

## THE SCIENCE-RELIGION DEBATE AS SEEN ON TELEVISION: COSMOS, BONES AND THE X-FILES

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The great faith versus reason debate, packaged as the science versus religion conflict, began with the condemnation of Galileo and the heliocentric system of Copernicus in the 17<sup>th</sup> Century, further evolved during the Darwinian controversies in the 19<sup>th</sup>, and persists in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century in terms of the cosmology of alternate universes and the Big Bang. So well-known has this debate become that it has trickled down from the halls of academe to the general public, and has been appearing on our television screens in the last 40 years. No need to read Galileo's *Dialog on the Two Chief World Systems* (400 pages), Darwin's *Origin of Species* (400 pages), or Einstein's essays on general relativity (short but impenetrable). All that may be necessary is sitting on your couch watching television. Three programs come to mind (not including *The Big Bang Theory* whose plots contain more high school romance than scientific controversy).

First there is *Cosmos* which appeared in 2014 as a series of well-produced segments, covering all aspects of the universe as discovered by modern science from atoms to galaxies, from the Big Bang until the present day, portrayed in vivid, picture book fashion.<sup>i</sup> All of it was presented by the smooth and knowledgeable Neal deGrasse Tyson. Tyson is no mere television presenter, but holds the position of Director of the Hayden Planetarium of the Museum of Natural History in New York City. He is also the protégé of the late Carl Sagan who was Tyson's professor at Cornell University and who was the presenter of an earlier of *Cosmos*, called significantly, "Cosmos: A Personal Journey" which appeared on national television back in 1980. Tyson follows Sagan in espousing the same total belief in science, that science is the supreme and only source of true knowledge available to the human race. Further, that scientific reason is the best antidote to ignorance, bigotry, and false myths, an attitude that makes religious belief in the supernatural illogical and problematic.

Thus all of *Cosmos*' star charts, space-time traveling, galactic explosions, speculations about life on other planets, come with the baggage of an anti-religious message, that the true answers to the mysteries of human existence are to be found in the proper methodology, ongoing discovery of material causes and the comprehensive theories of modern science. One of the episodes of *Cosmos* presents the tragic case of Giordano Bruno, burned at the stake for heresy who Tyson presented as a martyr to religious bigotry on behalf of reason. There is no debate in *Cosmos*, only the assumption that science can, in effect, explain it all for you which implies that in terms of the debate, that if you are defending religion you are deluded (and your world is "demon haunted" in Sagan's words) and that resistance to the inevitable triumph of science is futile.

*Cosmos* is not television's last word on the great debate, however. Two recent popular television series make a clearer, more complex presentation of the relations or lack of relations between faith and reason, and more particularly between revealed religion and modern science. Each of the programs features a man and a woman representing each side of the debate who often discuss the issues of science and religion in the course of the programs' dramatic events. In *Bones*, the woman, Temperance Brennan ("Bones" is her nickname as well as the name of the show) is a forensic anthropologist who represents scientific rationality.<sup>ii</sup> She provides an extreme case of belief in science, as she is often seen by the viewer dismissing the existence of anything supernatural or transcendent. For Dr. Brennan nothing

exists beyond the empirical evidence provided by science, effectively excluding any possibility of the supernatural, the existence of God, and the immortality of the soul; she rejects such beliefs as myths. This is in opposition to her partner, a male FBI agent who presents the case for religious faith, often relying on “gut” responses, and the truth and usefulness of sentiment and religious beliefs. The woman has a beautiful face but a bland affect which rarely expresses emotion, giving a Mr. Spock like impression that she is reserved emotionally in her intense dedication to objectivity and scientific truth. She is often placed in situations in which her incomprehension of social mores seems clumsy and unfeeling (like the main character on *The Big Bang Theory*).

The FBI agent, named “Seeley Booth” (usually called by his last name) as the drama makes apparent was raised as a Catholic, and has an outgoing, rugged and forceful personality. He is portrayed above all as an agent of the criminal justice system, a detective who is always ready to make an arrest or conduct an interrogation. The opposition between the two main characters provides much of the drama and most of the humor in the show, but also neatly portrays an older version of science vs. religion debate. It is the older, as it were classic portrayals of direct opposition between reason and faith. Unlike *Cosmos*, it presents both sides of the great debate fairly; in the program, Bones and Booth have over time become lovers, are now married and have a daughter which is perhaps symbolic of the relationship between reason and faith, often opposed but ultimately intertwined.

In the *X-Files*, the second of the two programs, the relationship is represented more subtly. <sup>iii</sup> Once again, there is a woman, usually called by her last name, “Scully,” who is a scientist of a beautiful face which rarely expresses emotion. Once again, there is a male FBI agent usually referred to by his last name, “Mulder”. Here however, the FBI agent is a believer in space aliens and paranormal phenomena who believes that the “truth is out there” but who seems never really certain what the actual truths are. (The stories more often hint rather than show the fact of alien presences.) The woman forensic scientist is both the believer, again a quasi-Catholic who sometimes wears a small cross, but who at the same time represents scientific rationality. She approaches the paranormal phenomena buried in old FBI files or coming from recent reports of odd happenings, skeptically, searching for natural explanations, an exercise in rational disposal of myths and false beliefs that sometimes fails. Her skepticism of the paranormal provokes the dramatic conflict between the two characters. The FBI agent is not a forceful figure but has the character of an inquirer, but a dogged and humorous one; he is a searcher after larger truths, truths that escape normality, and is more a poet and a philosopher than a crime fighter.

(The quasi-Catholicism of the figures in each of the programs who represent faith is a consequence of the need of writers and directors to show that the major character is a religious believer and is not presumably a form of proselytizing. The Catholic religion has a visible aspect which can easily be used in dramatic form to such as making the sign of the cross, focusing on a Christmas creche, or showing a minister wearing a Roman collar. Such signs are explicit and are enough to show the religious propensities of a character or a situation, while evading major theological consequences.)

The philosophy of the *X-Files* regarding faith and reason is not one of opposition but seems to imply that reason is the underlying basis of both science and religion, an attitude that is shown dramatically by the fact that the female lead character is both a scientist and a Christian believer of an orthodox nature. It is her partner who discounts the rational basis of both science and religion who seeks truth in the evanescent paranormal. Mulder’s belief in extra-terrestrials and the paranormal may remind the viewer of Chesterton’s remark that when men stop believing in God, they do not believe in nothing, rather they’ll believe in anything. The *X-Files* represents a better and deeper understanding of the relations between science and religion, for that debate depends on the more general question of the relation between faith and reason; the *X-Files* portrays this relationship more accurately than *Bones*.

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*Bones* is more a crime drama with scientific pretensions like *NCIS* in which philosophic questions are thrown in as a feature along with some on-going romantic situations. The *X-Files* descends from such programs as *The Twilight Zone* and *Dark Shadows* that featured fantasy and horror with little sentiment.

There is a link between scientific and religious truth that is between the scientific understanding that mankind's mind and efforts can discover facts and laws about the way the physical universe works, and the belief in the unseen world proclaimed by religious faith. Denying the possibility of truth in science likely means denying that mankind can ever have certain knowledge of anything at all, which means in turn that religious belief cannot have a rational basis. The formal arguments of Aquinas or the profound analysis of faith by Newman, for example, are rendered useless once mankind's ability to know the truth is denied; religious belief then becomes a matter of will, of assertion in the face of contrary evidence. On the other hand, religious belief may subsidize scientific truth by the implicit understanding that the physical universe has a rational structure, based on permanent and discoverable laws implanted by the Creator God. And in this way are science and religion reconciled. Or so a philosophical television watcher can deduce from *Cosmos*, *Bones* and the *X-Files*. ■

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<sup>i</sup> Re: *Cosmos*; <http://channel.nationalgeographic.com/cosmos-a-spacetime-odyssey/>

<sup>ii</sup> Re: *Bones*; [http://bones.wikia.com/wiki/Bones\\_\(TV\\_series\)](http://bones.wikia.com/wiki/Bones_(TV_series))

<sup>iii</sup> Re: *X-Files*; [http://www.salon.com/2013/09/17/lessons\\_of\\_the\\_x\\_files\\_the\\_one\\_show\\_every\\_tv\\_exec\\_should\\_be\\_watching/](http://www.salon.com/2013/09/17/lessons_of_the_x_files_the_one_show_every_tv_exec_should_be_watching/)