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"Religion Freaky" or a "Bunch of Men Who Died?" The (A)theology of *Buffy*

Introduction: "Nothing Solid"

(1) Early in the final season of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (*BtVS*), a vampire, who as a human knew Buffy in high school, interrupts their fight to the death to ask her a question. After first claiming to "defy" God and "all of his works," he then asks Buffy: "Does He exist? Is there word on that, by the way?" Buffy responds with a characteristic shrug, "nothing solid" ("Conversations with Dead People," 7007). *Nothing solid*. The answer resembles Buffy's other responses to issues of religious sincerity—she uses irony and humor to sidestep a topic that is implicitly related to her own existence and purpose. In Season Three, as Buffy and Giles search for evidence in a mausoleum, Giles explains to Buffy, "it's a reliquary. Used to house items of religious significance. Most commonly a finger or some other body part from a saint." Buffy's oft-quoted reply is "note to self: religion creepy" ("What's My Line" part 1, 2010). In Season Four she responds to an evangelizing college student that she "always meant" to accept Jesus Christ as her personal savior but then just "got really busy" ("The Freshman," 4001). Within the show itself, although ethical decisions and even religious rituals are presented seriously, the presence of traditional Christian symbols, churches, and divinity is generally lightly mocked.

(2) Buffy's vague response to this ultimate question of God's existence is more revealing than it might appear, and a closer reading of this scene opens up some complex questions about the role of God, religion, and theology in the show. By asking Buffy about the existence of God, this vampire/ex-classmate assumes that her position perhaps gives her some insight into the question of God's existence. Although he locates himself in *opposition* to God, it is the Slayer that he hopes might have a determinate answer. Her response, in turn, assumes that there is a possibility of an answer, that it is a question that *can* be solved. But the nature of the idea of God can be seen inhabiting the impossibility of an answer to that very question. Buffy's words, "nothing solid," express not only the show's ambivalence towards religion, but also the importance of iconic objectivity—the need for something *solid* that occupies space and can be located and framed by both character and viewers. This need for solidity in an answer to questions of indeterminate nature is characteristic of traditional interpretation—readings that presume stable meanings, origins, and autonomous existence. What I will attempt to demonstrate in this essay is that it is in the very tension between the two opposing words—"nothing" and "solid"—that the "theology" of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* is located.

"Does He Exist?"

"*Solid*"

(3) Critics writing about religious themes in *BtVS* cite a by now familiar set of touchstones: the use of holy water and crosses, the demons' reverence for relics, the battle between good and evil, and various mystical rituals that echo Judeo-Christian traditions. In the recent wave of criticism attempting to associate *BtVS* with fields of philosophy and critical theory, there has emerged a subset of *Buffy* Studies that has tried to

contain, categorize, or totalize the show as a work of religious art, or as a work that demonstrates a determinate religion or religious-ethical content. Fans and scholars have found in *Buffy* analogies with diverse strands of Christianity[1] or models for ethical behavior, a "practical theology," or a "domestic church."[2] The characters of Buffy and Angel are often seen as figures of Christ who descend to hell and back and sacrifice themselves for the greater good.[3] A more skeptical interpretation, although still oriented towards deterministic religious traditions, is offered by Lynn Schofield Clark in her book *From Angels to Aliens*, where she points to how much media in general and *Buffy* in particular capture and encourage the tendency of many young people to accept religious figures and themes while distrusting traditional institutions. In his lecture "God, New Religious Movements and *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*," Massimo Introvigne, like Clark, sees *Buffy* as appealing to a generation of "non-belonging believers." He quotes the beer drinking college students from "Beer Bad" (4005) who pretentiously claim "there will be no Thomas Aquinas at this table" as speaking more truly than they know of the distance between traditional theology and the supernatural world of *Buffy*.

(4) But however one reads these aspects of *BtVS*, there is no disputing that the show distances itself from traditional religious practices and beliefs. Although its emphasis on complex ethical issues necessarily connects to our culture's association of ethics with religion, it rarely if ever proposes a divine solution to these issues. And if its demons, monsters, and hell dimensions suggest both reflection and parody of Judeo-Christian mythology, the absence of divine presence and the characters' general indifference to religion is a common theme throughout the series. While *Buffy* may use, refer to, and suggest religious systems, ideas, rituals, and symbols, it rarely endorses them, explicitly or implicitly. There is never any statement of absolute meaning or divinity (good or bad) that is not ultimately made open to questioning and subversion. Theologically and otherwise, the show resists categorization and static meaning throughout, and, especially in the later years, introduces subversive elements onto the conceptual universe of the earlier seasons.

"Nothing"

(5) Other critics exploring the religious side of the show have concluded that it is definitively "not religious" at all and is indeed "atheistic." Gregory Sakal points out that despite the importance of "sacrifice," "salvation," and "redemption," and despite a few "arguably Christian overtones," the show is "decidedly" not Christian (239). Creator Joss Whedon has described himself as an "angry atheist," a comment that has also drawn a lot of attention, both critical and popular. On the DVD commentary to the episode "The Body" (5016), Whedon cites as one of the main themes his view that the "Sky Bully" does not exist and will not come down to make things better.

(6) Of course many critics have realized that *BtVS* presents neither an absolute position of belief or disbelief. Wendy Anderson, for example writes that, while for the characters on Buffy, religion is "not necessary," the show is ultimately "far from secularized but also far from sacralized" (226). Her essay is one of several that point to the tension in the show between its religious themes and images and its resistance to acknowledging any divine authority. I would like to take her point even further by suggesting that it is this very tension, and in fact this very

resistance, that can be seen as theological, or, as I will propose, (a)theological.

"It's About Power"

(7) The importance as well as ambiguity of religions, religious symbols and myths is established in the very first episode ("Welcome to the Hellmouth," 1001). Buffy's first major battle finds her fighting the vampire Luke in a mausoleum in a cemetery. As he fights Buffy, and as the scene shifts back to Giles viewing images of a Devil-like figure in a book, Luke grandly soliloquizes in the style of the King James Bible:

> But on the third day of the newest light will come the Harvest.
> When the blood of men will flow as wine.
> When the master will walk among them once more.
> The earth will belong to the old ones.
> And Hell itself will come to town.

Luke throws Buffy into a coffin and, as she lies terrified, the episode ends on the word "Amen" spoken by the vampire as he leaps in to kill her. Buffy is only saved from death by the crucifix around her neck as Luke pulls back in anger.

(8) This scene raises issues that will be explored throughout the series. What keeps the show fresh and interesting are the ways in which the reoccurring battle scenes are drawn to represent shifting psychological and conceptual conflicts. An older and wiser Buffy, teaching Dawn to fight, will make the critical interpretation that, "it's about power." This comment, appropriately, is as complex and paradoxical as any statement of power analysis should be. First articulated in Season Five when she realizes that the Watcher's Council has no control over her—"Power. I have it. You want it." ("Checkpoint," 5012)—the phrase is most obviously presented as thematic material in the first episode of the final season, when it is spoken by both Buffy herself and then the First Evil in the guise of Buffy ("Lessons," 7001). But where does the power lie in her initial confrontation with Luke? Luke is powerful because he is a vampire, a hybrid species that is part human and part demon, and because he is connected to the "Master," an ancient vampire entombed beneath a church with connections deep in a mythical past before humans swarmed the earth "like a plague of boils." Buffy is powerful because she is the "slayer," a seemingly human creature imbued with a mysterious power and responsibility given to her through an ancient and apostolic process.

(9) Yet each of these powers comes with subversive questions. Buffy's power, as Anya will suggest in the final season, is acquired only through "luck." The cross around her neck is a powerful repellent of vampires seemingly because it is connected to ancient traditions. But this very cross has just been given to her by a vampire who was evil until a Gypsy "curse" gave him a soul, and whether one sees these as Christian traditions or a folkloric vampire tradition is also ambiguous. The word "Amen," a cross, conflicting mythical and mystical forces, pagan, folkloric, and Christian each embody some sort of power. But what are the sources of their power? To put this question in philosophical or theological terms: do any of these powers have a true *essence*? Each of these elements on their own represents not an essence or even an autonomous object but simulacra. They can only be read as they relate to each other. (A crucifix means nothing until it repels a vampire. A soul is meaningless until it is absent.) How are we to read this web of forces?

(10) My first point is that these intertwined forces indeed must be read *as* a web and not as essential or autonomous powers, a reading that mirrors many current perceptions of contemporary culture. For theologian and cultural critic Mark Taylor, there "is a religious dimension to *all* culture" and its "multiple threads have been intricately interwoven to create the complex webs now entangling us" (*Moment* 6). Within *BtVS*, if we take any of these elements out of context, it is easy to overstate the connections and the coherence of the show's relationship to traditional or determinate theology. Instead of stating that Buffy's cross *is* a Christian based power, or that a vampire *is* a symbol of Satanic evil, we see that it is the intertwined complexity of competing powers which produce meaning. Each force (iconic, mythical, and mystical) depends on the other and supports the other. In the scene from "Welcome to the Hellmouth," for example, if we take only Buffy's cross without the vampire's "amen," we misrepresent the complexity with which religion exists in the show, and by extension, in our culture. As Taylor insists, "we are living in a moment of unprecedented complexity," and the "task we now face is . . . to learn to live with it creatively" (*Moment* 3-4). The most interesting modern literary representations of religion—in Nietzsche, Borges, Proust, Bataille—present religion in a way that does not allow it to be totalized or explained and avoids the either/or logic of traditional criticism: they force us to be creative. *BtVS* neither has nor gives an answer. Like other texts, sacred or secular, the importance of *BtVS*'s relationship to religion lies in the difficulty of the *act* of its interpretation.

(11) The attempt to find *BtVS* as *either* a religious text *or* an atheistic one is analogous to efforts in Shakespeare criticism that argue for his life and works as either Catholic or Protestant. Although this is a longstanding debate among Shakespeareans, the more important point is that in writing plays that penetrate the complexities of the human condition, Shakespeare necessarily created texts that can be read both for and against Protestant and Catholic worldviews. In the same way *BtVS* can be read, not as an expression or repudiation of any religious tradition or as a reflection of Whedon's professed atheism, but as a text that is both religious and atheistic.

(12) What invites and frustrates religious and theological interpretation of *Buffy* is that it both is and is not religious. It is both of these things because it presents religion not only as traditional trappings and as simulacra, but because sometimes these trappings do seem to carry some power. It is dismissive of all of the central issues of religion (the creator, free will, good and evil) and yet is obsessed with these very issues. It is at once play and the real desire for meaning; it relishes its irony and yet seeks some kind of center.

(13) The concept of "atheology" (or "a/theology") as drawn by Georges Bataille and Mark Taylor probably represents my approach most accurately. While it means something different to Bataille and Taylor (hence the slash in Taylor's spelling), atheology always stands for a position between atheism and theology, between or outside of faith or disbelief. It is not opposed to theology, but opposed to traditional and deterministic quests; it denies a theology that insists on perceiving God as something "solid." Reading *BtVS* through theories of atheology and postmodern theology gives us an approach that permits and relies upon the contradictions and paradoxes that necessarily exist on *Buffy* and in our own culture.

"Where is the thing I was so afraid of? You know, the Lord?"[4][4]

> To define God as the supreme evil is as much an act of homage and belief as to define him as the supreme good.
> J. Hillis Miller (354)

(14) Essays and thought on *BtVS*'s relationship to religion can be organized into four general categories: 1) action (ethical decisions, sacrifices), 2) symbols and rituals, 3) Good and Evil, and 4) mythology (vampires, demons, the slayer). Yet each of these four categories also demonstrates ways that, while echoes of traditional religious elements are common within each of these categories, ideas of a confessional religion or a determinate God are consistently subverted, good and evil are never stable categories, and even "ethical" actions and selfless sacrifice are continually questioned. By reading through each of these categories we can see the transgressive atheology that accompanies more traditional interpretations.

Actions: Buffy's Killing of Angel

(15) In the finale of Season Two when Buffy must kill Angel in order to save the world, she is faced with a classical ethical dilemma ("Becoming," part two, 2022). Although she performs what appears to be a selfless ethical act of goodness, the scene is further complicated by its echoes of the staking of Lucy Westenra in Bram Stoker's *Dracula*. The striking parallels between *BtVS* and the most famous vampire staking in literature reveal subversive and destabilizing resonance in the *Buffy* scene. In *Dracula*, Lucy Westenra's fiancé is allowed to drive the stake through her heart to allow her eternal soul to go to paradise. Buffy, far from putting Angel's soul to rest, must kill him just after his soul has been restored, and he has reverted to the "good" Angel. In an exact reversal of the staking of Lucy in *Dracula*—where only after Lucy has been staked is her fiancé permitted to kiss her—Buffy *first* kisses Angel and *then* ("close your eyes") thrusts the sword into him, sending him not to eternal salvation, but to suffer in a hell dimension. In this scene revenge and salvation and good and evil are subverted and not clearly defined. If there is a suggestion of divine presence here (and if not, where does Angel's soul originate and who creates the hell he is sent to?), it appears Buffy acts *against* (or a least outside of) any divine order.[5] Although ethically Buffy has chosen the good of the many over the few, theologically she has sent a recently redeemed soul to hell.[6] While Buffy appears to have made a "good" choice, the contrast to the good versus evil world of *Dracula* is revealing.

(16) These issues are brought to the surface in the episode "Buffy vs. Dracula" where Dracula essentially forces Buffy to confront Nietzsche's warning that "whoever fights monsters should see to it that in the process he does not become a monster" (*Beyond*, 89: section 146). Buffy, despite her occasional resistance to her slayer calling, has rarely questioned the roots of her power, or the assumed goodness of the struggle. Buffy's statement after defeating Dracula, that she is now "chock full of free will," is typical of the series' ironic view towards traditional religion. Her claim of free will points not so much to a theological position, but to an existential crisis in believing in even the *possibility* of an individual and free will. What the episode has confirmed, of course, is that Buffy *cannot* rely on having free will, nor can she ever again be sure of herself as an unmitigated force for Good. The irony is that she claims free will just after she has been forced to question her own sense of even choosing between

good and evil. Is a slayer, as Buffy will ask, "just a killer after all?" By determining which monsters live and die, by determining who *is* a monster, is Buffy going too far, playing God?[7]

(17) Buffy's questions are the same questions of theology and theodicy that Frankenstein's monster asks his creator scientist and creator God: Why did you make me? Why did you put me here? What kind of world is this? These are also the questions Milton's Adam asks of his God in *Paradise Lost*, lines that Mary Shelley used as an epigraph to *Frankenstein*:

> Did I request thee, Maker, from my clay
> To mould me man? Did I solicit thee
> From darkness to promote me? (X. 743-745)

The crucial difference between the *Frankenstein* monster (or Adam) and Buffy is that there is no obvious "Creator" presence for Buffy to question. This absence is the very lack Dracula forces her to realize. As much as she and we desire it, there is not, and will never be, a stable presence to address these questions to.

(18) While Buffy herself has no creator to appeal to, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* in its totality—for all the deserved credit Joss Whedon gets for his "genius"—has no creator either. The fan and critical attention directed toward Whedon reveals a characteristic and traditional need for origin; a desire for a creator to the show and a framed-ness to its existence: a need for it to be an object; to be solid, to be a text they can locate, surround, and analyze. Yet, as Taylor maintains, "from the viewpoint of a/theology, there never was a pure origin" (*Erring* 155). It is this traditional and theological desire for a creator that drives the need for absolute positions of determinate religious interpretations of *BtVS*. And by transferring the attributes of the divine Creator to the human creature, atheistic interpretations also demand a deterministic and metaphysical reading that *Buffy*'s atheology resists. The show epitomizes the postmodern, digital, media, and internet-created text and therefore has a certain ontological slipperiness that places the text between the show's actual episodes, DVD extras, *Buffy* novels, essays, conferences, internet chat rooms, junior high school Wicca clubs, fan fiction, and comics.[8] It is only through a complex web such as this one that the multiple and paradoxical roles of religion in the show and in our postmodern culture can be understood.

(19) Without a stable creator presence, questions of meaning and truth become difficult. "The secret to defeating Dracula," says Giles, is in "separating the fact from the fiction," and the difficulty of this separation is one of many gray areas the show explores. This gray area between fact and fiction is, by implication, a theological area as well, and a space that vampires and monster stories continually occupy. "My thesis is this," *Dracula*'s Dr. Van Helsing says, "I want you to believe . . . . To believe in things that you cannot" (*Dracula* XIV). This impossible belief points to the shifting and ultimately unlocatable line between fact and fiction that Elaine Graham finds so essential to the cultural work that monsters currently do. "If the boundaries between humans, animals, and machines . . . are clearly under pressure in the digital and biotechnological age, then the relationship between another supposed binary pair, 'fact' and 'fiction' is also central" (13). In our virtual world where fact and fiction are no longer seen as clear opposites, Graham finds monsters crucial in continuing to define ourselves and our relationship to the divine. It is the

role of the monster of neither fact nor fiction to explore the spaces of unity and fragmentation, belief and disbelief, and to allow us to see what it means to be on the dividing line of the in-between.

(20) Traditional religious texts—written or otherwise—are spaces where fact and fiction almost by definition cease to have separate meaning. "Buffy vs. Dracula" is a comment on the control old narratives and mythologies have over us and our perceptions of reality. In her encounter with Dracula, Buffy has been tamed by the power of a legend and in the process been forced to begin questioning her own narrative, therefore embarking a quest to determine the fact and fiction of not only Dracula but her role, her vocation, and ultimately herself.[9]

Symbols and Rituals: Demons at Play

> We have lost our way. We have lost the night. But despair is for the living. Where they are weak, we will be strong. . . . Within three days a new hope will arise. We will put our faith in him. He will show us the way.
>
> ("When She Was Bad," 2001)

(21) The symbols and rituals of *BtVS* are perhaps the clearest pointers to traditional religions and have been a focus of both fans and scholars looking for religious significance in the show. Yet over the course of the show, these echoes of traditional religion consistently exist outside of any determinate religious, theological, ethical, or social institutions. Although crosses and holy water seem to be on the side of "good," the religious aspects of ritual belong to the monsters. Crucifixes, crosses, holy water, all lessen in importance throughout the run of the show, as vampires come to see them as merely annoying irritants. Buffy, who is buried wearing her crucifix, ironically and without comment appears to do away with it after *her* resurrection. While they seem to "contain" power, the mystical objects on *Buffy*, from the crucifix around her neck to the mysterious scythe in Season Seven ultimately suggest instability. In the same way that God and evil are not *things* but *actions*, the objects are defined by what they do rather than what they are, and ultimately their effect and affect is one of destabilization. They are not connected in any way to an absolute power, but only to physical power. Nor do they appear to be linked to any possible transcendent good or evil. They are interruptions of the real empirical world, and yet part of it. A crucifix has unexplainable power, and yet is just another weapon from Buffy's trunk. The scythe appears be the primary talisman of Season Seven and an important connection to Slayer legend, but basically it is just an ax that slices Caleb in two. **[Editors' note: The scythe is also, of course, used by Willow in "Chosen" to disperse the power of the Slayer.)**

(22) Actual references to religion tend to come from the demons and vampires themselves, such as a vampire commenting "I haven't had this much fun since the crucifixion." ("School Hard," 2003). One of the few references in the show to the actual Bible casts a line from Isaiah, "and a child shall lead them," as a prophecy about a vampire, the Master's anointed one ("Prophecy Girl," 1012). Although it would seem out of place to have Buffy, Giles, or Willow refer to the Christian origins of the cross, vampires joke about it. While demons and vampires seem to be drawn to the rituals, languages, symbols, and epistemology of traditional religion, Buffy and her friends are not. Vampires adapt the language and style of evangelical preachers (note the epigram to this section), they follow a

"Master," an "anointed" one, and a "vessel," and they facilitate Eucharistic resurrections. Just as the Master and Luke get to affect Biblical and Miltonic language in the show's opening episode, the most religiously influenced moments of ritual and speech tend to come from monsters and demons. Despite Spike's urging for "less ritual and more fun," vampires and demons are more connected and accepting of concepts of essence and transcendence that are the roots of traditional religious ritual. Vampires also express a weakness for charismatic religious leaders, yearn for a return to a legendary golden age, and they trust the power of ancient texts and prophecies.

(23) We see these elements of confessional religion when Spike must perform a ritual to restore Drusilla to health ("What's My Line," part 2, 2010). He performs it in the front of a church, and the emphasis on blood and resurrection echoes a Christian ceremony. The blood transfusion—a staple of vampire narrative from *Dracula* to *Near Dark*—in this scene is from vampire to vampire and is performed with all the ritual of a holy communion. Complete with stained glass images, Gregorian chant, and incense, Spike intones "from the blood of the sire she is risen. From the blood of the sire she shall rise again."

(24) Wendy Anderson is correct in pointing out that the "religions of the Buffyverse are overwhelmingly demonic" (214). What does it do when traditional religious symbols and ritual are diminished, found powerless, or are connected to evil? The Buffyverse points to some central questions being asked in contemporary philosophy and theology.[10] Can we make a separation between good and evil? Are they necessarily inter-reliant? Are we fated to keep thinking through the same patterns of religion even if we believe they are empty? Is to think the divine also to think the monstrous?

Good and Evil: After Theodicy

> "In every generation there is a Chosen One. She alone will stand against the vampires, the demons and the forces of darkness. She is the Slayer."

(25) These words, the canonical text of what a slayer is, set up a worldview where there is a battle between good and evil, between the "forces of darkness" and what would have to by implication be the forces of light. Does this mean there is therefore a Good with a capital "G"? Does the existence of evil necessitate a Good? This Foucauldian interpretation is a common contemporary reading of monster narrative. Veronica Hollinger, for example, says of Dracula: "however threatening [a] vampire is, it serves a crucial function . . . in its role as evil Other, it necessarily guarantees the *presence* of the Good." As the paradigmatic vampire narrative, *Dracula* is often read as a conflict between Good and Evil, a battle between Christian warriors and a monster who is, in Van Helsing's words, "an arrow in the side of He who died." Although Dracula, as well, presents an ambiguous world of religion,[11] any discussion of religion in *Buffy* has in the background the religion of *Dracula*, and the polarized good versus evil that it suggests.

(26) The vampire, at least since Stoker's Dracula, has been generally perceived as evil, opposed to order and the Christian religion. Although the figure of "Dracula" as perceived by the turn of the 21st century is no longer Stoker's Dracula, but one continually reinvented and re-envisioned by films and popular culture, he still represents an opposition to the pillars of culture and civilization. More recent depictions

of vampires have moved away from the racially exotic foreign aristocrat, replaced by criminals, drifters, outsiders, and unsupervised children,[12] yet they still represent an opposition to "good and "normal" people. What makes *Buffy's* vampires unique is that they are random, formed outside of any single determining moral, religious, or social system.[13] Other than their superficial revulsion to the Christian cross and holy water they do not seem particularly opposed to any religious essence. The vampires on *Buffy* are not participants in a cosmic war, not "arrows in the side of Christ," not chosen or damned, they just *are*.

(27) In *Buffy's* earlier episodes vampires are described as being "pure evil," and, while having the memories and personality of the person who had lived in the body, as now either having the "soul of a demon" or no soul at all. The obvious difficulty with this definition—are memory and personality completely separate from "soul?"—is a boundary that is explored as a primary theme of the series. The initially defined separation between vampire and the previous human reveals itself to be never stable or absolute. In "Doppelgangland" (3016), an episode that features the return of Willow's dark vampire double (a figure that foreshadowed more than any *Buffy* watcher could have predicted), Buffy reassures Willow and the others that "a vampire's personality has nothing to do with the person it was." Angel responds "well, actually. . ." and then stops. Much of the rest of the series is devoted to exploring that unfinished and ambiguous "well, actually." Angel, who stands for both, demonstrates that there is no way to define a boundary between vampire and human and there *is* no pure evil or pure good. Ultimately, the vampire is demon and person, and is therefore not unquestionably evil. The vampire's very existence, like that of a god, is deeply unsettling. Like a divine being, the vampire belongs to forces beyond and outside of our understanding, and does not allow us to maintain a certainty in our own perceptions and beliefs.

(28) Although the ambiguity of good and evil is a theme throughout the series, it is through the character of Spike that issues of good and evil are most directly addressed. Spike, beginning as a powerful evil vampire, goes through complex transformations, and his character is used to explore the gray areas between good and evil and human and other. In Season Four, after the Initiative installs the chip in his brain that prevents him from harming humans, the neutered Spike at first continues to insist on his essentially evil nature. Ultimately, however, he expresses compassion, kindness, and love, all without the presence of a soul. Spike is a variation on the cyborg fantasy in postmodern science fiction, with the ironic twist that the microchip makes him *more* "human." The show, which constantly privileges the irrationality of magic and mysticism over the rationality of the scientific, here blurs these polarities.

(29) Speaking in defense of Spike, Buffy's sister Dawn (herself existing without a true origin), encapsulates the theological issues involved in the field of cyborgs and the "posthuman" with her profoundly postmodern statement: "Chip . . . soul, same diff." Although Spike will occasionally remind us that—"Hey, I'm evil, remember"—he begins to show and inspire compassion, and begins to be accepted by other characters and by viewers. Trying to console Dawn, who has just learned that as "the Key" she may be used as a force for evil, Spike says, "I'm a vampire. I know a lot about evil," and then concludes that, "I'm not good. And I'm OK" ("Tough Love," 5019). His statement ascribes to his being four determinate definitions: vampire, Evil, not Good, and "OK," all in an act of kindness. Again, the essence of each characteristic exists in a web of inseparable complexity.

(30) To simply call something evil is to remove it from our responsibility, to keep it at arm's length.[14] As philosopher Susan Neiman says, "We are horrified . . . not when beasts and devils behave like beasts and devils but when human beings do" (3). In this context, we can learn from our reactions to Spike. We are most horrified, not by all the previous murders he has committed as an active vampire, but by his attempted rape of Buffy that occurs after we come to accept him as human. Spike can only be truly horrific *outside* of the boundaries of essentialist evil. Because we can no longer dismiss him as a monster he is only now a true threat to us.

(31) On *Buffy*, it is not the presence of a soul that separate humans from vampires (Angel, a vampire *with* a soul, is still not human), but it *is* the lack of a soul that seems to make vampires evil. The soul, like Buffy's crucifix, is a symbol of good without a source. Where do souls come from? Angel receives his soul in the form of a gypsy curse intended to make him suffer for the whole of his immortal existence. When Spike is ultimately "ensouled" at the end of the sixth season, it is through a process of bloody combat tests put to him by a demon. The soul, then, while it appears to be opposed to evil, does not come from a place of any transcendent good, but is just a mystical commodity. Just as a non-Catholic can throw holy water on a vampire, a demon can dispense a "soul." Like the cross, the soul acts as just a thing, yet its "thingness," its solidity, paradoxically makes us questions its existence. What is a soul if it can be stored in an urn, or conjured and implanted by a gypsy curse, a demon, or a beginning Wicca? If a soul is just a thing, is it a soul? On *BtVS* religious symbols are pure simulacra; faith and the "real presence" of God are beside the point. Good and evil are not opposing forces, and they have no essence or power of their own.

(32) Western literature historically creates competing sets of supernatural personalities—Baal and YHWH, Beowulf and Grendel, Mina and Dracula, Buffy and Spike—whose courses of battle both define and complicate the grounds of good and evil and sacred and profane. Our culture of monotheism encourages us to associate God with ourselves; evil, then, becomes other. But as we instill our anthropomorphic God with our own prejudices, weaknesses, and fears, ethical opposites blur together. God becomes monstrous; evil becomes a fluid concept. The two opposing forces need each other and often merge together in identity. Buffy and Spike make their messy, chaotic, destructive, and creative merging literal.

(33) Vampires are often seen as representing forces of chaos that are antagonistic to religious, theological, and divine presence. Yet theology comes with its negative, disruptive, and chaotic side as well. It is as forces of discontinuity and intervention that monsters and gods are *not* opposite, but necessary partners that illuminate each other. The vampires on *BtVS* function as "supplemental" figures in that they are always/already supplementing the construction of the idea of what is Good (and quite literally within the context of the show since evil precedes good.) The supplement, in Jacques Derrida's famous conception, complicates from the very ground any seemingly simple or metaphysical conceptualization such as the binary understanding of good and evil. The vampires on *Buffy* force us to abandon our either/or logic and accept a logic of *and*. A being is not evil or good, not human or vampire, but good and evil, human and monster. The world of *Buffy* is a world where evil and good cannot be defined, cannot even exist in a pure form, and yet it is a world where we need to desire such absolute concepts to carry on. *Buffy*, like philosopher

Emanuel Levinas, portrays the modern world as now existing "after the end of theodicy." In other words, evil and suffering have become something we cannot integrate into any category of understanding or reason; they are beyond classification

Mythology: From Hell to Heaven to Nothing

> "This world is older than any of you know. Contrary to popular mythology, it did not begin as a paradise. For untold eons, demons walked the Earth, and made it their home -- their Hell. But in time they lost their purchase on this reality, and the way was made for mortal animals, for Man. All that remains of the Old Ones are vestiges, certain magicks, certain creatures"
> ("Welcome to the Hellmouth," 1001)

(34) Like the show's often cited reversal of the horror cliché of a helpless blonde girl being chased into an alley, the mythical ground of the show involves an obvious reversal of the Judeo-Christian Garden of Eden myth. As Giles explains, "contrary to popular mythology," in the beginning the earth was inhabited by "pure" demons. Many of the Judeo-Christian resonances of *Buffy* reflect the vampire's connections to this primal time of pure evil. I don't believe that within a larger cultural context there is much to be gained delving into and analyzing *BtVS*'s mythology *as* a mythology. Myth is revealing when it is myth; it can have no author—and that takes thousands of years. What *is* revealing is how fictional and fabricated myth is perceived and received by the viewing audience, how we react to created myth.

(35) For example, when Angel is returned to Sunnydale after Buffy kills him, we can try to explain it through an analysis of the mythical cosmos of the show. But the most we can discern is that Angel may or may not have been returned from Hell by the First Evil to kill Buffy (or perhaps for some other reason).[15] Mythically what is important is not how it happened, but whether we find it convincing. Does the "Buffyverse" seem like a world where this event can happen? Had Angel been lifted out of Hell by angelic creatures from heaven, it would have seemed ridiculous to a regular viewer of the show. But to be hurled naked onto the earth, shivering and feral, returned perhaps by forces of good and perhaps by forces of evil, seems, within the context of the series, an authentic action.

(36) Although Angel is not returned by obvious heavenly forces, the mythology of a "heaven" shockingly appears in Season Six. After Buffy has returned from the dead, she reveals to Spike that she thinks she has been in "heaven" and feels torn away by her friends.

> I was happy. Wherever I . . . was . . . I was happy. At peace. I knew that everyone I cared about was all right. I knew it. Time . . . didn't mean anything . . . nothing had form but I was still me, you know? And I was warm and I was loved and I was finished. Complete. I don't understand about theology or dimensions, or any of it really, but I think I was in heaven. ("After Life," 6003)

Buffy's heaven, in ways that are hard to define, does not feel like part of an "authentic" *BtVS* mythology. Although Tara tells us that there are millions of heavenly dimensions and although Buffy's is not a classic definition of a Christian heaven, she does present a heaven that many Christian believers could recognize. The statement "I was in heaven" rests

uncomfortably within the context of the supernatural world of the show. Like Buffy, we can accept that we don't understand the different "dimensions," but we weren't expecting Buffy to ponder "theology." But as the season progresses we have reason to doubt the existence of her "heaven" as a theologically and divinely created paradise. Throughout the season, connections are drawn between this hovering vaguely present idea of heaven and other more negative and less angelic states of being. Buffy herself, who spends most of the season depressed and "going through the motions," seems to associate extreme moments of negativity with her heaven. In fact, in Season Six the few flashes we get of the old happy, joking Buffy are when she is invisible ("Gone" 6011) or when she is unaware of who she is ("Tabula Rasa" 6008). These two glimpses of a joyful Buffy both relate to a suggestion of the nothingness of a heaven where she was "happy." Anya's question, "do you think she was walking on clouds, wearing Birkenstocks and playing a harp?" ridicules the thought of a traditional Christian heaven. But what is Buffy's heaven? It comes to seem not a Christian heaven at all, but an absence, an almost nothingness. Buffy is happy when she is *not*.

(37) Buffy first reveals to her friends that she feels ripped away from true happiness in song: "I think I was in Hea-ven." Her words, immortalized in the musical episode "Once More with Feeling" (6007) by the eerie chromatic movement from a minor to a diminished chord and by Sarah Michelle Gellar's micro-tonal slide down on the second syllable of "hea-ven," suggests various levels of darkness that will be associated with heaven. A deeper musical analysis of this musical moment reveals how the voice descends alone while the instrumental background remains in stasis, stressing the separation Buffy feels from any grounding principles, at the same time the idea of heaven prevents her from making any connections. Spike echoes the same melodic line, descending on the word "living," which connects Buffy's singing of a heaven where she is not and Spike singing of a state of living where he is not. The negation and disassociation blend the two characters, the words heaven and living, and the music into a dark negative emblem for the entire series. The music emphasizes absence and death, and the scene in which Buffy sings these lines also features what could be read as a suicide attempt, as she is saved from dancing into flames by Spike.

(38) Buffy's heavenly escape from a life of violence and fear is given darker resonance by its implied connection to her imagined existence in the insane asylum in a later episode ("Normal Again," 6017). These associations are further conflated by dark Willow, who, in her most memorable speech, tells Buffy that insane asylums were her "comfy alternative" to the real world and that she was happiest when she was "in the ground" ("Two to Go," 6021). Willow's cruel but honest speech links the escapist fantasy of negation with the alternate world of both death and an imagined asylum. In "Normal Again," the psychiatrist treating Buffy remarks that "last summer when you had a momentary awakening" which suggests that Buffy's death and "Heaven" had been just another visit to an asylum when her mom and dad where still together and where monsters never existed. The asylum—Buffy's escape—is located at an uneasy place in the middle of Season Six. While few viewers were willing to accept that the show would employ the "it was all a dream" cliché, the suggestions of this possibility and its links to Buffy's idea of heaven present discomforting and irresolvable paradoxes to an attempt to establish moral or narrative continuity to the season. Buffy's heaven and her asylum

influence how we read the entire season, yet both are unstable and self-effacing spaces.

(39) In Buffy's insane asylum, her doctor informs her that her "fantasy world" (the one of slayers and vampires) is coming apart—a meta-critical and postmodern comment on the discontinuities of the show itself in Season Six. The very premise of the series' mythology, especially in the later seasons, is that it can always subvert itself. Episodes like "Buffy vs. Dracula," "Restless," "Normal Again," and "Superstar" (4017) are examples of the process by which the ground of the show's very mythology and narrative are threatened from within. The mythology of *Buffy* is more accurately anti-myth—not an affirmation of older systems of thought—but a continual challenging of them. While this anti-myth can be subversive to religious belief, it is not un-theological. Even the legacy of the Hebrew Bible, according to scholars such as Herbert Schneidau, is an example of anti-myth more than myth—an attack on sacred institutions rather than a creation of them.

(40) For Schneidau, Biblical thought does not use myth but uses it up, subverts and destroy it. The Judeo-Christian tradition contains "no inherent sacredness and can always be ultimately questioned" (Schneidau 4). Myth is an attempt to understand, to contain and explain the mysteries and paradoxes of life. While myth shows the world as a "system of correspondences," a world that, like a language, we can "learn to read" (Schneidau 99), the Judeo-Christian tradition, especially in the Hebrew Prophets and in the letters of Paul, subverts this view. In this sense, Biblical tradition and its legacy, from *Paradise Lost* and *Hamlet* to *Finnegans Wake* and *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, is about the subversion of myth. We can especially see this in the tendency of the Buffyverse to focus on "mythical" elements that don't and can't make sense, where the correspondences don't match up: Slayer lore, the First Evil, and, in *Angel*, Wolfram and Hart.

(41) Each of the four categories of religious analysis I have described—actions, symbols and rituals, good and evil, and mythology—reveals some similarities to traditional religious and theological systems, but more significantly do not allow these analogies to remain stable. But rather than point to this resistance as evidence of a form of atheism, it seems that it is more philosophically satisfying to see it as the show's (and our) atheology—an atheology that admits of the power of established religious narratives, while at the same time denies the ground on which they stand.

(42) Season Six, centered on Buffy's struggle to accept being alive, and Willow's continued slide into dark magic is, to me, the philosophical and theological core of the series. In reviewing the earlier seasons, I can't avoid thinking that they inevitably aim towards the darkness and nihilism of Season Six. From almost the beginning of the show we know that Buffy must die young, that there is no apparent transcendent Good, and that Good and Evil are slippery terms. But it isn't until Season Six that the show and its viewers truly faced the darkness they had created. And although the end of the season and Season Seven offer a sort of redemption, it is one that doesn't deny any of the emptiness and pessimism.[16] Like its opening episode that brought Buffy out of the grave, the end of the sixth season may find Buffy climbing out of the ground again, this time into daylight and to the strains of Sarah McLachlan singing the "Prayer of St. Francis," but there is still no going back to the relative happy innocence of earlier seasons. Buffy and her friends find that they *can* go on, but only with the realization that life has no point, that

there is no transcendent good, no ruling hand of providence, and no promised end. Like Schopenhauer, Buffy realizes that life is essentially irrational, painful, and meaningless, but that there are reasons to go on living, there are things in the world to be appreciated and enjoyed.

Absolute Interruption: "The negative space around the object"[17]

Nihilism stands at the door: whence comes this strangest of guests?
Nietzsche

(43) Critics writing about the relationship of religion to a literary text often do the disservice of writing about religion within the limited confines of the traditional definition given by Mircea Eliade as being a sacred cosmic order *against* the chaos. Based on this definition, the most "religious" figure in *BtVS* is perhaps Whistler—a "demon" in charge of balancing good and evil. But this is not the religion and theology of *BtVS* or of our postmodern world. We may desire balance, order, a definition of good and evil, but these things are denied us. For us as well, like the final season of *Buffy*, there is no going back.

(44) That which we chose to call "God," whether we profess to "believe" or not, is not necessarily an absolute ground of stable meaning. Instead, as many thinkers, ancient, medieval, and postmodern have attested, "God" is conversely that which makes meaning slippery, makes communication inadequate, and makes a stable ground on which to stand impossible. It is possible, following the thought of many postmodern philosophers and theologians, to see God and religion *not* as forces against chaos, but as disruptive and chaotic forces themselves. What we choose to call God is defined as an "absolute other" or "a God who may be," pointing to the role of God as a force of incomprehensibility.[18] For Derrida, religious belief "is to be found in the experience itself of non-relationship or of absolute *interruption*." This experience comes about through "desacralization," "atheism," and by the "radical experience" of "going beyond" even negative theology (*Religion* 64-65).[19]

(45) If God and religion, then, are *not* that which makes all things possible or comprehensible, but that which is beyond understanding and partakes of the impossible, they occupy and create spaces of extreme instability. Thinking of a god on the fringes of comprehensibility also suggests God's monstrous nature and the impossibility of separating gods and monsters. This type of theological interpretation blurs the distinctions between gods and monsters and both monsters and Gods end up standing for uncertainty.

(46) If God is an "absolute interruption," the most God-like force on *Buffy* is the First Evil.[20] The First Evil, or just the First, is the main adversary in Season Seven, but initially appears in Season Three. In "Amends" (3010), Buffy encounters the First in the guise of Giles' dead girlfriend Jenny Calendar. When the First confronts Buffy it describes itself as "beyond sin," something she "can't even conceive," "beyond understanding" and "the thing the darkness fears." Although Buffy is characteristically dismissive, "yeah, I get it, you're evil," the First's self-definition also echoes the postmodern divine—a definition maintained throughout Season Seven, as the First is positioned outside of any comprehensible psychological or corporeal interpretation. (The usual identification of this force as "The First" establishes a connection between the Slayer mythology which also begins with "the First," and expresses the need for the original, the "something solid," yet at the same time the

unstable and indefinable presence of both “Firsts” denies the literal existence that is desired.)

(47) The space of the First—unimaginable, unreachable—is the postmodern, post-Einsteinian version of the margins of medieval sailing maps where the monsters resided. It is the postmodern god of “absolute other,” and a return to a version of Plato’s *Khora*, the non-space that functions as the primordial origin of the world; a nothingness before anything that, Plato suggested, can only be imagined through a sort of dream state (71). *Khora*, translated as “receptacle” or “space,” is described by Plato as “invisible and formless, all-embracing, possessed in a most puzzling way of intelligibility, yet very hard to grasp” (70). Plato’s *khora* is a paradigm for the empty space that both is and isn’t a God, a void that undermines and challenges our ground of being—the absolute emptiness of the vampire’s undead body, Buffy’s heaven, the First, and the abyss of Season Six.

(48) The episode that introduced the First Evil, “Amends” drew considerable attention and controversy by viewers who saw it as a Christian episode. Angel, after encountering the First, who almost wills him to feed from and kill Buffy and forces him to re-experience his murderous past, walks out into the morning to commit suicide by sunrise. As Buffy desperately tries to convince him of the worthiness of his “life,” he is greeted by what appears to be a Christmas miracle—clouds and a southern California snowfall—that save him by blocking the sun. As he and Buffy walk hand in hand in the snow, the final shot—the one that really got fans going, although Joss Whedon claimed the shot was accidental — pans across a billboard revealing the word “pray.” But, although the word pray drew all the attention, what was actually shown was not just the word “pray” but “pray for. . ..” It is the word “for” that I find most interesting. Pray *for* what? *For* whom? What *for*?[21]

(49) Prayer, as contemporary philosophers have pointed to, is not an act performed in the *presence* of a divine figure, but in the absence of one. One does not pray to a present God—Moses does not “pray” to the burning bush. The closest thing *BtVS* ever has to real prayer is Buffy’s plea in the musical episode to “give me something to sing about,” an unanswered cry to an invisible creator to give her life meaning. This scene, the final one of the episode, also features the musical disclosure that she was in heaven, her aborted suicide dance, and finally, her first kiss with Spike, all quests for “meaning.” This moment, a central moment in the season that resonates throughout the whole series, captures the theology of *BtVS*: one of absence and one of *a*-theology—a simultaneous belief and disbelief, neither atheistic nor theistic, and a desire for meaning and transcendence.

(50) The ending episode of the series finishes constructing the mythology of the slayer and then also destroys it. In “Chosen,” (7022) Willow performs a ritual that destroys the line of power passed on from slayer to slayer, therefore giving every potential slayer the power of the chosen one. In this final act, Buffy attacks the socially constructed roots and apostolic succession of her own mythology and religion and rids her power of any sense of absolute essence. In their final act together, confronting one more apocalypse and the First Evil, Buffy and Willow defy the rule of a “bunch of men who died thousands of years ago,” an act of anti-myth which can be read as a dismissal of traditional religion, and a releasing of chaos upon a cosmic order.

(51) As James South points out, while Buffy and Willow have indeed “changed the world,” it cannot be said to be better or worse, nor is it a

"happy" ending. Instead it is an ending "filled with new possibilities" ("Philosophical Consistency"). South's brilliant argument that Buffy must transcend teleology, that she must break out of the dialectical relationship of good and evil before she can destroy the First and escape Sunnydale (i.e. Plato's cave), also applies to the show's ultimate anti-mythical stance of atheology. By breaking free of traditional forms of theodicy, mythology, and theology *BtVS* creates a world view that, while it may not be Christian, also is not un-Christian (although it may occasionally be anti-Christian). If we return to Buffy's answer to the existence of God ("nothing solid"), we can read it as unanswerable questions that lead to an atheology: Can nothing be solid? Can solid be nothing? What is solid? What is nothing? For traditional believers, God is solid; God is the absolute ground on which meaning is constructed. For Christian or Jewish mystics, God was indeed often characterized as "nothing." Ultimately, the world of *BtVS* points to neither solid nor nothing, but embraces the ambiguity in between. The final episode ends—as Buffy smiles, almost squints, into a brightly lit future—appropriately on a question: "What are we going to do now?" No longer featuring a Chosen One, having defeated the god-like disruption of the First and destroyed the Hellmouth, the show neither denies nor affirms any religion. *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* expresses neither an absolute certainty nor a total abyss, but, as a postmodern atheology, finds in the death of its gods not despair but opportunity.

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[1] Papers presented at the recent Slayage Conference on *BtVS* included papers on *Buffy* as Gnostic, Buddhist, and as Thomist.

[2] Sources including Janet Reiss's book *What would Buffy Do* and Reid B. Locklin's "*Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and the Domestic Church" in, Slayage 6.

[3] As Wendy Anderson points out, Xander, as well, has his Christ-like moment, when he identifies himself as just a "carpenter" and, in the final episode of Season Six, saves the world through the power of love.

[4] "Who Are You?" (4016).

[5] Another related example is Buffy's death leap from the tower, perhaps the most discussed ethical decision of the whole series. While it has been seen as an act related to Kierkegaard's Abraham, a "Knight of Faith," who is willing to sacrifice his son in an act that even transcends ethics, Buffy's leap from the tower, can also be seen as the opposite: breaking from an oppressive authority figure (God or the Watcher's Council) and refusing to sacrifice Isaac or Dawn—the opposite of Kierkegaard's Knight of Faith.

[6] Although, of course, the existence of a soul does not seem to change Angel's essential nature as a (perhaps damned) vampire. Note especially Darla's line in *Angel* when he recoils from a crucifix: "No matter how good a boy you are, God doesn't want you. But I still do" ("Dear Boy," 2005).

[7] As has often been pointed out, Dracula speaks words that hauntingly recall those of Buffy's dream encounter with the first slayer speaking through Tara in "Restless," the final episode of Season Four. "You think you know. What's to come. What you are. You haven't even begun." In the final episode of Season Five, of course, Buffy chooses to die, ending a year-long struggle with the issue of choice by making the ultimate assertion of free will and of her individuality by giving her life, perhaps the only truly individual choice and gift a person has.

[8] One very basic example of this intersection of the "canonical" and the "non-canonical" exists in Joss Whedon's DVD commentary to "Restless" where he interprets his own written text of the episode based on commentary he read on the internet.

[9] In the Season Six episode "Normal Again" she will have moments of wanting to see *all* this as a fiction.

[10] For example, see works by Timothy Beal, Richard Kearney, and Emmanuel Levinas.

[11] For an essay on the subversive Christianity in *Dracula*, see "Vampire Religion," by Christopher Herbert (*Representations* 79, Summer 2002).

[12] See, for example, the films *From Dusk Until Dawn*, *Near Dark*, *The Lost Boys*.

[13] I have written about this elsewhere. See my essay “Sometime you Need a Story” in *Fighting the Forces*.

[14] The common characterization of the September 11 terrorists as “evil” or “evil-doers” allowed us to not let them threaten our idea of humanity. If they were “evil” they are essentially different than us and can then be categorized as monsters, as “other” than human. By thus keeping evil in the closet and under our bed we don’t allay our fears, but we position evil in a way that does not require us to accept any responsibility.

[15] The actual reason *why* Angel is returned is an easier answer: The show’s ratings had much to gain from having more scenes of David Boreanaz taking his shirt off to be tortured and the possibility of a spin off series was already being considered.

[16] Despite repeated promises to viewers that Season Seven would be lighter in tone, and despite attempts in this direction such as “Buffy the guidance counselor” the season swiftly veered into pessimism. By the end of season, most of the high school students Buffy forges bonds with will be dead.

[17] “The Body” (5016).

[18] See Emmanuel Levinas for “absolute other,” and Richard Kearney for the “God who may be.”

[19] Joss Whedon, like Derrida, is a professed atheist, whose fascination with religious and theological thought has prompted much theological interpretation within the field of religious studies itself.

[20] Not Glory, who is a “God,” in the sense of the Greek *Theos* and not a God as we see it in Western religions. Her divinity (like that of Illyria in the final season of *Angel*) like the Greek gods is contained primarily in a perceived immortality.

[21] Prayer on *Buffy* is always presented ironically; Cordelia praying for shoes or Xander offering up Christian, Jewish, and Buddhist prayers simultaneously.