



Joss Whedon and Religion

Essays on an Angry Atheist's
Explorations of the Sacred

*Edited by Anthony R. Mills,
John W. Morehead and J. Ryan Parker*

Foreword by K. Dale Koontz

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Foreword

K. DALE KOONTZ

I can tell you exactly where I was when I first encountered *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*—I can even tell you which episode was airing. (If you're curious, I was in Greenville, South Carolina, and it was the early fall of 1998. The episode was "Becoming: Part 2.") I was marked from that moment. Seldom, if ever, has a television show had such an immediate impact on me. I really cared about these characters. I was entranced by the elaborate mythology that had been spun for this world. I adored the sharp dialogue. In short, this show was amazing, yet it wasn't a blockbuster in the ratings. How could that be? Surely I couldn't be the only person who felt this connection—where were the fans of this incredible show?

It turned out that they were all around me. I quickly found a cadre of fans who were passionate about the show and, as legions of Whedonians can attest (or Whedonists ... there's a debate, but I do not anticipate an outright schism), that's a warm and welcoming circle. But I also quickly found myself looking ever deeper into the show. As much as I enjoyed the annual "Big Bad" and the crisp one-liners, I was drawn to the larger themes which ran throughout the show, leaping easily from season to season. These were important themes, too—far more lasting than Buffy's style choices (remember that awful crimped hair? Shudder.). *Buffy* tackled Big Questions—redemption, grace, community, loss, destiny, and free will were only a few of the issues that received attention throughout the run of the show. I've speculated before that one of the reasons *Buffy* was able to explore these issues was that it was a little show on a start-up netlet with a silly title. In this case, flying under the radar had definite advantages.

Whedon's interest with these issues didn't end with *Buffy*. As his body of work developed, he has continued to wrestle with these Big Questions throughout his work. *Angel* and *Firefly* both feature ensemble casts of characters trying to find significant meaning in a society that often seems cold, uncaring, and directionless. *Firefly*'s untimely cancellation led to *Serenity*, which gave Whedon a larger screen on which to play out his concepts of control, choice, and consequences. The 2007–2008 writers' strike led to Whedon exploring webcasting and the result, *Dr. Horrible's Sing-Along Blog*, showed that Whedon's gift for storytelling could exist over the Internet and that his catchy, Sondheim-influenced tunes could grip our hearts. With his return to the small screen in 2009 with *Dollhouse*, Whedon had a new playground for his ideas regarding feminism, power, and identity. He also continued the slayer story with his work on the graphic novel *Fray* and he has continued to work in the comic book field, sometimes with his own creations and sometimes playing in someone else's sandbox—most notably, with his run on Marvel's *Astonishing X-Men*.

Then came 2012, which in retrospect can be termed "the year of Whedon." Several years prior, he had cowritten and produced *The Cabin in the Woods*, but the film had languished in MGM's vaults as the studio struggled to overcome bankruptcy. Ultimately, the film was released by Lionsgate in April of 2012 and proceeded to turn the horror film genre inside out, albeit in a good way. Possibly Whedon's most overt exploration of free will, *Cabin* quickly became a critical darling. A few weeks later, *Marvel's The Avengers* was released. This film was a monumental undertaking, involving as it did a large ensemble cast of characters, four of whom had already had stand-alone films and all needed to

be integrated into a cohesive whole. One of Whedon's hallmarks has long been crafting scripts centering on just how a disparate group of individuals manages to set aside their sizable differences and come together to craft a strong community, and this was a major theme in Whedon's script. He knows how to play to his strengths and the box office receipts (currently well in excess of \$1.5 billion worldwide) bore that out.

At the beginning, I mentioned that *Buffy* had an immediate impact on me. I should mention that it also had a *lasting* impact on me, as the show was my launch pad into what is known as "Whedon studies." Beginning early in the run of *Buffy*, academics noticed the show and they flocked to the richness of the text. There was something in here for nearly any discipline—gender studies, media studies, sociology, psychology, and philosophy scholars all used the lenses of their own areas of study to view *Buffy* as well as Whedon's other shows, as they came along.

I entered this arena to answer one seemingly simple question: Why would someone who so adamantly professed himself to be an atheist spend so much time grappling with issues that are often associated with faith in the unseen and unknown? After all, you can't watch three hours of Whedon's work without rubbing up against questions of redemption and grace, examining an expansive definition of family, or confronting the perils of blind zealotry. My writings in this area led me to delve more deeply into Whedon's shows and I have been fortunate indeed to present academic papers and publications on Whedon's work for a number of years now. One result of my ongoing interest was *Faith and Choice in the Works of Joss Whedon*, a book that explores the seeming contradiction of an atheist examining these concepts.

As proud as I am of *Faith and Choice* (and I think it would make quite a handsome companion volume to the book you hold in your hands), it didn't answer all of my questions, and Whedon's work since its publication in 2008 has raised additional questions. This is why I'm so pleased that Tony, John, and Ryan have collected the essays you're about to read.

In contemporary American society, the very word *religion* often seems to be used to narrow and exclude, rather than to celebrate and include. I am firmly of the "Big Tent" belief which states that deeper examination generally leads to the discovery of common ground and a greater understanding of other worldviews. This book is a Big Tent book. The authors come at their individual topics from a wide variety of angles, but all are concerned with clarifying their opinions and explaining their viewpoints. You may not agree with all of them, but I feel confident that the essays contained here will spark the fires of your mind and get you to thinking, which is seldom a bad thing.

Whedon's output is extensive and I can only marvel at the sheer mountain of effort this book represents. Trying to be comprehensive when your subject's productions span the multiple media platforms of television, film, webcasts, and comic books is an immense task. I don't envy the editors the task they took on, but I know I'm glad that they shouldered the burden, for the result is a worthy addition to the fields of both religious studies and Whedon studies.

K. Dale Koontz teaches communications and film at Cleveland Community College in western North Carolina. She received a J.D. from Wake Forest University. Among her published works is Faith and Choice in the Works of Joss Whedon (McFarland, 2008). She has presented widely on Whedon's work.

Preface

ANTHONY R. MILLS

The pairing of Joss Whedon and religion may strike some as inappropriate or at the very least ironic. While it is widely known that Whedon has referred to himself as an “angry atheist” (hence the slight provocative subtitle of this book), he has also admitted to being fascinated by the concept and practice of devotion. Even this admission notwithstanding, many of his texts deal explicitly with gods, goddesses, demons, and other supernatural beings and with belief and disbelief therein. Even where these aspects of religion are absent, other issues are explored which tend to be significant for religion and their followers and theologians, such as metaphysics, humanity, identity, ethics, and the end of the world. Moreover, contemporary hermeneutics has, for a number of reasons, moved beyond the traditional priority of authorial intent in the interpretation of texts, films, and other media. The authors in this book take seriously what Whedon says about his own work, but they recognize that there is often more to be said than this, and so should we. For these reasons we are confident that a book on Whedon and religion does not in and of itself suggest undue impositions on his oeuvre. Whether one will read any particular interpretation in such a way, or as simply wrong, is another matter, and the very diversity of the approaches and perspectives we have represented here will hopefully foster debate thereabout.

As for me, I can say that Whedon’s shows and films brought life to my Evangelical faith in a way that the church never did. My first real exposure was to *Firefly* roughly a year after it had been cancelled. I immediately noticed that although they may have been out in the black, the folks on Serenity had a firm grasp of companionship, compassion, forgiveness, and protection of the weak, all of the things which I was told to value in Christian circles but which were rarely demonstrated and usually outright opposed in actual practice and politics. But when Inara, the prostitute, gives Shepherd Book, the man of God, what is essentially absolution of sin at the end of the pilot, I was baffled into humility and the space became holy ground.

A few years later I gave *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* a shot. Watching it as one untimely born, as it were, I became hooked and bought the complete series because my local video store only had the first two seasons available for rent. The same thing, that moment of rapt awe, happened when I came across “Amends” from season three. Its breathlessness was in its silence and simplicity. Not by might, nor by power, says the Lord, but by snow in southern California.

There have been many other such experiences throughout my years of being a Whedon fan, without which this book would not have come into being. Sure, some other folks may have thought at some point in the future to put an edited volume like this together, but this one you’re reading owes its impetus to those tearful, sacred moments had by a young man alone in his apartment. And, although I have said farewell to God, it remains true that what always drew me to Jesus is what I have seen ever embodied in Whedon’s texts: grace, mercy, love, redemption, and the hope of a new day. Even if at the end of all things it really is only us out here in the black, aren’t these worth fighting for?

Introduction

ANTHONY R. MILLS

The works of Joss Whedon—from his hit (and not so hit) television shows *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, *Angel*, *Firefly*, and *Dollhouse*, to his popular comic book writing on *Fray* and *X-Men*, to his cult success *Serenity*, critical darling *Cabin in the Woods*, and box-office smash *Avengers*—are among the most influential pop culture phenomena of the last two decades. They are also among the most provocative when it comes to explorations of religion and the important dimensions of the human condition closely associated with it: family, friendship, sex, forgiveness, redemption, faith, hope, love, and death. All of these Big Questions, as Dale Koontz puts it, loom large in Whedon's opera. While several volumes have been written on Whedon from philosophical and cultural studies perspectives, relatively little attention has been given to the religious significance—and implications—of how he portrays these subjects.

The essays in this volume on Joss Whedon and religion address the above topics and other themes pertinent to Whedon's work through a broad lens, reflecting several academic disciplines, methodological approaches, and, of course, religious convictions. Christianity, paganism, and Western esotericism are the most common dialogue partners, but are approached, in different ways, through theology, history, religious studies, cultural studies, and philosophy of religion. This diversity is meant to present the volume as a strong introduction to the many religiously significant themes and aspects of Whedon's work. At the same time, it is not meant to suggest that religion is the *only* hermeneutical approach to the Whedonverse, but rather to augment the insights of Whedon's other intellectual interlocutors. As such, we consider it a companion volume to the other scholarly anthologies of Whedon's works.

The book is organized in a roughly chronological fashion. It begins with five essays on *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1997–2003) and *Angel* (1999–2004). Jeremy R. Ricketts sets the stage for us by exploring the changes from human to vampire (and sometimes back again) in the Buffyverse in terms of spiritual transformation. He interprets this phenomenon, including the gaining and losing of souls, through the work of psychologist and philosopher William James and religious studies scholar Mircea Eliade. In their essay, Hope K. Bartel and Timothy E. G. Bartel put the third-season *Buffy* episode “Anne” in conversation with the Greek tradition of Pascha, or Easter. They explore the parallels between this hell-harrowing episode, on the one hand, and the fourth-century Paschal homily of St. John Chrysostom and fourteenth-century *Anastasis* icon, on the other. Good stuff for you history or Greek Orthodox buffs. Valerie Mayhew goes old school on us as well by arguing that feminine power has been negatively linked to sexuality throughout history, including in the stories of pagan goddesses and Christian women mystics. While *Buffy* starts to be written in this way, she ends up embracing both her femininity and sexuality in emulable ways, similar to the Virgin Mary. Jason Lawton Winslade provides a detailed historical analysis of the background and uses of Wicca and witchcraft in the Buffyverse and argues that this is key to identifying and understanding the feminist theology, or *thealogy*, of the show. Roslyn Weaver goes to the other end of the temporal spectrum and explores the significance of apocalypse in *Buffy*. Whereas the biblical patterns of apocalypse are overseen or controlled by the divine, the end in Whedon's world is a thoroughly human affair, although with supernatural elements of demons and the undead.

Next come two essays on *Firefly* (2002) and *Serenity* (2005). Desirée de Jesus argues that the black male figures of Jubal Early and the Operative, two men with fanatical devotion to their causes, are written in a way that ties their religiosity to negative racial stereotypes, thereby suggesting both the irrationality of religious belief and the danger of strong black masculinity. Dean A. Kowalski looks at ethics in the Whedonverse and argues that both Mal and Angel pursue courses of action which do not depend on God or divine command, but which can rather be read as examples of an Aristotelian–Kantian ethical synthesis in which one does what’s good just because it’s right.

Moving right along, we also have two essays on *Dollhouse* (2009–2010), each of which takes a different theological and philosophical approach to how the dolls’ identities seem to be in some sense maintained given the show’s premise of mind-body dualism. J. Leavitt Pearl borrows heavily from phenomenologist Michel Henry to argue for the existence of a soul, understood as an individual’s source of consistent identity, memories, and feelings despite repeated imprints with different personalities. On the other hand, Julie Clawson argues that the dolls’ persistent behavior and feelings despite multiple mind wipes owes to human beings’ essential interrelatedness, which mirrors what some contemporary theologians refer to as the *social Trinity*, the idea that humans find their identities in relation just as the persons of the Trinity do.

Susanne E. Foster and James B. South cap off our discussion of Whedon’s television series by considering the power structures presented therein (e.g. the Initiative, the Alliance, Wolfram & Hart, and the Rossum Corporation) in light of Augustine’s political theology. While Whedon’s views of the polity are not explicitly Christian, there are surprising parallels to be found with Augustine: both recognize that there are better and worse ways to live communally and they often agree on what characterizes those ways of life.

Next we consider the two films released in 2012 which have helped to make Joss Whedon a household name (at least in those households where *Buff*y reruns were not the norm). Our two essays on *Marvel’s The Avengers*, written and directed by Whedon, display different attitudes to the themes of power and superheroism found in the film. On the positive side, Russell W. Dalton compares Whedon with both Stan Lee and Ayn Rand and finds that the former two offer an exemplary ethic of self-sacrifice and protection of the weak, whereas the latter, whose thought has found a home of late among many America policymakers, proffers the kind of ethic preferred by many Marvel villains, including Loki: the weak are to be ruled by those superior to them. On the negative side, John C. McDowell expresses concern over the nationalism and exclusivism expressed in the film, critiques which are not new for the superhero genre but which nevertheless stand out because of Whedon’s tendency to subvert the moral and political authority of established power structures in his other works.

Finally, we have two essays on the other 2012 film, *The Cabin in the Woods*, cowritten and coproduced by Whedon. Although this film was made well before *Avengers*, it was released only a month before it in the United States. Moreover, since the end of the world is a major theme in it, we thought it a fitting end to the book. J. Ryan Parker attends to the religious and cultural significance of the violent sacrifice of youth by comparing *Cabin* with the Christian theological doctrine of penal substitutionary atonement—in which Jesus’s horrific death is understood as necessary in order to get one right with God—and by eschewing both film and doctrine in favor of a less sadistic solution. W. Scott Poole focuses instead on the eschatology of *Cabin* and sees it as an example of Whedon’s joyful nihilism as opposed to the more despairing nihilism of H. P. Lovecraft, who has greatly influenced Whedon and *Cabin* especially. Poole engages two twentieth-century Christian theologians, Jürgen

Moltmann and Dorothee Soelle, and argues that despite their more sophisticated approach to eschatology their views leave something to be desired.

Before we get to the good stuff I want to make a few comments about style to help guide the reader. For the most part we have formatted the book according to the 16th edition of the *Chicago Manual of Style*. We have broken from it in a few cases where other practices of citation have become conventional, especially in studies of pop culture. All Bible references, Whedon episode locations, and movie directors and dates are referred to in parentheses in the text instead of in endnotes, except for citation of block quotes where a parenthetical reference may be confusing. For example, we would refer to “The Harvest” as “*Buffy* 1.2,” meaning that the episode is from *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, specifically season one, episode two. Since *Firefly* only had one season, we leave off the “1” so that “Objects in Space,” for instance, is referred to as “*Firefly* 14.”

Also, we have decided to follow Chicago style’s preference for lowercase words whenever it seemed feasible to do so, even when this goes against some practices within Whedon studies. For instance, “Slayer,” “Potential,” and “Watcher” are here put in lowercase because they are generic terms, except when referring to the full title of a character, such as Buffy the Vampire Slayer. Generic terms which are used as names, however, such as “the Master” or “the Operative,” are capitalized, along with special terms like “Big Bad.”

Finally, we have chosen to put the names of actors in parentheses only after the first mention of a character’s name, whether this comes in the text or an endnote, but only for major or recurring characters in an attempt to avoid clutter. For this reason and to avoid any confusion, we have also chosen not to mention actors or episode locations in works other than Whedon’s.

Varieties of Conversion

Spiritual Transformation in the Buffyverse

JEREMY R. RICKETTS

At a casual glance, Joss Whedon's *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and *Angel* seem like shows that obviously deal with religion. There are crosses, after all, as well as a hellmouth and an occasional nun. A closer look will inform the viewer that while surface elements of religion are clearly present, no main recurring character seems to talk about going to church much (or, in the case of Willow Rosenberg [Alyson Hannigan], synagogue), and specific tenets of traditional religious doctrine are rarely mentioned beyond the definitive existence of a soul.¹ A still deeper analysis will show that while the humans in Joss Whedon's world may not express overt religious sentiments, vampires in the Buffyverse form a locus of religious experience through which viewers can examine important tenets of faith, particularly conversion, salvation, redemption, and the difficulty of change and connection. Thus, through an examination of the symbolic conversion of humans into vampires, one can begin to unravel the philosophy of spirituality evinced within the Buffyverse and discover the manifold religious and spiritual connections within the shows.

When humans are converted into vampires in the Buffyverse, the internal transformation is as powerful and immediate as the external one, mirroring intense religious conversion. The newly initiated embrace their incipient power and disdain their former status to the point of often killing their families as their first act as a vampire. They are sure of their place in the world and have a connection with evil and often with each other. Their conversion is neat and simple. Yet when vampires such as Angel (David Boreanaz), Spike (James Marsters), Darla (Julie Benz), and even Harmony (Mercedes McNab) try to become more human, Whedon emphasizes atonement and redemption as well as agonizing existential questions over right and wrong, good and evil, change and stagnation, and connection and isolation. Vampires sans souls do not engage in such spiritual philosophizing, and in direct opposition to those vampires, Whedon's ensouled vampires do grow and change, but not easily.

This essay argues that Whedon's vampires represent convincing symbols of spiritual conversion that have current relevance to the experiences of converts (and deconverts) worldwide. Whedon's depiction of conversion parallels a nuanced philosophy of religion articulated by William James which argues that those who engage with complex notions of good and evil are often miserable, but ultimately experience life in a fuller way than those who are convinced of their place in the world. Whedon emphasizes the struggle to connect with others that so many contemporary people face. His ensouled vampires encounter profound challenges, but also experience profound change.

William James and the Once- and Twice-Born

In 1900–1902, William James gave the prestigious Gifford Lectures at Edinburgh which led to his influential book *The Varieties of Religious Experience*. The word “variety” is key in this essay

because James's lens can be employed to examine many different expressions of religion and spirituality, as he himself did in the lectures. I will use James as a starting point to analyze how Joss Whedon and his collaborators created a universe in which vampires represent the easy and sure path to spiritual satisfaction, a state James calls "healthy-minded." James refers to the healthy-minded as "once-born" in that they do not need a spiritual rebirth to be firm in their religious convictions. He argues that the once-born are "fatally forbidden to linger ... over the darker aspects of the universe.... The capacity for even a transient sadness or a momentary humility seems cut off from them."² Speaking of Walt Whitman as a representative of the once-born, James argues that Whitman had "infected" admirers into his "cult," telling words that echo the process of conversion from human to vampire in the Buffyverse.³ Of course, Whedon's vampires are evil and thus represent a mirror image of the condition James describes.⁴ Where the once-born see only good in the world, the vampires experience only evil. Yet authorial intent remains the same: James and Whedon both argue that despite the allure of being completely sure of one's place in the universe and thus healthy-minded, such thinking represents an overly simplistic reading of that universe.

In contrast to the healthy-minded, James notes that the "morbid-minded" or "soul-sick" long for a conversion that will begin to reconcile their divided selves; a conversion which makes them "twice-born." According to James, the morbid-minded more clearly recognize the ebb and flow of good and ill in the world; and James, on behalf of the twice-born, critiques the once-born for their overly simplistic view of life, namely their failure to engage with or at least contemplate matters of ultimate concern. For the once-born, the world is a whole and exciting place. For the soul-sick, it can be "remote, strange, sinister, uncanny."⁵ And those who come through the other side of the crisis provoked by being morbid-minded, like Spike, maintain a complex and meaningful view of life but without the tendency to melancholy. It is through this lens that Whedon explores the impact of conversion, spirituality, and the unsettling but realistic fact that one must ask difficult questions in order to grow, change, and deeply connect.⁶

Common Vampires: The Once-Born

While vampires in the Buffyverse seem to have no clear belief in a deity per se, their rites parallel religion at many points and they often think of themselves as god-like. In fact, scholars have often noted that vampires in the Buffyverse seem to be the *only* characters that pay much attention to religion at all. Buffy (Sarah Michelle Gellar) and her comrades use a cross, but it is a defensive weapon against vampires more than an instrument of devotion. Even Buffy, who has been to some version of heaven, has doubts about the existence of God.⁷

In contrast, vampires depend and even thrive on the rituals most often associated with religion, and this is key to understanding how the human-to-vampire conversion is symbolically representative of issues involving religious conversion that are presented throughout the series. When humans first become vampires, they all go through a rebirth of sorts that initiates them into the world of the vampire. As scholar of religion Mircea Eliade points out, all such initiations are religious in nature, because "the change of existential status" leads to a completely new identity.⁸ In other words, the new initiate has become "another" through a process equivalent to a new "birth."⁹ Vampires in the Buffyverse consistently speak of their conversions as births that open up an entire new world to them.

The series also symbolically reinforces this idea in several ways. The vampire Drusilla (Juliet Landau) often refers to her maker Angelus as “Daddy” and likens siring to having a baby. The Master (Mark Metcalf) promises Darla that she will be “reborn” (“Darla,” *Angel* 2.7). And, of course, most new vampires are symbolically born when they claw their way out of the earth. It is in this sense that vampires are once-born: they are whole and complete upon conversion. From that moment forward, they are able to avoid morbid-mindedness.

Once a new vampire has entered this world, the rites and symbols most often associated with religion continue. The entirety of season one of *Buffy* deals with the ancient vampire known as the Master, who is trapped in a subterranean church beneath Sunnydale spouting off prophecies with religious élan. In the very first episode of the series his vampire henchman Luke offers a ritualistic prayer complete with an “Amen.” In the second, Luke feeds off the Master’s blood in a clear allusion to the Eucharist. We even learn that vampires have a patron saint. Yet it is appropriately when humans are first converted into vampires that we see the clearest connections to religious conversion. Vampires tend either to want to convert their family members, as with Spike, or, more often, to kill their family in a complete literal and symbolic rejection of their former way of life, as with Angelus and minor vampire characters such as Zachary Kralik.¹⁰ These violent rejections of identity symbolically parallel the experiences many converts face today as the new initiates undergo a concurrent celebration of their new life and a forceful rejection of their old.

Conversion stories are usually portrayed as joyous occasions—indeed, one of the more famous conversions is the one that C. S. Lewis describes in *Surprised by Joy*. This deeply spiritual joy is mirrored in Whedon’s vampire world.¹¹ The experience of conversion in the Buffyverse was set from the very second episode when Sunnydale High student Jesse McNally is turned into a vampire. When Buffy and fellow “Scooby Gang” member Xander (Nicholas Brendon) find out about the conversion, Xander offers his sympathy.¹² Jesse replies, “I feel good Xander. I feel strong. I’m connected to everything.” When Xander tries to remind him of their friendship, Jesse says, “You’re like a shadow to me now.” The break in identity goes so far that some hours later Jesse refers to himself in the third person, abandoning his name in much the same way that Angelus, Spike, and Darla do. Before being staked, he says, “I’m a new man,” an apt description of the sudden change in identity felt by many new converts, almost like flipping a switch.

Bookending the series from Jesse in season one to season seven, in “Conversations with Dead People” Buffy meets up with the recently reborn Holden Webster, her former classmate. As they make small talk, Buffy tells him that she is sorry he was converted, and he immediately comments, “No, no, it feels great. Strong. Like I’m connected to a powerful all-consuming evil.” This scene encapsulates one of the more ironic themes of the show: vampires are more connected, at least superficially, than many humans. Their complete and utter faith in their identity renders them able to be at peace in a way that those with souls cannot match. As Angel plainly says about being a soulless vampire, “It’s an easy way to live” (“Angel,” *Buffy* 1.7).

This model of conversion bears out across time as well as seasons in *Buffy*. In the years 1753 and 1888 respectively, Angelus and Spike awake to what they describe as glorious new worlds in deeply symbolic rituals of being born again. After she bites him, Darla lets Angelus drink blood from her bosom and then oversees what she refers to as a “birth” from the grave (“The Prodigal,” *Angel* 1.15). This scene is mirrored in the second season of *Angel* in “Reunion” (2.10) when Drusilla is brought in to sire the momentarily human Darla. Drusilla tells people that she is having a baby and places Darla

in dirt from which she will be born in white, gratefully throwing off her recent humanity. And as Spike says about his conversion, “Getting killed made me feel alive for the very first time” (“Fool for Love,” *Buffy* 5.7). The ambiguity of those with a soul is so profound that in the Buffyverse only once-born vampires possess absolute certainty about anything.

Yet within the philosophy of spirituality that Whedon articulates, this is consistent. In the Buffyverse as noted, vampires are most closely associated with religious ritual. Such an association allows the famously “angry atheist” Whedon to implicitly critique those who think that adhering to a specific religious creed assures their spiritual salvation. Whedon taps into one of the major trends of the postmodern age by having his nonvampire characters and those vampires with a soul seek out a nondoctrinal spiritual path that may or may not lead to a resolute religious conviction, but ideally leads to some sort of understanding of their place in the world. As sociologist Charles Taylor notes, there is currently among many people a “sense ... that this life is empty, flat, devoid of higher purpose.”¹³ That vacuum must be replaced by “a personal search” for meaning; one which plays out for several characters in the Buffyverse.¹⁴ The once-born vampires may be healthy-minded in that they are free of doubt, but without doubt, there can be no questions, and without questions, there can be no growth. The Turok-Han, the protean vampires who reside literally in the hellmouth, are the purest expression of the once-born from the side of evil; killing machines with complete conviction about their purpose in the world and without existential anxiety, but also devoid of connection and the sometimes troubling but necessary search for deeper meaning that is the only route to personal and spiritual growth.

Uncommon Vampires: The Road to Twice-Born

William James notes that to the morbid-minded, the healthy-minded “seem unspeakably blind and shallow.”¹⁵ It is true that those with sick souls are cognizant of evil and as a result are often led to morbid-mindedness in their contemplation of the world. Yet their way of being encapsulates far more potential than those who are healthy-minded because the twice-born have an opportunity to experience a “deeper kind of conscious being” than the once-born via their more complete worldview.¹⁶ But even those who long for a second birth still experience a more complete and complex understanding of the existence. In the Buffyverse, Harmony, Darla, Angel, and Spike represent the clearest examples of the way Whedon symbolically uses different notions of conversion, questioning, and connection to express a philosophy of spirituality.

The vampire Harmony presents an opportunity for exploration of the symbolic quest for spiritual satisfaction in that she stands at a liminal space between vampire and human and serves as a counterpoint to Spike and Angel. In high school, Harmony was shallow, vain, and a bit of a ditz. As a vampire, it does not appear that she is much different, but there are key moments that show an element of desire for growth fueled by an uncertainty lacking in other vampires. She attempts friendship with humans, particularly Cordelia (Charisma Carpenter) at first, a friend from her human days. Her attempts to bond with coworker Winifred/Fred (Amy Acker) are even more notable, as Fred is a stranger and not someone she knew from her past. Harmony also successfully swears off of human blood for a time. She even possesses, at least to a degree, that all-important quality in the Buffyverse introspection. She notes, “I don’t have a soul so I have to try a lot harder” (“Harm’s Way,” *Angel* 5.9

Apparently unique among vampires, she tries to control herself without aid of a soul or any other kind of device such as the implant in Spike.

To fully appreciate the spiritual philosophy of the Buffyverse, it is important to consider how and why Harmony seeks to become good. The ironic answer is that she lacks the connection to a higher power that other vampires in the show mention.¹⁷ She is evil upon conversion, to be sure, as all of Whedon's vampires are, but her half-hearted attempts at villainy produce no concrete results, and her vampire partner of choice, Spike, uses her and ultimately rejects her for the vampire slayer. Harmony then tries to connect with humans, with some success. But with the conversion of her new friend Fred into a demon and the failure of a renewed relationship with Spike, she seesaws back to the dark side and betrays Angel.¹⁸ She learns what Spike and Angel already know: it is not as simple as just saying "I'm one of the good guys now," as she does in the *Angel* episode "Disharmony" (2.17).

Yet Angel understands her betrayal and seems to appreciate her struggles. He appears to recognize that while his soul was restored and Spike began his journey to ensoulment with an inhibitor chip in his head, Harmony set out to be good without any aid. But without connections, her attempts are largely futile. As she affirms in "Harm's Way," "Since I got vamped at graduation, I've had trouble connecting with people." Harmony is unwilling or unable to commit to either being fully vampire or fully good, and thus vacillates between being once- and twice-born. She occupies a position in a kind of Acheron, cut off from connections with good or evil, and is left to fend for herself where other vampires find connections up to and including love.

Darla presents another intriguing case study of conversion. A flashback establishes that she was a syphilitic prostitute who was near death in the year 1609 when she was converted ("Darla"). The Master, ever fond of religious ritual, appears to her in priestly garb as her "savior," and she stays by his side for hundreds of years with an interregnum during her time with Angelus. She is dispatched quickly in season one of *Buffy*, staked by Angel in the seventh episode. Yet it is her resurrection by the evil law firm Wolfram & Hart in *Angel* that propels her on a complicated path to salvation. These lawyers bring her back from the dead in a scheme to turn Angel evil. Darla is brought back as a human, and therefore has a soul, but much like Angel, it was forced upon her as opposed to earned, and her guilt is monumental. Her connection to a higher evil is severed and her certainty is quashed. She begs Angel to turn her back into a vampire to escape the searing doubts that come with being morbid-minded, but he refuses. Darla faces a unique identity crisis in that her soul is moving her away from her vampire self, but she has not been human in four centuries. Much like other vampires, Darla completely rejects her former identity, noting that "I'm not like her, whoever she was" ("Darla").¹⁹

Angel will not assist Darla back into the certainty of the vampire world through conversion, but rather promises to help her atone. In a series of flashbacks we learn about Darla's selfishness as a vampire; she even left her great love Angelus to a mob at one point ("The Trial," *Angel* 2.9). But as a human, she begins to understand the horrors she caused.²⁰ She has no time to act on this remorse, however, because Wolfram & Hart brought her back exactly as she was as a human—with terminal syphilis.

Angel thus embarks on a series of trials to win Darla's life back so she can begin a process of redemption.²¹ Although Angel is successful, when it is discovered that Darla has already been resurrected once, she is left to die. Yet Darla has seen the trials through Angel's eyes and has gained new perspective. She fully commits to the idea of atonement in the limited time that remains for her. Darla is thus twice-born via Angel's mediation, willing to accept her fate and die on the cusp of a

unified human identity. Drusilla and Wolfram & Hart intervene and Darla is converted into a vampire again (“Reunion,” *Angel* 2.10).²² As a newly sired vampire, Darla is once more full of certainty and consumed by evil.

Angel halts Darla in her typical pattern of destruction in an unexpected manner. Angel, near complete nihilistic despair over the evil he sees in the world, has sex with his old lover Darla, risking a moment of true happiness and the loss of his soul. But not only does he not lose his soul, he returns from the nihilistic precipice and recommits to his own journey of atonement (“Reprise,” *Angel* 2.15). Darla’s confidence is sorely shaken by her failure to convert Angel, but it is shattered when she discovers that he has impregnated her.

This impossible and unprecedented occurrence in the Buffyverse leads to profound consequences for Darla. She is given a second chance at redemption. Similar to her brief second stint as a human, she at first tries to reject a chance at atonement by aborting the fetus, but the child is under some form of magical protection. She soon begins to feel empathy for her former victims and love for her unborn child, ostensibly because she shares a soul with him. As her pregnancy continues and her love grows, she embraces her feelings but fears that they will disappear after the birth when she no longer shares a soul. In other words, as a twice-born individual, she is deeply aware of evil in the world and even in herself. In an act that consciously reenacts Angelus’s birth in an alley, Darla stakes herself and turns to dust, leaving the healthy baby crying, but safe, on the ground (“Lullaby,” *Angel* 3.9). This scene forms a counterpoint to one several episodes earlier when Darla tells Angel that she did him a favor by making him a vampire. Angel replies, “You damned me” (“Darla”). In one alley, she took a life. In another, she gave her own life for another’s. Through this action her atonement is complete, and her redemption is confirmed in a later episode when she returns as an angelic emissary of sorts (“Inside Out,” *Angel* 4.17).

While Harmony and Darla are important examples of conversion to consider, any essay that deals with ensouled vampires must attempt to make sense of Angel and Spike. They are both (eventually) vampires with a soul, but one is morose where one is light, one is Irish where the other is English, and most significantly, one had his soul forced upon him where the other earned his soul through trial. While there is a suggestion that Angel’s much longer trials will end in the reward of his becoming human, his soul is not yet at ease. Angel had his soul restored by gypsies, or Romani, who wanted to punish him for killing one of their own. Angel would thus be tormented for eternity with guilt over all he had killed. The Romani also put in a mystical clause that if Angel were to ever have one moment of true happiness, he would lose his soul. This proviso puts him in a much more precarious position than Spike, who earned his soul free and clear. In fact, Angelus does return in season two of *Buffy* and season four of *Angel*. It also takes Angel many decades after his ensoulment to fully commit to redemption. He even links back up with Darla after the restoration of his soul to try and continue their swath of destruction, but his new morbid-minded status prevents him from doing so.

The encounter with Darla during the Boxer Rebellion is significant in that it draws a clear line between healthy- and morbid-mindedness. Angel tries to go back to his vampire family, but as James notes, “To the healthy-minded ... the sick soul seems unmanly and diseased.”²³ Darla is disgusted with Angel’s doubt and uncertainty and mocks him as a pretend savior to a band of missionaries she killed whom he was trying to protect (“Darla”). Over the course of the series she frequently castigates his soul as something “filthy” and “disgusting” that “sickens” her. But it is in that moment of Darla’s initial rejection that he recognizes his morbid-mindedness; he quickly spins into a decades-long

turmoil, completely disconnected from life. Angel thus falls into the deeper part of James's framework of the morbid-minded, in that when atoning for "misdeeds" those who are soul-sick realize that a "mere apology" will never be enough, but that "every pound of flesh exacted is soaked with all its blood."²⁴ At their most acute, the soul-sick are prone to "ignore that of all good."²⁵ Angel does not kill anyone, but he does not intervene in life either. He subsists off of rats and makes no connections with anyone.²⁶ It takes intervention from the demon Whistler, who helps balance good and evil, to get Angel onto the path to redemption and connection. And Buffy, of course. Angel sees Buffy and wants to help her. But when they fall in love, he realizes again how precarious his position is. After they make love and Angelus takes over due to that moment of true happiness, he repeats the old patterns: killing those closest to him; or, as Giles (Anthony Stewart Head) says, those who most remind him of his humanity ("Innocence," *Buffy* 2.14). As Angelus says in that same episode, "[Buffy] made me feel like a human being. That's not the kind of thing you just forgive."

To save the world, Buffy is forced to kill Angel just as his soul is magically restored ("Becoming: Part 2," *Buffy* 2.22).²⁷ Buffy's action sends Angel into a hell dimension where he suffers one hundred years of agony and torture. Twice Angel had his soul restored by magic. The first time he spent one hundred years on earth in torment, the second time in hell. But in season three of *Buffy*, he comes back from *above* in a white shaft of light ("Faith, Hope, and Trick"). He has earned a measure of redemption through suffering and should be able to feel more at peace with himself. Only by literally going through hell can he regain a firmer hold on his soul through what Eliade notes is a common motif in many cultures: the "initiatory ordeal *par excellence*" of the hero descending into hell.²⁸ And there is strong suggestion that Angel will face a smoother road to redemption; a key intervention by some higher power underscores this when in a fit of intense guilt (and spurred on by a primeval force of evil) he tries to kill himself ("Amends," *Buffy* 3.10). He waits for the sun to come up and consume him in flames, but a once-in-a-lifetime snowstorm hits Sunnydale and he is spared.

He is sorely tested later in *Angel* to be sure, but he does not lose his soul after having sex with Darla, and as the series ends he is beginning to explore a relationship with Nina, a werewolf.²⁹ When Angelus does return in season four of *Angel*, it is a calculated move that could help save the world. The curse is not negated, but he need not withdraw from those to whom he is connected. Angel still faces a road of misery because, as the show establishes, connections are what keep people from too much existential angst and Angel has to be careful that his connections do not make him too happy. On the other hand, he cannot disavow connections because that leads to a deep disaffectedness at best and near-soulless behavior at worst.³⁰ Ultimately, Angel is mostly able to thread that existential needle through the intervention of friends such as Doyle (Glenn Quinn), Cordelia, and even Spike to some degree. Angel is usually connected to the complex world around him, and as he tells Nina, "If you separate yourself from the ones you love, the monster wins" ("Unleashed," *Angel* 5.3).

Yet the vagaries of his connections remain the reason that Angel cannot move into a full expression of his twice-born status and a complete unification of his conflicted soul. As Darla says in an early episode of *Buffy*, "You're not one of them." Angel replies, "No. But I'm not exactly one of you either" ("Angel"). Many scholars argue that Buffy is a savior for both Angel and Spike, and there are certainly overtones of that, but really it is simple human connection that time and again saves them both (and allows Darla to save her son).³¹

Indeed, Spike quests for his soul because of burgeoning connections with others. When considering

Spike, it is important to note that his ability to seek reclamation of his soul was arguably aided by the chip which the Initiative placed in his head. The chip essentially negated his ability to harm humans in any way by causing blinding pain in his head if he attempted such harm, but he can fight demons and vampires, and does so with gusto. This puts him in close contact with the slayer, and he forms a connection with her that probably would not have existed otherwise. Yet despite the chip, there has always been something different about Spike. Contrary to most vampires, he converts his mother into a vampire instead of killing her.³² He does not have the same taste for ritual that other vampires have as shown in the *Buffy* episode “School Hard” when he kills the Anointed One (whom he calls the “annoying one”) and calls for a “little less ritual and a little more fun.”³³ He works with the Scooby Gang in season two, *prior* to being defanged, in order to stop Angelus from destroying the world, a place he quite likes. He genuinely mourns the loss of Drusilla as well. More than most vampires, he does not take connections for granted, and is vigilant to maintain them.

Yet his lack of a soul does often frustrate his connections in a manner similar to what Harmony experiences. For example, in *Buffy*’s “Fool for Love,” Spike professes his love for Buffy only to be told that he is “beneath” her, a comment echoed by a love interest when he was human. This insult resonates with him even more strongly as a harmless vampire in that it relates to his liminal status between monster and man. He has no soul and is not a man, but he cannot (easily) kill humans either, so he is not a monster. In this state of identity crisis he retrieves a gun to kill Buffy (as noted, the chip causes extreme debilitating pain, but he could conceivably kill), but when he sees her crying he relents and consoles her. She allows him to comfort her, moving him back in the direction of being a man. Indeed, in the final episode of season five, Spike tells Buffy, “I know I’m a monster, but you treat me like a man.” Such experiences serve as a dress rehearsal of sorts that allow him to see a glimmer of what a complicated but genuine connection could be like, as opposed to his often ephemeral vampire connections. This idea is underscored by his relationship with Drusilla. As unthinking killing machines, they experienced love and a connection, but arguably not a profound one. When Spike evinced the first hint of change, Drusilla was gone. It took Spike some time to get over her, but when he did, he realized that their connection was a shadow of what it could be as a twice-born individual.

With this history in mind, it is easier to understand *Buffy* episodes like “Crush” (5.14). Spike sees Buffy sitting alone and, recognizing the critical power of connection, tries to talk to her as a friend, or at least a colleague. He is rebuffed, and this lack of connection tilts him back toward evil as he kidnaps Buffy and offers to kill his former lover Drusilla for her. Spike insists he has changed, but Buffy says he is just inhibited by the chip, like “a serial killer in prison.” She is partially right, as evidenced by Spike’s attack on a woman he thinks is Buffy in “Smashed,” his amoral and potentially destructive deal with a demon in “As You Were,” and his sexual assault of Buffy in “Seeing Red.” Yet while Drusilla thinks Spike is simply being conditioned in the same way that an electric fence conditions a dog, he is growing and changing to the extent that he quests for his soul—an intervention Harmony never experienced. In essence, as a morbid-minded person he longs for a twice-born conversion and actively seeks it, and thus is the purest expression in the *Buffyverse* of the kind of individual discussed by James.

Spike’s growth is reflected in actions like his kindness to Buffy’s mother and in the tasks he performs for Buffy for which he will not get credit. More significantly, he does not betray Buffy’s sister Dawn (Michelle Trachtenberg) when he has every chance to do so under torture by the evil goddess Glory (another classic once-born character, played by Clare Kramer), a fact Buffy may never have known (“Intervention,” *Buffy* 5.18).³⁴ These acts are done not for calculated reasons, like tricking Buffy into

loving him, but for selfless reasons brought on by the connections he is starting to feel. In fact, after Buffy's death at the end of season five, Spike continues to help the Scooby Gang and watch over Dawn. Buffy tells Spike that he cannot love because he has no soul, while Drusilla claims that vampires can experience devotion. But vampire love is for the most part shallow. Angel says that Darla, his lover of 150 years, "never" made him happy because he "didn't have a soul" ("Dear Boy," *Angel* 2.5). Human love based on a more intimate connection is much harder, but broadens life's perspective so much that in the Buffyverse it has spiritual overtones not found among common vampires.

Spike's quest for his soul is even more revealing. He goes to a cave in a village on the other side of the world to participate in a demon trial that will result in the restoration of his soul if successful, which echoes Eliade's discussions of initiation rites ("Villains," *Buffy* 6.20). This poses an interesting ontological question for the series in that vampires in the Buffyverse have the memories and characteristics of the human they inhabit, but a demonic soul.³⁵ So why does Spike's demonic self voluntarily seek a soul that will suppress it, as we know from Angel's experience? I contend that it is through the experience of longing for twice-born status that was brought on by his connections. He succeeds where Harmony fails.

Despite occasional conflicting descriptions of the nature of a vampire, Giles argues that there are two types of monsters: ones beyond redemption; and ones that not only can be redeemed, but *want* to be redeemed ("Beauty and the Beasts," *Buffy* 3.4). The chip in his head allows Spike, already different from other vampires, to begin the difficult process towards redemption. Giles is also right in seeing a higher purpose in Spike's inability to fight humans ("The I in Team," *Buffy* 4.13). That inhibition led to his soul and arguably his salvation.

Spike's sacrifice during his trials thus allows him to come through the experience of morbid-mindedness into a full expression of being twice-born and what William James describes as "a loss of all worry [with] a willingness to be, even though the outer conditions should remain the same," a condition markedly different from Angel.³⁶ Spike is far too interesting to be a complete saint in the sense that James describes, but he does unquestionably value the fight for "abstract moral ideals."³⁷ As the one character that is able to largely unify his disparate halves of monster and man, Spike's symbolic role as savior is even more dramatic. In the *Buffy* episode "Beneath You" (7.2.) he drapes himself over a cross in a church in a classic savior pose. Just like his soul, the cross burns, but his soul allows him to grow throughout season seven and in the last episode to save the world. To solidify the message, Spike *literally* feels his soul as he sacrifices himself for everyone else—like Darla, the ultimate form of atonement. The message is that those that are twice-born such as Spike are exemplars; human enough to continue growing and changing, but internally unified enough to foster connections and avoid chronic depression.

To be sure, Spike does have some redemptive issues to work through in the basement of Sunnydale High during season seven of *Buffy*, but his transition to feeling at relative peace was much smoother than Angel's. Angel himself recognizes this and resents Spike for making it seem so easy. Spike even claims in the *Angel* episode "Just Rewards" (5.2) not to care much about atonement at all, but in "Damage" (5.11) when one of the newly activated slayers mistakes him for the killer of her parents and tortures him, he is forced to once again face his own deeds. He refers to himself and Angel as monsters, and he has changed so much that he is also able to recognize that while he and Angel were both innocent victims as well before they were converted, it does not excuse their subsequent crimes.

Fittingly, just before Spike earns his soul at the end of season six of *Buffy*, the background music is that of Sarah MacLachlan singing the prayer of Saint Francis, which ends with the words “it is in dying that we are born to eternal life.” Spike successfully kills his demon self and negates his vampiric birth in favor of his rebirth as a twice-born ensouled being. As Buffy herself tells him, “You’re alive because I saw you change. Because I saw your penance” (“Never Leave Me,” *Buffy* 7.9). He, more than any other character, moves from once-born into a full expression of a twice-born individual to emerge as a complex *and* largely confident character. Usually in the Buffyverse complex characters are not very confident, and confident characters are none too complex. Spike represents the one character that reconciles his twice-born personality, and that makes him unique in the Buffyverse.

Conclusion: The Spiritual Philosophy of the Buffyverse

In the *Buffy* episode “Lie to Me” (2.7), a group of soul-sick humans try to convince a pack of vampires to convert them. Speaking in directly spiritual terms, one young woman asks, “Do you really think [the vampires] will bless us?” For her and her friends, who refer to one another as “true believers,” the opportunity to convert represents a chance to “ascend to a new level of consciousness” with a “chance for immortality.” But more than anything, the idea of conversion represents the chance to be freed of doubt and loneliness. Angel notes that such desires are far from unique. Buffy of course tries to stop them and is cast as an unbeliever who taints the group. Even the title of the episode evokes a distinction between the once-born and those who crave a second birth. Buffy asks Giles to “lie to me” about whether or not life is easy. Giles replies, “Yes, it’s terribly simple. The good guys are always stalwart and true, the bad guys are easily distinguished by their pointy horns or black hats, and we always defeat them and save the day. No one ever dies and everybody lives happily ever after.” A classic soul-sick character, Buffy simply replies, “Liar.”³⁸ Similar encounters take place throughout the Buffyverse and help to illustrate Whedon’s philosophy of spirituality, a philosophy clearly seen in the vampire characters of *Buffy* and *Angel*.

William James’s notion of the once-born and twice-born are clearly reflected in *Buffy* and *Angel*, and conversions in the series symbolically represent a coherent spiritual philosophy. The significance lies in the fact that “healthy-mindedness is inadequate as a philosophical doctrine, because the evil facts which it refuses positively to account for are a genuine portion of reality, and they may after all be the best key to life’s significance, and possibly the only openers of our eyes to the deepest levels of truth.”³⁹ Vampires are a mirror image of this position, failing to recognize any good with extremely rare exception, thus forming “a formally less complete” system.⁴⁰ They seem to experience deep connections, but they only *feel* deep because of the vampire’s lack of an evolved consciousness. Perhaps it is fitting that the atheist Whedon has his vampires perform baroque but empty religious rituals where other characters explore deeper but more abstract notions of spirituality. Whedon effectively mirrors so much of modern life with his emphasis on spirituality over strict religious observance and practice. Those who follow rites and rituals such as the vampires are coded as empty inside. Other characters, the morbid-minded, are nowhere near as satisfied with life, but they are able to touch something of the divine in those moments in which they connect. Whedon thus symbolically emphasizes that although the trials of contemporary life often lead us to feel like the world is ending if we can only connect, then our friends will be there to fight the demons we all face, at least until the next apocalypse.

NOTES

1. Of course, in later seasons Willow becomes a Wiccan and often invokes higher powers. The characters in *Angel* also interact with the mysterious god-like “Powers That Be.”
2. William James, *Varieties of Religious Experience* (1902; repr., Charleston: BiblioBazaar, 2007), 8.
3. Ibid., 87. Despite that passage, James admired Whitman in many ways. See John Tessitore, “The ‘Sky-Blue’ Variety: William James, Walt Whitman, and the Limits of Healthy-Mindedness,” *Nineteenth-Century Literature* 62, no. 4 (March 2008): 493–526.
4. K. Dale Koontz correctly notes that in the *Angel* episode “Unleashed” (5.3) Angel says that vampires “can control themselves if they want to.” However, Angel was talking about himself and trying to calm down a person who had recently been turned into a werewolf. See Koontz, *Faith and Choice in the Works of Joss Whedon* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2008), 43.
5. James, *Varieties*, 142.
6. Indeed, in the episodes featuring Jasmine (Gina Torres) where a goddess of sorts converts much of humanity to the equivalent of once-born (season four of *Angel*), Angel initially expresses relief that the “constant questioning” is over. But since by nature he is morbid-minded, he eventually turns to those questions once more.
7. In “Conversations with Dead People” (*Buffy* 7.7), Buffy’s response when directly queried about whether there is proof of God is, “Nothing solid.”
8. Mircea Eliade, *Rites and Symbols of Initiation: The Mysteries of Birth and Rebirth* (1958; repr., New York: Harper & Row, 1965), 1.
9. Mircea Eliade, *Myths, Rites, Symbols: A Mircea Eliade Reader* (New York: Harper & Row, 1975), 164, 174. *Buffy* scholars often rightly note the show’s reliance on Joseph Campbell’s delineation of monomyth with its attendant concerns of initiation, yet Eliade’s emphasis on the religious nature of initiation better explains in this instance the ways in which vampires use it. For a Campbellian perspective, see, for example, Rhonda Wilcox, *Why Buffy Matters: The Art of “Buffy the Vampire Slayer”* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2005), particularly chapter two; and David Fritts, “Buffy’s Seven-Season Initiation,” in “*Buffy* Meets the Academy: Essays on the Episodes and Scripts as Text,” ed. Kevin K. Durand (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2009), 32–44. See also chapter two of Joseph Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (1949; repr., Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1973).
10. Kralik is featured in the *Buffy* episode “Helpless” (3.12). He talks about killing and eating his mother and plans to convert Buffy to a vampire and get her to do the same to her own mother, Joyce (Kristine Sutherland). The rebirth motif is emphasized here as well, as Kralik tells Joyce that Buffy will wake as a vampire and that her face will be the first thing she “eats,” as opposed to “sees.” Another example is the vampire convert Penn from “Somnambulist” (*Angel* 1.11), who derives such satisfaction from killing his family that he reenacts the murders for two hundred years. Vampires also consider their fellow converts as their new family. The Master and Drusilla in particular are fond of

using familial language to describe the vampires they have relations with. In another nod to the rejection of human identity, the further away a vampire gets from his or her human existence, the less human they look. The Master has “grown past the curse of human features” (“Darla”), and the ancient vampire Kakistos has cloven hands and feet and is similarly unable to look human (“Faith, Hope, and Trick,” *Buffy* 3.3).

[11.](#) Many of the conversion stories that James relates are indistinguishable from the conversions experienced by Whedon’s vampires. Since Whedon is so adept with symbols, this is not entirely unexpected, and, as James says, in conversion “a complete division is established in the twinkling of an eye between the old life and the new” (James, 199). One particular convert James refers to recounts, “I did not know where I was: I did not know whether I was Alphonse or another. I only felt myself changed and believed myself another me; I looked for myself in myself and did not find myself. In the bottom of my soul I felt an explosion of the most ardent joy” (206). Such is the experience of Whedon’s vampires, minus the soul. Examples such as this can be found throughout a great deal of religious literature, further underscoring the symbolic connection of vampire conversion to religious conversion. In *Expectations and Experience: Explaining Religious Conversion*, Eugene V. Gallagher writes that the religious hymn “Amazing Grace” “implies a strong devaluation of the individual’s previous status and an exaltation of the current status. Noteworthy also is the dependence on an outside agent. The transformation so briefly but forcefully recounted is not the result of any individual effort, of earnest reading or the diligent practice of self-help exercises; it was the result of grace—grace so sweet and sudden as to appear ‘amazing’” (1). Vampires in the Buffyverse describe their conversions in much the same way.

[12.](#) Buffy and her friends often refer to themselves as the “Scooby Gang.”

[13.](#) Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 2007), 506.

[14.](#) *Ibid.*, 507.

[15.](#) James, *Varieties*, 151.

[16.](#) *Ibid.*, 147.

[17.](#) *Buffy* fans are passionate and articulate and often speculate about such issues. One fan theory is that there is a correlation between how much blood is drained during the siring process and that converted vampire’s later human qualities. See, for example, the *Buffy* FAQ page on imdb.com.

[18.](#) While beyond the scope of this essay, the struggles that Illyria (Amy Acker) faces (the demon that Fred transforms into) would make an interesting topic of study in terms of conversion narratives within the Buffyverse. Anya (Emma Caulfield) represents another potential topic of study as she converts from vengeance demon to human to vengeance demon to human. Anya in particular stands in counterpoint to vampires, as she is initiated into the world of humans by experiencing hardships such as the death of a loved one and heartbreak in a relationship. Both Illyria and Anya experience deep identity crises; Anya’s resolves only through her sacrificial death to help save the world in the last episode of *Buffy*. Illyria’s redemption continues in the canonical *Angel* comic series. On the other side, those converted by Jasmine are clearly once-born, and it is telling that Whedon has his characters reject that world. Finally, other examples of conversion such as in “Halloween” (*Buffy* 2.6), where characters actually transform into the costumes they are wearing, also underscore how Whedon

develops a coherent spiritual philosophy by portraying the tantalizing but ultimately unsatisfying status of being once-born.

[19.](#) It should be noted that Darla actually is a human at the time of her rejection of her former self, but she is speaking of her 1600s human self. The resurrected Darla more closely identifies with her vampire days, as they were so much longer. In fact, that is much of her problem; she has no human identity to fall back on.

[20.](#) In a moment infused with Lacanian overtones, Darla breaks a mirror to avoid her own reflection (“Darla”). Of course, Whedon plays with our preconceived notions as much as he plays with genre, and instead of seeing an ideal “I” in the mirror, Darla sees an “I” she hates—one capable of guilt and remorse. This scene is mirrored, so to speak, in the *Buffy* episode “Who Are You?” (4.16) when Buffy and morally questionable vampire slayer Faith (Eliza Dushku) switch bodies, and Faith-as-Buffy pummels her own self, calling herself “disgusting.”

[21.](#) Angel’s quest in many ways foreshadows Spike’s later trials to win his soul.

[22.](#) In another nod to the persistent motif in the series of vampire conversion as a birth, Darla feeds on blood from Drusilla’s bosom during the transformation.

[23.](#) James, *Varieties*, 151–152.

[24.](#) *Ibid.*, 131.

[25.](#) *Ibid.*, 137. Much of Angel’s early existence post–Angelus falls under this paradigm, and season two of *Angel* explores this side to him as well, particularly when he discovers in “Reprise” that Los Angeles, his home base (and indeed the entire planet), is headquarters for a primal form of evil because evil thrives on the harm that humans do to one another. He becomes so prey to what James calls “pathological melancholy” that in the episode “Reunion” he lets Darla and Drusilla murder a home full of lawyers and their spouses.

[26.](#) Angel’s subsistence on rats further marks a symbolic link to the morbid-minded, as James figuratively discusses such people “grubbing in rat-holes” (152).

[27.](#) In a common motif of the series that reflects some religious rituals, blood is the only thing that can close a universe-ending portal, and in this case, it is the blood of Angel.

[28.](#) Mircea Eliade, *The Quest: History and Meaning in Religion* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1969), 123.

[29.](#) Angel does lose his soul in “Awakening” (*Angel* 4.10) when a shaman creates a fantasy world for him wherein he has sex with Cordelia, but the world is an impossibly saccharine confection that bears little resemblance to his real life.

[30.](#) This line between isolation and community is established in, among other episodes, “To Shanshu in L.A.” (*Angel* 1.22), where Angel is so disconnected that he does not seem to care about a prophecy about his ultimate fate. When he reestablishes his connections, he reflects on the prophecy, which has been translated to say that he might become human one day, and simply but sincerely states, “That’d

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