

## 16 Prophecy Girl and The Powers That Be: The Philosophy of Religion in the Buffyverse

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### Making "Amends"

ETHAN: We used to be friends, Ripper. When did all that fall apart?

GILES: The same time you started to worship Chaos.

ETHAN: Oh, religious intolerance. ("A New Man")

*Buffy the Vampire Slayer's* third-season episode, "Amends," written and directed by series creator Joss Whedon, generated terrific controversy within the show's fan community when it first aired in December 1998. "Amends" features the ensouled vampire Angel being overwhelmed by horrific visions of his past victims until he finally plants himself outside on Christmas Eve to await sunrise and inevitable death. As Buffy pleads with him to reconsider, unseasonable snow begins to fall in the Southern California town of Sunnydale, miraculously obscuring the rising sun and preserving Angel's (un)life. The episode ends with a montage of characters marveling at the snow while the camera pans past a theater marquee reading "PRAY." Fans were baffled by what they perceived as a pro-Christian message or a hokey plot device. After all, *BtVS* was centered around an irreverent take on the genre of horror, up to and including those moralized endings in which the evil or naughty are killed while the

good (however traumatized) survive.<sup>1</sup> While *BtVS* had borrowed the use of crosses and holy water from standard horror/vampire mythology, it had left their relation to Christianity or any other official religion quite deliberately unanswered. "Amends" seemed to throw this pattern off, and Whedon finally responded in the show's official Internet forum, "The Bronze": "Was it God? Well, I'm an atheist, but it's hard to ignore the idea of a 'Christmas miracle' here. . . . The fact is, the Christian mythos has a powerful fascination to me, and it bleeds into my storytelling."<sup>2</sup>

Longtime *BtVS* and *Angel* fans have little doubt that "the Christian mythos has a powerful fascination" for Whedon. Some have even tried to claim that both shows' heroes are Christ figures, thanks to their self-sacrificial habits and occasional trips to hell and back.<sup>3</sup> On the other hand, "Amends" is not much of a victory for organized religion, "PRAY" notwithstanding (Whedon claimed that the marquee message was "an unintentional coincidence"). None of Buffy's friends attend church or synagogue services during the episode; instead, they work together, in what one jokes is a display of "Hanukkah spirit," to trace Angel's visions to a group of evil eyeless priests complete with chanting and runic tattoos. These "Harbingers of Death," described by a prophecy that Buffy cheerfully compares to supermarket tabloids, do more than kill Christmas trees growing above their underground hideout; they also summon the self-proclaimed "First Evil, beyond sin, beyond death" who is trying to convince Angel to kill Buffy. Hanukkah jokes and Christmas trees aside, the only unmistakable evocation of the Judeo-Christian tradition comes in a flashback when one of Angel's victims begins reciting *Psalms* 23, quite ineffectively, just before his death.

What's going on with *BtVS's* use of religion? Obviously, Buffy and company move in a world that is not easily secularized:

<sup>1</sup> See for example the treatment of Buffy's "anti-authoritarianism" and how it "is a kind of anti-horror . . . it openly mocks the underlying morality [of horror movies]" in David Graber, "Rebel Without A God," *In These Times* (27 December 1998).

<sup>2</sup> Joss Whedon, "The Bronze" (Cf. the Bronze VIP Posting Board Archives, [www.cise.ufl.edu/cgi-bin/cgiwrap/hsiao/buffy/get-archive?date=19981215](http://www.cise.ufl.edu/cgi-bin/cgiwrap/hsiao/buffy/get-archive?date=19981215)) (15 December 1998). Post edited to regularize capitalization and spelling.

<sup>3</sup> See "Pastor Steve's Buffy Page," [www.mtcnet.net/~bierly/buffy.htm](http://www.mtcnet.net/~bierly/buffy.htm).

quite apart from their use of crosses and holy water to repel vampires, the so-called Scooby Gang and their spun-off compatriots at Angel Investigations routinely encounter cults, worshippers and devotees of exotic gods, concrete manifestations of those gods' power, effective religious artifacts, or accurate prophetic writings. What is striking about the Buffyverse conception of religion is how regularly and frequently it is *demonized*, in both the literal and figurative sense of the term. As in "Amends," the heroes and antiheroes of the Buffyverse scorn religious observance and ritual, while their (usually demonic, but definitely evil) opponents cling to it. Buffy has no trouble using holy water, crosses, prophecies, her friends' spellcasting abilities, or even miracles to her own advantage in the fight against vampires and demons. She does not, however, feel compelled to pray as a result, much less attribute her success to any of the deities she may have invoked. The snowfall in "Amends," like Angel's unexpected return from Hell several episodes earlier, is entirely unasked-for and unexpected; the handful of genuine, unattributed miracles throughout *BTVS* and *Angel* point out the extreme rarity of such inexplicable events. Most religious activity in the Buffyverse signals the presence of demons or other forces of evil. However, this evil is usually defeated not by miracles, but by the forces of self-reliance and friendship.

### New Religious Movements, Hellmouth-Style

"Don't Forget! Winter Solstice Hanukkah Christmas Kwanzaa & Gurnenthar's Ascendance Are Coming!" (Sign at the Magic Box, "Into The Woods")

The religions of the Buffyverse are overwhelmingly demonic; as such, it comes as no surprise that most religiously motivated characters turn out to be Buffy's opponents. Buffy's first-season adversary is the Master, a vampire trapped in an abandoned church who heads the "Order of Aurelius," regularly quotes some sort of scriptures, and performs liturgical readings from Aurelius's prophetic writings. He seeks to restore the dominion of the "Old Ones," the demons who existed before the creation of mankind, by opening the Hellmouth located in Sunnydale. This inversion of Christianity becomes even stronger when the

Master is joined by a vampire child identified as "the Anointed One." Eventually, Buffy fights the Master directly and is drowned, but her friends show up in time to revive her, allowing her to defeat the Master and close the partially opened Hellmouth; the remnants of the Order of Aurelius are eliminated early in Season Two. But the Buffyverse features a wide variety of other religions; in the first season alone, there is the borderline case of Catherine Madison's invocation of "Corsheth" during witchcraft, the questionable Christianity of serial-killer-turned-vampire Andrew Borba (who quotes from the Apocalypse of John and rants about sin and judgment), and the Masai "Primals" and their zookeeper follower who operate in some way analogous to "demon possession." More positive religious role models only appear briefly: there are the fifteenth-century Italian monks who bind the demon Moloch (although their religious affiliation may be incidental to their actions, since Giles and Jenny manage to do the same) and a monk named "Brother Luca something" who forwards Jenny a verse from *Isaiah* containing vital information about Buffy's fate, but he never reappears. Religion—whether identifiably based on real-world beliefs, identifiably demonic, or both—seems either to support or (much more rarely) fight against the forces of evil.

Even in seasons without overarching religion-related plots, Buffy and the Scoobies constantly find themselves battling against demonic cults and sects ranging from the (human) worshippers of the demon Machida to the (demonic) Sisterhood of Jhe to the vengeful "spirit warrior" Hus of the native Chumash people. The Chumash raise an interesting point, since they are an historically real Native American people; in fact, Mission Santa Barbara—the town on which Sunnydale is based—was founded largely in order to Christianize them. In "Pangs," Hus's first act after killing his academic captor is to head for a church and slaughter the resident priest, who is identified as having connections to the (closed) mission. Sometimes, then, the religions of the Buffyverse straddle the line between reality and fantasy, but usually at the expense of religion. We learn in passing that Rasputin was both a "member of an obscure religious sect" and a vampire. Vampires have their crusading Saint Vigeous, mimicking the destruction wrought by the medieval Crusades. Giles's ex-companion Ethan Rayne keeps returning to Sunnydale to work mischief and ally with demons precisely

because he worships the Roman chaos god Janus.<sup>4</sup> Demons invoked as “Götter” in German are shown to have been behind centuries of witchcraft persecutions in “Gingerbread.”

A more contemporary example is the “Family Home” in “Anne,” which is obviously based on a fundamentalist Christian ministry: Buffy tries to infiltrate it by asserting that “I woke up, and I looked in the mirror, and I thought, hey, what’s with all the sin? . . . I’m dirty. I’m, I’m bad, with the sex and the envy and that, that loud music us kids listen to nowadays.” She encounters the home’s operator, Ken, and his latest victim, Lily, at a “ceremonial pool” (the shooting script carefully does *not* call it a baptismal font) where he is encouraging her to “wash away the past . . . the sin and the pain and the uncertainty.” Of course, this being the Buffyverse, the pool turns out to be a portal to a demon dimension where humans are forced to spend their lives in industrial labor while their identities are destroyed. Ken—now revealed as a demon—helpfully identifies it as “hell” and tells Lily that she’s “been heading here all your life.” Then Buffy saves the day by leading a slave rebellion during which she poses atop a platform holding a hammer and sickle before killing Ken. Marx’s famous definition of religion as “the opiate of the masses” is clearly at issue here.<sup>5</sup>

The category of religion is simultaneously a metaphor for human evil and a quasi-historical source of human evil throughout the Buffyverse. Even dead religions remain dangerous, since

<sup>4</sup> In “Halloween,” Rayne’s first appearance, Giles identifies Janus as “the Roman god of chaos.” More precisely, Janus seems to have been the Etruscan god of chaos, while the Romans demoted him to the lesser role of boundary deity. One could also cite the extent to which, for instance, the fifth-season Knights of Byzantium are clearly based on medieval crusaders and evoke the Fourth Crusade (1198–1204), in which Catholic forces—at the behest of their Venetian travel agents—fought their fellow Christians in the Byzantine Empire.

<sup>5</sup> Joss Whedon’s remarks in “The Bronze” forum about “Anne” are rather entertaining: “The hammer and sickle were not intentional, but I too noticed the imagery when I saw them and was most pleased. The sickle, by the bye, is actually an African weapon called a HUNGA MUNGA and I am terribly in love with it. In times of excitement I am known to shout HUNGA MUNGA in an irritating fashion. And to sing the *Internationale*” (3 October 1998). Post edited to regularize punctuation and spelling. For a discussion of Marxist imagery in *BtVS* see James B. South, “All Torment, Trouble, Wonder, and Amazement Inhabits Here’: The Vicissitudes of Technology in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*,” in *Journal of American and Comparative Cultures* 24 (2001), pp. 93–102.

their artifacts and knowledge can be used for evil by unconnected individuals. Whatever Josephus du Lac’s “religious sect” was (apparently Catholic, as he was “excommunicated by the Vatican”), it produced a book “said to contain rituals and spells that reap unspeakable evil,” and when Spike uses the du Lac Cross to decode the book, he summons the demon Eligor to restore Drusilla’s strength (“What’s My Line?, Part Two”). The Egyptian cult of the Sobekites left transmogrification spells which allow the hellgod Glorificus to turn a cobra into a giant serpentine ally (“Shadow”). There is a particularly telling moment in one scene of this episode: the giant snake slithers through an empty church and a crucifix looks sadly down on it with absolutely no effect. Eventually, however, Buffy overcomes the snake with help from Giles and a makeshift weapon. Even when religious knowledge or religious objects are used in the fight *against* evil, as in Buffy’s final confrontation with Glorificus, the Slayer and her allies must ultimately rely on their own abilities and their bonds with one another. This theme has been reiterated in every *BtVS* season finale to date, and most recently in Season Six: Willow, who has been consumed by vengeance and dark magic, decides to end the world by raising a “Satanic temple” and unleashing the powerful “she-demon” Proserpexa. “No magic or supernatural force can stop her,” Giles warns, but it turns out that she can be—and is—defeated by Xander’s obstinate and entirely unmagical refusal to stop loving her (“Grave”). It is not insignificant that Buffy and her friends are called “the Scooby Gang” in several episodes. The original *Scooby-Doo* cartoon featured a band of teenagers who constantly found themselves in seemingly supernatural explanations; in every episode, the “meddling kids” eventually discovered one or more human villains with inventive tricks instead. Buffy and company may be dealing with “real” supernatural entities, but the teenagers still triumph over the forces of quasi-darkness through self-reliance, research, friendship, and a healthy dose of luck. Religion is not necessary.

### Religion and the Regular Character

BUFFY: I gave Riley the day off. . . . I’m sure he’ll come over later looking for a little . . . Bible study.

JOYCE: Well, good. I mean just as long as the two of you are spending some quality time with . . . the Lord. ("Into the Woods")

What about the forces of good? Of *BtVS*'s regular characters, it is difficult to find many who qualify as "religious" by even the most lenient standards. Most of them exhibit very little interest in religion. Buffy, their leader, occasionally mocks organized religion—along with nearly everything else—but focuses on saving her family, friends, and the world, not necessarily in that order. She refers to slayerhood as a "sacred duty, yadda yadda yadda" ("Surprise") and jokes with her mother about "Bible study," that is, sex with boyfriend Riley ("Into The Woods"). In "Triangle," after Buffy and Riley break up, Buffy asks a nun about entering a convent, but her goal is clearly "the whole abjuring the company of men," and she uneasily asks "do you have to be, like, super-religious?" She does not seem to have any clearly articulated vision of an ideal world beyond survival, security, and happiness. Even her sixth-season revelation that she was torn from heaven means only she was "warm, and loved, and finished, complete" ("After Life"); a later episode ("Normal Again") equates this "heaven" with a delusional, demon-induced world in which Buffy is a psychiatric patient. On the whole, Buffy's attitude towards most religious beliefs and practices is pretty well summed up in a single exchange:

GIRL: Have you accepted Jesus Christ as your personal savior?

BUFFY: Uh, you know, I meant to and then I just got really busy. ("The Freshman")

Buffy's dependence on friends, family, and ultimately her own inner strength is what the show truly emphasizes. When Angelus taunts that he has stripped away her friends, weapons, and hope, she tells him that she still has "me" ("Becoming, Part Two"); when the First Slayer challenges her in a dream, she responds, "I am not alone . . . Now give me back my friends" ("Restless"). These, not religious crises or affirmations, are Buffy's moments of triumph.

Most of Buffy's friends and allies have equally little to do with religion, and the deviations from this norm are telling. Anya, the on-and-off vengeance demon, only uses religious lan-

guage in her efforts to invoke the "Lower Being" D'Hoffryn. Spike, Buffy's sometime vampire lover, enters the Buffyverse as an iconoclast: after hoisting the Anointed One into the sunlight and destroying the vampiric religion which began with the Master, he announces: "From now on, we're gonna have a little less ritual, and a little more fun around here."<sup>6</sup> Elsewhere, his attitude toward religion is remarkably like Buffy's: for instance, he uses the du Lac Cross but makes fun of the resultant ritual ("What's My Line?, Part Two"). Giles is a slightly more complicated case: one could argue that the Council of Watchers borders on a religion, but Giles has begun to question the Council's agenda by the end of the first season and decisively breaks from it in the third-season episode "Helpless." As for more conventional religions, it is Giles who finds Sunnydale's forty-three churches "excessive" ("What's My Line?, Part Two"), and his handful of magical invocations throughout the series are relatively deity-free and involve no apparent sense of continued obligation. In fact, the Buffyverse's only connection between magic and religious practice comes from Willow's annoyed response to her mother's accusations of witchcraft in "Gingerbread": "I worship Beelzebub. I do his bidding. Do you see any goats around? No, because I sacrificed them!"

Willow probably has the best-explored religious identity of any regular character in the Buffyverse, but this is not saying much. She identifies herself as Jewish through Season Five, but this only motivates her to resist traditional Christmas celebrations in various seasons and to worry about her father's reaction when she nails crosses to her walls to keep out vampires in "Innocence." By the fourth season, she is identifying alternatively as "witch" and "Wiccan," but she ignores Tara's concerns

<sup>6</sup> Stacey Abbott argues that the iconoclastic Spike is a "modern vampire," by comparison to the traditionally-minded Master and his first-season acolytes, and that *Buffy* "has, with each season of the television series, gradually disembedded itself from these traditions in order to create a modern vampire and slayer, both independent and self reliant," in part by "highlighting the physical over the spiritual." However, Abbott does not examine the extent to which the category of religion plays a role in the transformation from vampire-legend tradition to modernity. See "A Little Less Ritual and a Little More Fun: The Modern Vampire in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*," *Slayage* 3, www.slayage.com (June 2001).

about Wiccan attitudes towards resurrection in “Forever,” along with the latter’s cautions about the proper use of magic in Season Six. Many of Willow’s spells invoke gods and goddesses, but these invocations seem purely instrumental, and they are most prominent in Season Six, as she (temporarily) becomes a force of apocalyptic evil. Tara’s religious beliefs apparently do influence her actions, but it seems significant that both the character and the audience spend more than a season after Tara’s introduction—that is, until “Family”—suspecting her of being some sort of demon. The only known churchgoer among Buffy’s friends or acquaintances is Riley, although he is not otherwise given to discussing or practicing religion; he is initially controlled by the Initiative, then succumbs to the temptation of paid vampiric bloodletters. The ill-fated Jenny Calendar initially identifies herself as a “technopagan,” asserting that “the divine exists in cyberspace same as out here,” but she considers bone-castings and email to be equally valid information sources (“Prophecy Girl”). It is interesting to realize that Tara and Jenny both wind up dead, while Buffy’s less religious friends continue to thrive. Once again, Buffyverse religious characters are somewhat ineffectual at best and demonic or evil at worst.

The title character of *Angel*, who started on *BtVS*, supposedly “has a thing for convents” (“Dear Boy”). However, it manifests only during his evil vampire phase; Angel seems relatively uninterested in religion while he possesses a soul. The cross he gives Buffy in “Welcome to the Hellmouth” seems to be purely for defense against vampires. When Cordelia, another *BtVS* crossover character, tries to describe her vision of a demon-worshipping cult and explains that its disciples are killing one another over how to worship it, he responds, deadpan: “This is why personally I rarely go to church” (“Dear Boy”). Angel’s own message of hope and his soul-saving mission certainly bear affinities to religious projects, but he disclaims any connection, emphasizing the same messages of self-reliance and friendship highlighted on *BtVS*:

ANGEL: You’re at a crossroads, I know. It’s either go for the easy fix and wait for the consequences, or take the hard road and go with faith.

RACHEL: Oh, God. You’re not from that freaky church on Sunset, are you?

ANGEL: In yourself. That kind of faith. (“In The Dark”)

Angel’s second-season epiphany puts him even further away from anything we could identify as religion: “In the greater scheme or the big picture, nothing we do matters. There’s no grand plan, no big win . . . all that matters is what we do, cause that’s all there is. What we do now, today.”<sup>7</sup> He redefines his mission in the most secular terms imaginable: “I fought for so long, for redemption, for a reward, finally just to beat the other guy, but I never got it. . . . I want to help because I don’t think people should suffer as they do” (“Epiphany”). Cordelia is equally skeptical about organized religion; she responds to a shroud dyed with virgins’ blood by complaining that this has nothing to do with purity. “This is all about dominance, buddy. You can bet if someone ordered a male body part for religious sacrifice, the world would be atheist like *that*” (“The Shroud of Rahmon”). *Angel*’s other regular and recurring characters tend to be interested in religion only insofar as they are demons, vampires, or contributing to the cause of evil; Darla, Angel’s recurring adversary in the second season, accuses him of “probably flogging himself in a church somewhere” (“Redefinition”) and claims—in one of the show’s most memorable lines—that “God doesn’t want you, but I still do” (“Dear Boy”). Angel does not respond.

### Religious Truths: Prophecies, Powers, and the Plural of “Apocalypse”

ANGEL: Don’t believe everything you’re foretold. (“To Shanshu in L.A.”)

At first, prophecies in the Buffyverse might seem to be an exception to the rule that religion is anti-demonic and not terribly effective at best, demonic and evil at worst. As Wesley Wyndham-Pryce points out in the *Angel* episode “To Shanshu in L.A.,” the definition of prophecy is indeed that “it came from on high.” Prophecies certainly play a larger role in the lives of Buffyverse regulars (especially on first-season *BtVS* and on

<sup>7</sup> For more on this theme, see Chapter 18 in this volume.

*Angel*) than other religious symbols or objects. Yet they, too, are connected implicitly and explicitly to demons, and are routinely evaded or circumvented. In the first season of *BtVS*, the Slayer manages to fulfill the letter but not the spirit of an infallible prophecy that climaxes in her death. She stops the “preordained massacre” in “The Harvest” before it has reached epic proportions, allows the Anointed One to “lead her into Hell” precisely because she wants to locate the Master, and dies at the Master’s hands only to be resurrected minutes later by Xander’s CPR (“Prophecy Girl”). Before he kills Buffy, the Master taunts her, pointing out that “prophecies are tricky creatures. They don’t tell you everything.” When he encounters her later, however, he is shocked: “You were destined to die! It was written!” Buffy counters, “What can I say? I flunked the written” (“Prophecy Girl”). Prophecies drop out of the main *BtVS* storyline after this: Buffy’s own prophetic dreams become rare after Season Two, and characters with prophetic abilities are usually possessed by demons, insane, or both (for example, Drusilla, or Tara in “The Gift”). In “A New Man,” even the Initiative is able to deal with the fore-ordained raising of the demon prince Barvain. Prophecy has obviously lost its sacred cachet. Over on *Angel*, assorted prophecies continue to play a major role in the storyline, but Angel and his friends frequently circumvent them; in *Angel* Season Three alone, translation difficulties and the forgeries of time-traveling demons combined to ensure that everyone who tried to rely on prophecies was betrayed.

Another apparently religious category which rapidly lost power on *BtVS* is “apocalypse,” a term with strongly Judeo-Christian connotations but which simply implies the end of the world in Buffyverse terms. It first turns up at the end of the show’s two-part pilot, when Buffy summarizes events as “We averted the apocalypse. I give us points for that” (“The Harvest”). Xander and Willow are shocked that nobody else remembers the previous night’s events, but this is only the beginning of the multiplication of apocalypses on *BtVS*. In “Never Kill a Boy on the First Date,” Buffy blithely tells Giles, “If the apocalypse comes, beep me.” Jenny Calendar describes the Master’s rising as an “apocalypse” twice in “Prophecy Girl.” At various points during the show’s run, Buffy’s encounters with Angelus and Acatlha, the Sisterhood of Jhe, the Mayor, the Vahrall demons, and Glory are all described as apocalypses. In

Season Four, Riley complains that “I suddenly find myself needing to know the plural of ‘apocalypse’” (“A New Man”), but Buffy and company have an even calmer reaction to the Vahrall menace:

GILES: It’s the end of the world.

BUFFY, WILLOW, XANDER: Again?

GILES: It’s, ah, the earthquake—that symbol—yes.

BUFFY: I *told* you. I—I said “end of the world” and you’re, like, “pooh-pooh, southern California, pooh-pooh.”

GILES: I’m so very sorry. My contrition completely dwarfs the impending apocalypse.

WILLOW: No, I—it can’t be. We’ve done this already.

GILES: It’s the end of the world. Everyone dies. It’s rather important, really. (“Doomed”)

By Season Five, Willow’s vengeful trip into dark magic is jokingly called “an apocalypse” by Glory (“Tough Love”), Anya can observe that “usually, when there’s an apocalypse, I skedaddle” (“The Gift”), and Buffy can ask Giles: “This is how many apocalypses for us now?” (“The Gift”). “Apocalypse” is a more routine event in the Buffyverse than plumbing repairs or passport renewal; there is often no religious imagery involved, and certainly no sense of a successful divine (or demonic) plan.

It’s difficult to say precisely who or what governs the Buffyverse, or what its fundamental religious truths might be. As we might expect, the powers of evil get a more thorough introduction than their opposites; in fact, from all accounts, evil came first. In “The Harvest,” *BtVS*’s second episode, Giles explains that the world “did not begin as a paradise” but as a “hell” for demons. After the demons “lost their purchase on this reality, the way was made for mortal animals, for man.” There is no hint of creation—much less a Creator—here, and human beings do not seem to occupy an especially privileged position. In “Amends,” Buffy finds herself battling “the First Evil” for Angel’s soul and sanity. This “First”—another confirmation, should we need it, that evil precedes good—is represented by a group of priests and can apparently take on any human form it chooses. It tells Buffy “I’m not a demon” and adds that it is “Beyond sin, beyond death . . . I am everywhere. Every being, every thought, every drop of hate.” In short, the First Evil is not only a First

Mover; it is also omnipresent and extremely powerful. Buffy, typically, is not interested in the theological implications, saying, "All right, I get it, you're evil." Still, it is interesting that Whedon chose to write the show's only morally absolute force as neither human nor demon. Pure evil is often demonic, but it has a human face as well; Hell and Earth are equated in Giles's creation narrative ("The Harvest") and again when Angel discovers that Wolfram and Hart's "Home Office," the source of much of the evil he battles, is in fact located in his own dimension and his own city of L.A. ("Reprise"). In Season Six, Buffy's human adversary Warren does more damage to her friends than any previous enemy except perhaps Angelus ("Seeing Red"), and her human friend Willow does her best to end the world ("Grave").

In contrast to this plethora of options, any supernatural forces of good other than Buffy, Angel, and their companions and fellow Slayers are entirely absent from *BtVS*.<sup>8</sup> On *Angel*, the Powers That Be are not only inscrutable and impersonal, but also unapproachable, and the "channels" by which Angel approaches them tend to undercut their authority. In *Angel*'s first season, the mysterious Oracles have human foibles and are killed by the "warrior of the underworld" Vocah. In later seasons, Angel Investigations' connections to the Powers grow less and less imposing: the demon Krevlornswath and his karaoke-linked aura-reading abilities, the cheerful demonic pop-culture maven Skip, the unseen and spectacularly unhelpful Conduit, even Cordelia herself. The joke becomes obvious in "Loyalty," when Wesley seeks clarification about a prophecy from a *loa*—presumably the West African spirit—who manifests in a giant plastic hamburger at a fast-food drive-through window. Even Cordelia's visions are unreliable; it turns out that the "celestial pipeline" through which they are transmitted can be "hacked" ("That Vision Thing") and that they have been slowly destroying her human brain tissue. In order for her to continue with the visions, she becomes part demon ("Birthday"). The Powers are certainly powerful, but their ethical status vis-à-vis humanity is extremely muddled, and it is frequently unclear whether they are unequivocally forces of good.

<sup>8</sup> Whistler, in "Becoming, Parts One and Two" is a demon charged with maintaining the balance between good and evil.

Whatever the Powers and the First Evil "are," they are not easily reducible to any recognized religion. Vampires fear crosses—Whedon has explained that this came from established vampire mythology<sup>9</sup>—but the Trinity is cleverly edited out of a Latin exorcism ritual and replaced by "God" ("I've Got You Under My Skin"). Meanwhile "God," like Little Red Riding Hood and James Bond, is also a legitimate Halloween costume option ("Fear, Itself"). Sometimes, in fact, Buffyverse religious truths seem aimed at debunking traditional Judeo-Christian expectations. In "The Harvest," Giles dismisses accounts of a primordial Golden Age or Eden as "popular mythology." There is a definite reduction of metaphysics to physics in the later seasons of *BtVS* and *Angel*, as the afterlife becomes more and more malleable while representatives of assorted higher and lower powers are found in their own "pocket dimensions." In "After Life," Buffy simply equates "theology and dimensions." As in *Angel*'s demon dimension Pylea, where the theocracy's "sacred texts" become the basis for dimension-crossing equations, religion can often be reduced to either human actions or pseudo-science. It is not much of a basis for moral action, and no "sensible" person in the Buffyverse seems inclined to treat it as such.

### Note to Self: Religion Freaky

As we have seen, the outward manifestations of Buffyverse religion can almost always be reduced to the demonic. The show's most irreverent and skeptical characters, humans and demons alike, are heroes and antiheroes; its villains are usually the most religious. Religious texts and artifacts are occasionally useful for fighting demons, but they can equally well draw human beings over to the side of evil. In the rare moments when Buffy and her friends are *not* fighting demons, neither religious belief nor religious practice plays a major role in their lives. Ultimately, then,

<sup>9</sup> See Joss Whedon, "The Bronze," ([www.cise.ufl.edu/cgi-bin/cgiwrap/hsiao/buffy/get-archive?date=20000418](http://www.cise.ufl.edu/cgi-bin/cgiwrap/hsiao/buffy/get-archive?date=20000418)) (18 April 2000): "Aggg! Stupid crosses! They were in the stories, okay, and we hadda use 'em and now I'm always worried, how do I explain crosses working on all vampires, maybe no one will notice and I can just NOT MENTION IT!!! . . . Actually, during my little rant I came up with the answer. It isn't the person who reviles the sy[m]bol of the Christian God, it's the demon that possesses them. Whew! It's cool. We're cool."

the moral center of the Buffyverse and the source for ethical behavior is neither demonic nor divine, but human. Since "Amends," the closest thing *BtVS* has had to a "Christian" episode is probably "Grave," the finale to a remarkably religion-free Season Six, in which Willow attempts to end the world with help from Satanists and demons but is foiled by the unconditional love of her friend Xander. Not only does Xander explicitly call himself a "carpenter" in the process, but the montage of characters realizing that the world has not ended is accompanied by a musical setting of the "Prayer of St. Francis," and the shooting script points out that Willow and Xander's climactic scene takes place on the same bluff above Sunnydale where Buffy confronted Angel in "Amends." But fan reaction to "Grave" centered around character issues, so that Whedon found himself called upon to explain Tara's death and Spike's transformation rather than Xander's momentary imitation of Christ. In contrast to the questioning of religious motives that accompanied "Amends," most *BtVS* fans quickly concluded that the religious imagery in "Grave" was simply a storytelling technique. This contrast suggests just how effective *BtVS* and *Angel* have been at reducing religion to a secondary issue, well behind the interpersonal relationships which lie at the heart of both shows. The Buffyverse, with its plethora of religious beliefs and practices, is far from secularized, but it is also far from sacralized. Or, as Buffy puts it much more succinctly in the second-season episode "What's My Line?, Part One": "Note to self: religion freaky."