologies constitute a kind of soteriology”.² Short neatly places Eliade’s assertion of the significance of cultural fashions against a 1979 *Newsweek* article proclaiming: “People can croak ‘Entertainment! Entertainment!’ until they’re blue in the face. The fact remains that films like *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*, *Superman* and even *Star Wars* have become jerry-built substitutes for the great myths and rituals of belief, hope and redemption that cultures used to shape before mass secular society took over.”³

The conclusion to be drawn from these twin insights is interesting. Science Fiction may be telling us that we *still* need our myths of belief, hope and redemption. Could it be that Science Fiction is also currently *providing* such myths? In each of the films quoted by *Newsweek* we find many of the themes that myths contain: transcendent powers; human beings undergoing encounters with ‘other-worldly forces’ and being shaped and changed as a consequence: a Truth ‘out there’ being revealed and appropriated; and so on. And these are also the very themes that dominate *The X-Files*, as we have seen. Understood in this way, therefore, we like *The X-Files* for the same reasons that we like much Science Fiction. For we have always needed myths of transcendence, hope, truth and liberation.

Why Science Fiction should currently be providing us with these may be further explained by the title of the genre itself. For, whilst the themes may be the same, their *packaging* is clearly different. Everything within these myths is wrapped in science. In *The X-Files* those from ‘out there’ have come ‘down here’, not on heavenly ladders or via virgin births but via highly technological means – for example in crashed (but advanced) spacecraft. Scully’s and Mulder’s *pursuit* of such ‘otherworldly visitors’ proceeds in much the same sophisticated ways: by car, via digital ‘phones, faxes and, of course, the Internet.

So perceiving *The X-Files* as an evolving mythos may explain a great deal. It speaks the language of science, yet contains plots, motifs and meanings which are timeless. This is a powerful combination which may take us yet further in our bid to understand why we like and perhaps need it so much. For *The X-Files* has the ‘cash value’ of much good Science Fiction, providing the timeless ‘deep themes’ of myth and legend whilst enjoying an exchange rate which favours anything apparently scientific.

Can we go further still? For it is not simply Science Fiction that is enjoying such current popularity but, as we have already noted, *parapsychology* as well. It can be suggested that the ‘stuff’ of parapsychology is very much the ‘stuff’ of *The X-Files*: UFO sightings, landings, abductions, Near-death Experiences, poltergeists, strange monsters, mutants, hauntings, reincarnation, and so on. It may simply be that these things too are the stuff of myth and legend, reincarnated and repackaged in a ‘scientific’ form that we can readily accept.

The irony, of course, is that the programme promises to take us *beyond* science. This, too, may help explain some of its popularity, and stems from its overtly paranormal content. For it is clear that the wide range of paranormal paraphernalia – from UFOs to reincarnation – assures us that the universe is bigger, stranger and, as Bryan Appleyard has recently asserted, more *interesting* than the mundanity which daily pervades our lives.⁴ Significantly, it also promises to take us beyond what is often perceived to be a shallow, reductionist

worldview, which for several generations has succeeded in showing us the *cause* of everything – but the value of nothing. Such an apparently mechanistic world, shorn of mystery and transcendence, is simply not enough – at least for many. As Carol Zaleski has written in a classic study of Near-death Experiences:

Comparative study of religion shows that *homo religiosus* has never found it sufficient to orient himself solely in terms of his place in local history, in the rat race, in private concerns that devour his energy. The imaginative cosmologies and eschatologies of different cultures testify to our human need to find a place to occupy in a wider universe.⁵

Wider, also, we might add, than science seems willing or prepared to offer; and this despite the intricate, imaginative and fantastic cosmologies that many contemporary and extremely popular science writers are currently offering.

A Convincing Distillation of Paranoia

In short, *The X-Files* uses science to take us beyond science. It provides us with fresh hope that the universe may not be quite so 'outsideless' after all in its assertion of the existence of transcendent realities such as aliens and paranormal powers. *The X-Files*, however, gives the apparently continued existence of these things a neat 'twist'. For in this series a select few from within the world's governments know all about them. 'They' know all about the crashed alien spacecraft; all about the existence of aliens; all about the alien 'abductions', the monsters, the mutants, the hauntings and the attempts to make human-alien hybrids using genetic mutations.

Indeed, here we come close to the heart that makes the programme really beat. The Truth is out there and those in power know all about it. But 'they' deem it to be a Truth that will be denied to 'us'. So they hide it away under a special classification: the 'X-files'. Caught between 'them' with the Truth and 'us' in the dark, Scully and Mulder exist in a strange, murky and in-between world. They have uncovered a *conspiracy* which unravels as the plot unfolds, and operate in a twilight no-man's-land between the light of knowledge and the darkness (and bliss?) of ignorance. Frequently the hunt for this hidden yet slowly unfolding Truth is further hampered by those in power whose activities hid the Truth in the first place. And this is really the point of *The X-Files*. Scully and Mulder are for ever in pursuit of what Appleyard, in a recent and brilliantly argued critique of the programme, has described as "the pattern that the surface facts conceal".⁶ Yet, as the plot unfolds, the truth dawns that the concealment is directed and deliberate. The Truth is Out There *but it is being kept from us*.

Indeed, Appleyard extols *The X-Files* as a "supremely brilliant and convincing distillation of paranoia"⁷, on a par with other comparable Science Fiction cult epics such as *The Prisoner*. The idea that there is a concealed Truth and that it is *interesting* he sees as psychologically consoling. It is important to know that the Truth is out there, even if we can never find it because it is being kept from us. Better this kind of hidden Truth than no Truth at all. Indeed, precisely *because* it is being kept from us, the idea is reinforced that it must be an *important*, interesting Truth. It must be very significant, if people are going to such lengths to hide it.

We can also note, at this point, that there is currently an enormous appetite (particularly in the US) for conspiracy theories. Examples are the on-going attempts to construct elaborate theories to explain the assassinations of John F. Kennedy and Martin Luther King, and the fact that 'conspiracy theorists' have their own magazines, cable TV shows and Internet sites.

Is There a Truth Around the Next Twist?

The idea that the Truth is Out There, however, may be more than simply *psychologically* consoling. We live in a society which many are describing as postmodern. Although, living in the midst of such a society, it is difficult to really see its cultural, moral and academic contours, nonetheless certain themes and boundaries are becoming clear. For example, on both academic and more popular levels there are increasing numbers of people who express great reluctance in allowing any perspective on 'truth' or 'reality' to attain a final, privileged or somehow ultimate position.

This culture shift has brought advantages and disadvantages. On the one hand, it has made us more willing and ready to listen to the voice of the hitherto marginalised 'other'. Indeed, when no voice can claim by right a more privileged status than any other voice, the way is cleared for a culture open to dialogue and discussion rather than monologue and repression. The result of this has been liberating in as much as prejudice, intolerance and dogmatism have been replaced by a greater openness to pluralism, tolerance and ambiguity – particularly in the quest for truth and meaning. Indeed, post-modernity has gone much further than this, demanding that we see truth and meaning as provisional, humanly (and thus socially) constructed, and above all as *relative*. All of this has enormous consequences for the construction of world views and the understanding of the world. As Richard Tarnas has recently argued:

In the politics of the contemporary *Weltanschauung*, no perspective – religious, scientific, or philosophical – has the upper hand; yet that situation has encouraged an almost unprecedented intellectual flexibility and cross-fertilization, reflected in the widespread call for, and practice of, open “conversation” between different understandings, different vocabularies, different cultural paradigms.⁸

So far, so good. But there has been a *cost* to such a liberation too. Nowhere is this more clearly seen than in the sense of psychological, intellectual and spiritual anomie which many people are experiencing as they seek a solid foundation for their understanding of themselves and their world. J. Richard Middleton and R. J. Walsh have recently characterised this anomie as a combination of disorientation, vertigo, dread, anxiety, apocalyptic doubt and, ultimately, “crushing normative confusion”⁹. Tarnas himself, despite arguing for and extolling the virtues of post-modernity, has described the post-modern situation as creating “potentially debilitating anxiety in the face of unending relativism and existential finitude”¹⁰.

Seen against this cultural backdrop, *The X-Files* appears somewhat old fashioned in its assertion that the Truth is, after all, Out There. This is certainly a fundamentally anti-post-modern (or post-post-modern?) assertion to make. In the midst of the anomie described by Tarnas, Middleton and Walsh, a message that there *is* a Truth, that it is absolutely True, and would be absolutely True whether we believed in it or not, is a strikingly revolutionary statement to make. Potentially, it is also psychologically, intellectually – even spiritually – comforting.

Perhaps *this*, then, explains much of *The X-Files*' popularity. Or is the Truth more subtle than this? For it may, of course, simply be that *The X-Files* is riding on the back of a new wave of unorthodox, unconventional spirituality which post-modernity has released and which the New Age as a whole embodies in its eclecticism. For it is of note that *The X-Files* also draws from a highly eclectic range of sources. Indeed, past episodes have taken much of their content from the very same sources of the New Age: shamanism, voodoo, witchcraft, alternative and complementary medicine and the tarot, to name but a few.

A Journey with No End

Like any good story, *The X-Files* promises to infuse our own evolving life stories with a plot and concomitant direction which draws us along both with and into a journey with the hero. Living mythologies have always done this and *The X-Files*, as we have been seeing, with its potent combination of science, fiction, parapsychology and conspiracy, presents us with a myth that is very much alive. We are drawn into the plot, lured by a promise (which is never realised) that the Truth will be just around the next twist.

As we journey into myth, we are inevitably drawn into *identification* with the hero. Interestingly, *The X-Files* has two. In a post-modern age which lays such stress on equality, it is fitting that the programme should offer us both a male and a female hero: Dana Scully and Fox Mulder. Yet even here there is a twist. Stereotypically, it is the female who *believes*. She it is who, reliant on the depth and tide of intuition rather than the cold rock of rationality, finds belief in the transcendent and supernatural easier than her male counterpart. Yet in *The X-Files* the stereotype is brilliantly subverted. For here it is the scientific, rational and beautiful Dana Scully who turns out to be the sceptic. It is Mulder who *believes*. Indeed, the conflict between Scully's unbelief (increasingly broached by the sheer *oddness* of events as they unfold) and Mulder's belief (he has a poster of a UFO with the slogan 'I Want to Believe' on his office wall) simply adds spice to the plot.

Yet the conflict does more than simply enhance the drama. As we identify with our heroes in their attempt to grasp the Truth, we are actually shown the twin sides of our own late 20th century Western natures. The striving of Scully's 'Hermeneutic of Suspicion' with Mulder's 'Hermeneutic of Faith'¹¹ will be familiar to many viewers as an *internal* struggle. We yearn to believe that there is a bigger picture; that there are truths as yet unglimped; that the mystery is about to be solved and all secrets revealed. Yet there is still something about our culture and our age that will not *let* us believe – a legacy, perhaps, of over a century of that same science which may permit us to struggle with belief in aliens but which has firmly shut the door on angels¹².

Ironically, following the twists and turns of *The X-Files'* unfolding plot is a journey that can never, really, end. In a sense it is a journey that can *have* no end. When Scully and Mulder open the last file, it will be the end of the X-files, in more ways than one. So on one level the continued success of the series is dependent on the Truth never being finally known.

Yet on a deeper level there are other reasons why the Truth can never emerge. On the one hand, after all we have been through with Scully and Mulder, what Final Truth could possibly be big enough? The success of the plot is sustained only by its ability to surprise us one more time with yet another twist. And, as it does so, the Truth becomes even bigger. Indeed, ironically it has become too big for the series that is devoted to the search for it.

But it is too big for us anyway. This is what the great religions have continually asserted, asking us instead to be content with symbols, stories, metaphors and images that let us see the truth obliquely or from the back, but never directly face-to-face. Besides which, there is for many of us a lingering, stabbing, Scully-like suspicion that the Truth may not be Out There at all, and that when we open the last file we will find that there was, after all, no spacecraft crash, no cover-up, nothing Out There, and no Truth. For Scully, for Mulder, and for us, it may turn out to be the case that journeying is better, far better, than arriving.

NOTES

1. Robert Short, *The Gospel From Outer Space*, London, Fount, 1983, p.14.
2. *ibid.*
3. *ibid.*
4. Bryan Appleyard, 'Why We Need the Truth and the Lies', *The Sunday Times*, 13th October 1996, pp.5-6.
5. Carol Zaleski, *Otherworld Journeys*, Oxford, OUP, 1987
6. Appleyard, *op cit.*
7. *ibid.* And see also a telling observation from Karl Popper who has written that "The conspiracy theory of society comes from abandoning God and then asking: 'Who is in His place?'" Quoted in Jim Schnabel, *Round in Circles: Physicists, Poltergeists, Pranksters and the Secret History of the Cropwatchers*, London, Hamilton, 1993.
8. Richard Tarnas, *The Passion of the Western Mind*, USA, Crown, 1991, p.398.
9. J. Richard Middleton and Brian J. Walsh, *Truth is Stranger than it Used to Be*, London, SPCK, 1995, p.61.
10. Tarnas, *op cit.*
11. The phrases are well-known and were coined, I believe, by Paul Ricoeur. It is, however, worth pointing out that this 'deep search' for a truth which is hidden (and usually murky) is found in Marx, Freud and (that 'Prophet of the Postmodern') Nietzsche himself. For a discussion of Ricoeur and the Hermeneutics of Suspicion, see David Wood (ed.), *On Paul Ricoeur: Narrative and Interpretation*, Routledge, 1991.
12. On this, see Keith Thompson, *Angels and Aliens: UFOs and the Mythic Imagination*, Massachusetts, Adison Wesley, 1991. However, as I write, there is a contemporary upsurge of interest in, and even encounters with, angels. The Religious Experience Research Centre at Westminster College, Oxford, currently holds about 50 on file, many recently submitted.

THE AUTHOR

Dr Mark Fox was born in 1962 and has lived most of his life in Birmingham, where he completed his studies into theology and related disciplines with a PhD in 1994. His areas of special research interest include the philosophy and psychology of religion, as well as issues at the interface of parapsychology and theology. His first degree was in theology, after which his postgraduate research included studies of Near-death Experiences and Conversion.

He is a regular contributor to a variety of journals, including *The Journal of Beliefs and Values* and the *British Journal of Religious Education*. In addition, he is currently working on *Narratives of Transcendence*, a major study of Near-death Experiences focused on the exploration of Near-death survivors' testimonies and utilising a variety of insights developed during his postgraduate studies.

Between 1996 and 1998 he was a Lecturer in the Study of Religions at Westminster College, Oxford, and closely involved with the Religious Experience Research Centre at Westminster College, Oxford, and was able to draw on his existing research interests in assisting the Director in a range of research-related activities. He remains closely involved with the work, and is an active member of the RERC's Research Committee. His occasional paper *Searching for the Truth Around the Next Twist – Why Do We Like The X-Files?* was commissioned by the Religious

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He has a long-standing interest in the paranormal, and believes that a concentration on testimony as the *prima materia* for exploring various paranormal claims, together with an examination of their cultural significance, will enable research to pursue a 'third way' between the extremes of overcredulity and scepticism.

He enjoys travelling with his friends, he sings and plays bass guitar in a Birmingham-based indie band, and supports West Bromwich Albion whenever he can.

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