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A Prophet of a Postmodern Faith

ANDREW D. KRONWETTER

Perhaps the worst-kept secret is that numerous examples of religious and/or spiritual themes appear in contemporary popular culture. Several writers have explored the topic.¹ A better-kept secret is the answer to the question, “Yes, but does any of that stuff make a difference?” In other words, can popular culture actually have a bearing on the spiritual lives of those who consume it? I believe that the answer is “yes.” However, I don’t just mean that Bible class teachers can make application of some television show or some song. Popular culture serves the larger culture as contemporary, (post)modern myths. Through these myths, we tell ourselves who we are, where we are, and why we are.

What I am suggesting is that popular culture influences our spiritual formation and development. Studies by Jindra and by Clark, for example, argue that popular culture texts can be significant in the formation of social and spiritual identity.² Furthermore, my own research of *The X-Files* demonstrates the effect of spiritual communication, a subtle but powerful influence upon popular culture.³

Through the first seven seasons of *The X-Files* (the focus of my research), the series chronicles the adventures of FBI special agents Fox Mulder and Dana Scully. Though both characters are vital to the series, Mulder’s quest for answers concerning paranormal phenomena, alien encounters, and government conspiracies dominates the show. The driving force through these seasons is the mysterious disappearance of Mulder’s sister when they were both young. Though this “myth arc” drives *The X-Files*, the portrayal of Scully’s spiritual journey to faith is a powerful aspect of the series. This journey is also of importance to many fans. I for one, a scholar and person of faith, see the development of Scully’s faith, her divine call, and what I believe to be her place as postmodern prophet to be of great interest.

Much of what viewers understand about Scully’s faith comes from implied or casually mentioned information. For example, she was raised in a Christian home, attended Bible classes, and experienced a falling away as a young adult. Yet at a time of grave illness, Scully reconnects with her faith because of the influence of her mother. Viewers experience several instances (in visions and visitations) from very early in the series that something or someone is hailing Scully.

A specific event in Scully’s life that tests and strengthens her faith is the loss of her daughter Emily. The child was born of mysterious circumstances—so mysterious that Scully did not know of Emily’s existence until shortly before the time of



the child's death. Emily becomes a profound force for Scully's spiritual development even though she is in Scully's life only briefly.

For example, in "All Souls" (season five), Emily appears to Scully in visions that serve as the voice of God. The visions are part of an ongoing process that Scully comes to believe is God's calling. Just as in "Revelations" (season three), in which Scully heeds a strange and divine calling to save the life of a young stigmatic boy, in "All Souls" Scully heeds the call and is thus able to overcome dark forces—and the strong-willed opposition of her partner and her priest—and save another child's life.

Mulder insists that Scully's interpretation of events is incorrect and that science will provide them with the answers they seek (uncharacteristic for Mulder, who is usually quick to embrace "extreme possibilities"). Father McCue, Scully's priest, insists that what Scully thought was the call of God (and a visitation by the terrifying seraphim) was really a hallucination brought on by half-remembered tales from her childhood, combined with the emotional stress of losing her own daughter. Had Scully acquiesced to Mulder's patriarchal, modernistic hegemony, the girl would have been taken by the devil. Furthermore, had Scully not rejected the priest's direction, the girl would have died at the hands of the devil.

From the first vision in "Beyond the Sea" in season one to the many miracles and visions she witnesses through the seventh season, Scully is being hailed by a force she identifies as God. She does not fully understand that force or understand why she is being called. The call conflicts with her training as a scientist and with her upbringing as a Roman Catholic. Her struggle with conflicting belief systems and loyalties is like that of many in Western culture today. As Scully overcomes obstacles and opponents, she symbolically speaks words of encouragement and comfort to viewers. In this way, she functions as a prophet of a postmodern faith.

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Scully resists forces of modernity and patriarchy in her struggle to find meaningful faith. She is presented as a believer who is not always sure about what she believes; she struggles to understand faith and her calling. As a scientist, she deals with facts; as a believer, she deals with questions and uncertainty. The contradictions she encounters between her faith and her profession are difficult but not a deterrent. Rather, holding mutually exclusive positions or beliefs is indicative of a postmodern perspective.

The struggle Scully faces resonates with an audience that faces similar struggles. As a metaphor for the human struggle for faith, Scully creates a space for thought, introspection, and discussion of spiritual matters. This deliberative space is particularly useful in a society that does not deal well with religious discussions and/or disagreements. I found at least 400 on-line messages representing several threads of discussion about faith, religion, and spirituality as reflected in or influenced by *The X-Files*.⁴ Many of the messages focus on depictions of Scully's "faith" episodes.

In a study similar to mine, Sarah Wakefield explores the Internet community known as "the Order of the Blessed Saint Scully the Enigmatic."⁵ Wakefield finds that this community finds strength in and identifies with Scully's sacred journey. Such devotion to a character, she contends, is unusual. Most online communities that focus on a personality are drawn to a performer, not her role. Thus, the spiritual journey found in the character Dana Scully serves a liberating function in the ritual of popular culture by performing prophetic work.

We tell stories to help us understand who we are. Some stories serve that purpose better than others. I am not certain that I could easily identify the spiritual significance of most. Much of what I see and hear in popular music and videos does not strike me as having deep spiritual meaning. But my exploration of *The*

X-Files has led me to believe that I should not dismiss the possibilities just because they are not immediately self-evident. Therefore, I will continue to strive to understand how such communicative acts influence humans, culture, and spiritual formation.

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ENDNOTES

- 1 For examples, see Gregory Stevenson, *Televised morality: the case of Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 2003); William D. Romanowski, *Eyes Wide Open* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2001); David Dark, *Everyday Apocalypse: The Sacred Revealed in Radiohead, The Simpsons and other Pop Culture Icons* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2002); and Mark I. Pinsky, *The Gospel according to The Simpsons: The spiritual life of the world's most animated families* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001).
- 2 L. S. Clark, "Identity, discourse, and media audiences: A critical ethnography of the role of visual media in religious identity-construction among U.S. adolescents," unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of Colorado, Boulder, 1998. Also, M. Jindra, "Star Trek fandom as a religious phenomenon," *Sociology of Religion*, 55 (1994): 27-51.
- 3 Andrew D. Kronenwetter, "Spiritual meaning in mediated communication: a thick description and textual analysis of the X-Files," unpublished doctoral dissertation, Wayne State University, Detroit, 2001.
- 4 I accessed this Web site, thexfiles.com/xphiles, over the course of several months in early 2001. It has since been shut down.
- 5 Sarah Wakefield, "Your sister in St. Scully": An electronic community of female fans of The X-files," *Journal of Popular Film and Television*, 29 (2001): 130-7.

