

# Queering Messiahs: Love, Sex and Salvation in the Whedonverse

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The article explores the question of religion and sexuality using popular cultural representations as a discussion partner. The focus is on the sexuality of savior characters in the imaginary worlds of the American film and Tv-series maker Joss Whedon. The analysis shows that several references to Christianity and obvious Christ characters can be identified in the material, but also clear challenges of Christian ideals. The complex portrayals of both saviors and sexuality in the Whedonverse are argued to point to some interesting and noteworthy aspects of sex and Christianity in a contemporary context. Issues that are brought to the surface refer to the importance of sex and love and problems with seeing sex as inherently good or bad. In the article, the essentialness of a space where the issue of religion and sex can be explored is stressed and the need for the discussion to continue is underlined.

## 1. *Introduction*

To understand the world of today one cannot ignore the worlds of popular culture. These imaginary worlds both influence and reflect us. In them we can find traditional thoughts and ideas, but also fascinating challenges of our ideals and practices. Therefore, it is not that surprising that many scholars nowadays turn to popular culture when they want to understand perspectives of our contemporary world. This is true for scholars of religion and theology as well. As many studies have shown, popular culture is rich with religious possibilities. In them we can find mythic motives,<sup>1</sup> reflections of a modern spirituality<sup>2</sup> and themes that inspire theological thought.<sup>3</sup>

The purpose of this article is to build on an area of research in the field of religion and film that has already produced some interesting studies. This is the field of sex, religion and film. The specific focus of this study is on how sexuality and religious themes are related to each other in the works of one film and TV series maker, Joss Whedon. Special focus will be on the many saviors in Whedon's works, but also on other religious themes and their connection to sexuality. The goal of this study is to show

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<sup>1</sup> J.C. LYDON, *Film as Religion: Myths, Morals, and Rituals*, New York 2003.

<sup>2</sup> A. POSSAMAI, *Religion and Popular Culture: A Hyper-Real Testament*, Bruxelles 2005.

<sup>3</sup> C. DEACY, *Faith in Film*, Aldershot 2005.

how the works of Whedon both promote and challenge traditional ideas about religion and sexuality, but also how the material can be seen to represent a complex contemporary attitude that can be a dialogue partner in the construction of a modern theological view on sexuality.

There are several reasons why the works of Joss Whedon, the so called Whedonverse, have been chosen as material here: first, Whedon's works, especially *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, have been shown to be very successful at plugging into modern ideas and values.<sup>4</sup> Secondly, Whedon's works have also been shown to be interesting when one looks at religion<sup>5</sup> and sexuality<sup>6</sup> and therefore can be suspected to be so when the two are combined as well. Thirdly, though the works are not strictly Christian, several of them, e.g. *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, are clearly culturally Christian<sup>7</sup> and are therefore also of interest from a Christian theological perspective. This is true both when they challenge the tradition and when they support some of its ideals. However, what exactly is the Whedonverse?

## 2. *The Whedonverse*

The material chosen for this study has, as mentioned, one thing in common. In the process of production, the American film and TV series maker Joss Whedon has been involved, in various roles as writer, director or producer. Despite this focus on Whedon's works, it should be made clear that this study is not about Joss Whedon himself or his religious beliefs. Though this might be an interesting topic in itself, it is the works of Whedon on which I focus here. A short article like this one, unfortunately, does not offer room to consider every work in which a productive person like Whedon has collaborated. The works chosen for analysis are therefore ones that clearly relate to the topic of the study: *Alien Resurrection*, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and *Serenity* and to some degree *Angel* and *Firefly*. In the analysis below we will only focus on certain scenes or structures that are clearly of interest. To make it easier for those who are not acquainted with the Whedonverse to follow the discussions, a short introduction of the material is provided below.

*Alien Resurrection* (1997), for which Whedon wrote the screenplay, is the fourth installment in the *Alien* film series. To give a short recap, the first film, *Alien* (1979), tells the story of how Ripley and her crew-

<sup>4</sup> S. ROSS, «Tough Enough»: *Female Friendship and Heroism in Xena and Buffy*, in S.A. INNESS (ed), *Action Chicks: New Image of Tough Women in Popular Culture*, New York 2004, pp. 231-256.

<sup>5</sup> Z.-J. PLAYDON, *What You Are, What's to Come: Feminism, Citizenship and the Divine in Buffy*, in R. KAVENEY (ed), *Reading the Vampire Slayer*, New York 2004, pp. 156-194.

<sup>6</sup> J. LARBALESTIER, *The Only Thing Better than Killing a Slayer: Heterosexuality and Sex in Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, in R. KAVENEY (ed) *Reading the Vampire Slayer*, New York 2004, pp. 195-219.

<sup>7</sup> S. CRAIGO-SNELL, *What Would Buffy Do? Feminist Ethics and Epistemic Violence*, in «Jump Cut», 48 (2006).

mates land on a desolate planet. There, one of the crew is attacked by a creature and after a while a monster erupts from his chest. The monster kills most of the crew until it is killed by Ripley. In *Aliens* (1986), Ripley returns to the planet to fight off even more monsters. In the third film, *Alien3* (1992), Ripley crashes on a prison planet and together with the inmates fight the monster she has brought with her. In the end she commits suicide, thereby killing the queen monster that is growing inside of her. Finally, in *Alien Resurrection*, Ripley is cloned so that the queen can be removed from her and used by the military to produce more monsters. The monsters escape and Ripley, together with a small group of people, stop the beasts and saves Earth.

The science fiction theme in Whedon's work continues with the TV series *Firefly* (2002) and the film *Serenity* (2005). *Firefly* takes place in a future world where humans have spread all over the galaxy. The lead characters are a former soldier, now captain of his own cargo ship, Malcolm Reynolds and his crew and the series follows their adventures and fight against The Alliance. In the film *Serenity*, The Alliance tries to capture the young girl River Tam, who together with her brother, had become a part of Mal's crew. River is a psychic who carries a secret memory that can seriously injure the alliance. When Mal and his crew find out about this secret, they do what they can to bring it to the world.

*Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1997-2003) tells the story of Buffy and her friends and their fight against evil in the little town of Sunnydale. As it says in the title of the series, Buffy is a vampire slayer, the one who has been chosen to fight against the demons, the vampires and the forces of evil. In each of the seven seasons of the series, Buffy and her friends fight different evil forces and stop the world from ending. However, the fighting and slaying is not the only theme in the series: it is also a coming-of-age story about a group of young people finding their way in the world. Finally, *Angel* (2000-2004), a spin-off of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, tells the story of the good vampire Angel and his fight against evil in Los Angeles, where he had gone after realizing that he cannot stay in Sunnydale with Buffy, the love of his life.

### 3. *A Christian subtext*

As many studies of religion and popular culture have shown, popular culture reflects and connects to modern trends related to religion.<sup>8</sup> As a consequence religion in film must be understood and analyzed with a knowledge of what constitutes contemporary religion or spirituality. When looking at films very often attention to the different religious traditions involved is therefore in order. This is true for the material of this study as

<sup>8</sup> A. POSSAMAI, *Religion and Popular Culture*.

well. However, in the following the focus will first of all be a Christian one. This is not because this tradition is the only one through which one can read the material. However, as Clive Marsh has pointed out, some films do in a more direct manner than others inspire a reading from the perspective of a certain tradition. A film such as *The Shawshank Redemption*, with its reference to the Christian concept of 'redemption' in the title, quite naturally invites a Christian reading.<sup>9</sup> In a similar manner, so does *Alien Resurrection*. As already mentioned, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* can be seen as culturally Christian; «it is steeped in the stories, symbols, language, and professed values of Christianity»<sup>10</sup>. The series, among other things, introduces several monks and priests and some storylines borrowed from the Christian tradition. To a large degree this observation is valid for the rest of the material as well.

What makes the choice of looking at the material from a Christian perspective fairly natural in this case is the focus of the study: sex and saviors. The saviors that we find in popular culture are far from always straightforwardly Christian, but in the western world, where the material for this study has been created, this is still the tradition that most obviously comes to mind. The saviors in the material are also in many ways related to the Christian tradition. Thus, there is what could be called a Christian subtext or framework in the material that becomes especially clear in connection to its savior characters. For example, in *Alien Resurrection* Christianity is evoked by the title of the film and the fact that the savior character in the story, Ripley, is brought back to life. In *Serenity* the connection to the Christian tradition becomes most obvious through the character Shepard, a pastor or priest that has earlier been traveling with Mal. This character tells Mal that what he needs is belief. When Mal states that he is not interested in hearing about God, Shepard asks why Mal always assumes he is talking about God when he talks about belief. Later on in the film it becomes clear that the person Shepard wants Mal to set his faith in is River.

In *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, a common theme is the end of the world and more than once this end is connected to Christian texts, texts that are, however, given their own interpretations. One such example can be found in the episode *Prophecy Girl* in Season 1 where *Isaiah* 11:6 is used as the key to understanding what is about to occur. The child that the text talks about, a child that will lead lions and lambs, is in the story the one that will lead the slayer to hell. In the same season, like a typical Christ character, Buffy dies and is brought back to life to save the world from evil. By dying again to save her friends and the world in Season 5, her association with a Christ character is reinforced. This becomes even clearer in Season 6 where she is resurrected, similar to Ripley. Dying and being

<sup>9</sup> C. MARSH, *Religion, Theology and Film in a Postmodern Age: A Response to John Lyden*, in «The Journal of Religion and Film», II (1998), 1.

<sup>10</sup> S. CRAIGO-SNELL, *What Would Buffy do?*.

brought back to life is something that also happens to the other savior characters in the series, Angel and Spike.

#### 4. *The problem of sex*

The relationship between sex and religion has often been a complicated one. This, of course, goes for the Christian tradition as well. The problem with sex in this tradition has been discussed and explained from many different angles. It has been related to the ideas and philosophies of the first centuries A.D.<sup>11</sup> but also to the position attributed to religion in the modern world.<sup>12</sup> If we concentrate solely on the question of the sexuality of the savior in the Christian tradition, the problematics of sexuality become quite obvious. The tradition holds that Jesus was not sexually active. The importance of this issue becomes clear if one, for instance, looks at the strong protest that films such as *The Last Temptation of Christ* caused.<sup>13</sup> In this film Jesus is, in a dream sequence, allowed to step down from the cross and lead a *normal* human life as a married man.

However, it is not just when focusing on the Christian tradition that one can identify problems with sexuality. This is true for certain film genres as well. Several of the works in this study can be labeled science fiction and as Vivian Sobchack has pointed out, the attitude to sexuality in science fiction is often, though not always,<sup>14</sup> quite negative. When sexuality is directly represented, it is frequently portrayed as something monstrous. In turn, the hero is usually fairly uninterested in sex.<sup>15</sup> The fact that many of the heroes in science fiction also appear as saviors and can be related to the Christian tradition<sup>16</sup> can perhaps provide a partial explanation: whether one agrees with this or not a negative attitude to sexuality seems to be what can be expected when one is dealing with science fiction saviors. Similarly, in the genre of fantasy and, as in this case, stories of vampires, some Christian religious themes can be identified as well. Vampires are often kept at bay with the help of Christian objects, such as crosses and holy water. The attitude to sexuality is perhaps somewhat more relaxed in these cases, but problems are also obvious. Sex is, for instance, usually

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<sup>11</sup> D.M. SWANCUTT, *Sexing the Pauline Body of Christ: Scriptural Sex in the Context of the American Christian Culture War*, in V. BURRUS - C. KELLER (edd), *Towards a Theology of Eros: Transfiguring Passion at the Limits of Discipline*, New York 2006, pp. 65-98.

<sup>12</sup> L. WOODHEAD, *Sex and Secularization*, in G. LOUGHLIN (ed), *Queer Theology: Rethinking the Western Body*, Oxford 2007, pp. 230-244 .

<sup>13</sup> L. BAUGH, *Imaging the Divine: Jesus and Christ-Figures in Film*, Kansas City (MO) 1997, pp. 51-71.

<sup>14</sup> C. SPRINGER, *Electronic Eros: Bodies and Desire in the Postmodern Age*, London 1996.

<sup>15</sup> V. SOBCHACK, *The Virginity of Astronauts: Sex and the Science Fiction Film*, in A. KUHN (ed) *Alien Zone: Cultural Theory and Contemporary Science Fiction Cinema*, London 1990, pp. 103-115.

<sup>16</sup> C. OSTWALT, *Armageddon at the Millennial Dawn*, in «The Journal of Religion and Film», II (2000), 3.

associated with evil characters, whereas the hero is portrayed as a victim of sexual violence.<sup>17</sup>

With this in mind, it is not that surprising that in Whedon's work we can find several problems with sex. For one thing, at least one virgin savior can be identified, namely River Tam in *Firefly* and *Serenity*. Perhaps mostly due to her young age, she is often portrayed as innocent and as not having any obvious sexual interests. The same, at least partly, holds true for Buffy in the first season of the series. Just like River, in this season she is a young girl not yet sexually active, but she does, in contrast to River, date. A somewhat more direct problematic attitude to sex can be identified in *Alien Resurrection*. This film continues the portrayal of monstrous sexuality that can be observed in the earlier films. As Gerard Loughlin puts it, «Alien reeks of sex».<sup>18</sup> However, this sexuality is almost always represented as something horrifying:

«From the first sighting of the alien pods lying in the ground like so many detumescent phalloi, the alien, in all its transformations, is presented as an obscene sexual organ, the horror of flesh that engorges with blood, flows with fluids and forces itself into the orifices of the human body».<sup>19</sup>

The monstrousness of the sexuality of the monsters continues in the following films with the introduction of the queen monster in *Aliens* and Ripley's pregnancy with the monster and death in *Alien3*. As Barbara Creed and others have pointed out, the sexuality of the monsters can be seen as a monstrous female sexuality, though the monsters are also connected to phallic symbols.<sup>20</sup> The sexual, monstrous female body returns in *Alien Resurrection* with the new queen who has inherited human reproductive organs from Ripley and gives birth to a monster that chooses Ripley as its mother.

However, it is not just by representing the sexuality of the monsters as problematic that the *Alien* films display a problem with sexuality and with connecting saviors and sexuality. This can also be seen in the way the female hero in the films is portrayed as not being sexually active, in contrast to several other characters who are killed by the monsters. Interestingly enough, it is only in the third film, *Alien3*, that Ripley is understood to have a sexual relationship and it is also in this film that she dies in the end. Sex, it would seem, leads to death for both saviors and other characters. In *Alien Resurrection*, Ripley is not seen to have a sexual relationship, at least not with a human being (we will return to this later) and in this film she lives.

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<sup>17</sup> B. CREED, *The Monstrous-Feminine: Film, Feminism, Psychoanalysis*, New York 1993, pp. 59-72.

<sup>18</sup> G. LOUGHLIN, *Alien Sex: The Body and Desire in Cinema and Theology*, Oxford 2004, p. 108.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 108.

<sup>20</sup> B. CREED, *The Monstrous-Feminine*, pp. 16-42.

Of all the works of Joss Whedon that we are looking at here, it is still the TV series *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* that, at least at a first glance, portrays the most problematic attitude to the sexuality of saviors. When the story of Buffy begins she is, as pointed out above, a virgin, being a girl of fifteen. However, as her relationship with the vampire Angel deepens, the question of sex enters the picture. Justine Larbalestier describes what happens as follows:

«Angel and Buffy do not discuss whether they're going to have sex or not; they just do it when the moment is right. That moment turns out to be after an escape from near death ... First they tell each other, 'I love you', then they kiss. Angel starts to say that maybe they shouldn't, but Buffy stops him: 'Just kiss me'. Their faces descend out of frame, cut to white out. Their first (and only) sex together is depicted as loving and consensual. Neither is using the other».<sup>21</sup>

At first glance then everything seems fine, but very soon things take a turn for the worse. After their night of lovemaking, Angel leaves Buffy and staggers out into the street showing clear signs of pain. He falls over and is approached by a young woman, smoking a cigarette, who asks if he is ok. Angel jumps up, bites her neck and turns to the camera slowly breathing out the smoke he has apparently sucked out of his victim. What has happened is that Angel has lost his soul and once more become the evil Angelus. This is a consequence of him having had sex with Buffy and thereby having reached a moment of true happiness, something the curse he carries does not permit. In this case, sex clearly brings evil into the world.

A problematic attitude to sex and saviors can be recognized in other seasons of the series as well, but perhaps most clearly in Season 6 through Buffy's abusive relationship with Spike. After being brought back from what turns out to be a heavenly dimension, Buffy has problems with finding her place in the world. The only one she confesses to is the vampire Spike, about whom she does not seem to care a lot, but who is madly in love with her. A fight between the two turns into lovemaking and this often brutal relationship continues for a while, carefully held secret by Buffy. When Buffy finally decides she has to end it, Spike tries to rape her and then leaves town. When he returns in Season 7 it is with a soul he has won in a great struggle, a struggle he has taken part in to be able to be what he thinks Buffy wants. However, in this season their sexual relationship does not continue as before. Having a soul makes Spike see some of their problems. Instead of making love, they spend a night just lying in each others arms.

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<sup>21</sup> J. LARBALESTIER, *The Only Thing Better*, p. 203.

### 5. *A matter of the soul*

Several more or less problematic representations of sex can then be found in relation to Buffy and other saviors of the Whedonverse. However, many positive representations of sex can also be identified. These are often directly connected to the messianic and apocalyptic themes in the stories. To start off with a somewhat comedic example the following dialogue from *Serenity* takes place at the moment when the characters are facing what looks to be their last stand:

Simon: My one regret in all of this... is never being with you.  
Kaylee: With me? You mean to say, as... Sex?  
Simon: I mean to say.  
Kaylee: Hell with this. I'm gonna live.

Here sex becomes something positive and worth living for. Many of the characters in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* also have sex before important battles. Sometimes these sexual encounters are not of that much importance. They are just a way of releasing tension, as it seems. However, for some of the characters these episodes also represent important moments of change, such as for Willow in the third season of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*. Willow and her boyfriend Oz have talked about having sex for the first time before, with Oz stressing that he wants it to feel right for both of them. They finally do it on the night of the great battle. Here, the thought of the end times is clearly a driving force, but at the same time the experience is important for both of them and changes things in a good way. Through sex, the characters are brought closer together and earlier conflicts are put aside.<sup>22</sup>

One could of course argue that it is not that surprising that some codes in relation to sex break down when facing what could be the end of the world. However, in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, as in many other popular cultural representations, apocalypses do not have the finality about them that we find in the Judeo-Christian tradition.<sup>23</sup> As a consequence, it is not possible to just see the sexual relations at this time as exceptions to the rule. Instead the situation in a way just heightens some emotions, emotions that would have been expressed sooner or later anyway or had been expressed before but to a lesser degree as is the case in the last season of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* before the final fight.

In a way, the relationship between Buffy and Spike can also be read as a life affirming attitude to sex, despite their relationship being in many ways problematic. Their sexual games might be offensive to some and Buffy does end the relationship after a while. However, the reason for her to start the relationship with Spike in the first place is the fact that he

<sup>22</sup> *Ibidem* p. 205.

<sup>23</sup> C. OSTWALT, *Armageddon*.



makes her feel, if not alive, then at least 'something'. As Terry L. Spaise puts it their sexual relationship works as a form of therapy.

«Even though the SM games did not help Buffy understand why she returned from heaven or help her to control the chaos of her life, and kept her in a limbo existence and isolated her from her family and friends, as a therapeutic exercise, they constituted a necessary element of Buffy's emotional restoration and ability to re-embrace life».<sup>24</sup>

Their sexual relationship might often be brutal and to some extent exploitative, but Buffy is still in a way brought back to life through it, or at least kept in the world until she can find a secure and meaningful footing.

Though it can be problematic to find a positive representation of sex in *Alien Resurrection*, here too an affirmative reading is possible. In the two first *Alien* films, Janice Hocker Rushing has identified a trace of what she calls the archaic goddess. This goddess represents a feminine that is not defined in relation to men. In later times, this goddess was split into the good and the bad mother (and other dimensions of the archetypical feminine). However, in films like *Alien* and *Aliens* something of the archaic mother goddess remains. The problem is that this goddess, her sexuality and her strength are not allowed to survive. A different end is perhaps not possible to imagine in the stories, but as Hocker sees it, the films in this way once again tell a very problematic story, a story that it is time to challenge.<sup>25</sup> Though the monsters are killed in *Alien Resurrection* as well, a kind of acceptance of the archaic mother and her sexuality can be seen here in the character Ripley. In this film Ripley is no longer just human, she is also partly monster. In one of the more memorable scenes in the film she is shown caressing the monster in a way that reminds one of a sexual act. Thus, strong, female sexuality is associated with Ripley and through her allowed to survive.

If we return once more to Buffy and Angel and their short time of bliss, here as well a positive attitude to sex can be found. Though Angel loses his soul when he sleeps with Buffy and due to this becomes evil, it is interesting that it is only when he has sex with Buffy, not just spends time with her, that he reaches true happiness. It is also only when he sleeps with Buffy, his true love, that this happens, not when he later has sex with at least one other woman. One could then argue that even though sex leads to something bad, it is not because sex as such is bad. On the contrary sex with someone one loves can mean true happiness. In a sense sex becomes a matter of the soul. In a similar manner sex becomes something more important for Spike, when he receives his soul, but not evil as such. One could of course still argue that sex is punished

<sup>24</sup> T.L. SPAISE, *Necrophilia and SM: The Deviant Side of Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, in «The Journal of Popular Culture», XXXVIII (2005), 4, pp. 764-762, here p. 761.

<sup>25</sup> J.H. RUSHING, *Evolution of «The New Frontier» in Alien and Aliens: Patriarchal Co-optation of the Feminine Archetype*, in J.W. MARTIN - C.E. OSTWALT (edd), *Screening the Sacred: Religion, Myth, and Ideology in Popular American Film*, Boulder (CO) 1995, pp. 94-117.

in the story. However, according to the logic of the series, it is in fact Angel who is punished for the crimes he committed when he was the evil vampire Angelus, both by being given a soul and loosing it. Buffy, of course, gets caught in the middle and has to kill Angelus, who turns back into Angel just before he dies, but it is not her or their having had sex which are represented as wrong.

To summarize, sexuality in the Whedonverse is, despite some problematic representations, often in a positive way connected to a life affirming attitude and, in a way, salvation. In this way the material shows a clear challenge or reworking of the Christian tradition or at least some aspects of this tradition. However, the picture is even more complicated than this. The saviors in the Whedonverse are not just sexual. They are also often represented as queer.

## 6. *Queering it*

Lately, the term queer has become a fairly popular term to use when describing a whole range of different identities. While queer used to have a negative sound to it, being queer is today, as it would seem, trendy, with the risk of becoming too inclusive to be meaningful. Despite this, the term can still be useful and it is a term that in many ways fits well when talking about the Whedonverse. However, what exactly does it mean to be queer? Gerard Loughlin describes queer in the following way:

«Queer seeks to outwit identity. It serves those who find themselves and others to be other than the characters prescribed by an identity. It marks not by defining, but by taking up distance from what is perceived as the normative. The term is deployed in order to mark and to make a difference, a divergence».<sup>26</sup>

Queer then is not just about sexuality, or being lesbian or gay. It is about not being able to be categorized in a simple way and about challenging ideas about sexuality, gender and more.<sup>27</sup> However, in the following we will concentrate on the aspect of sexuality, though many of the characters are queer in other ways as well.

If we start our analyses with looking at the presence of gay or lesbian characters in the material, several examples can be found. The most obvious character is probably the witch Willow in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*. This character starts off as a fairly typical straight girl, but in the fourth season of the series she meets Tara with whom she falls in love. However, Willow's potential lesbianism is already hinted at in the third season of the series. The relationship between Willow and Tara is portrayed as very

<sup>26</sup> G. LOUGHLIN, *Introduction: The End of Sex*, in G. LOUGHLIN (ed), *Queer Theology: Rethinking the Western Body*, Oxford 2007, p. 9.

<sup>27</sup> D. AMY-CHINN, *Queering the Bitch: Spike, Transgression and Erotic Empowerment*, in «European Journal of Cultural Studies», VIII (2005), 5, pp. 313-328, here p. 316.

loving and though no obvious sex scenes are shown between them, there are scenes that are very sexually charged. The most evident of these scenes is the scene from *Once more with feeling* in Season 6, where Tara sings about her love for Willow while being suspended in the air declaring that Willow makes her «com...plete».

Though the relationship between Willow and Tara is shown to be very affectionate, their story does not end in the best of ways. When they finally are reunited after a lengthy separation, Tara is killed by a stray bullet. In her sorrow Willow turns to the dark arts and tries to destroy the world. However, this is not the end of lesbianism in the series. Instead a new potential female love interest for Willow is introduced in Season 7, the season where she instead of becoming a representative of darkness becomes a goddess of light, when doing her part in the fight against the first evil.

In *Firefly* and *Serenity*, queer characters are somewhat more difficult to find. However, here as well an open attitude to sexuality and different forms of sexualities can be recognized. This is most obviously true in relation to the character Inara, a concubine or professional companion who is an occasional part of the crew. Though Inara provides sexual services she is never represented as a traditional prostitute. Instead her profession in the world of the series and the film is given a high status and also connected to religion, most obviously Buddhism (statues of Buddha can be seen in her presence). Inara chooses her clients – among whom powerful women – as she wishes.

In *Alien Resurrection*, as we have already seen, Ripley is not quite the Ripley we know. This is true when it comes to sexual relations as well. Though she is not seen actually making love to anyone, if we do not count the monster, it is interesting that the character she is most closely connected to is a woman, Call. However, the potential queerness of these characters becomes even more obvious when taking into account what they really are. As already mentioned, Ripley in this film is part alien. Call in turn is not a *real* woman, but an android. These two characters are, in other words, both representatives of something different and other, but at the same time something good. If we allow for queer to also mean a transgression of species boundaries, both Ripley and Call are then clearly queer.

If we return to *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* with a more complex view on queerness, several other characters turn out to be quite queer as well. Due to her relationship with vampires, Buffy is clearly not like everyone else. She is also in many other ways a transgressive character not easy to fit into a particular mould.<sup>28</sup> However, a character that even more than Buffy challenges ideas about both gender and sexuality is the character Spike. Dee Amy-Chinn has shown how Spike, when it comes to both his

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<sup>28</sup> F.H. EARLY, *Staking Her Claim: Buffy the Vampire Slayer as Transgressive Woman Warrior*, in «The Journal of Popular Culture», XXXV (2001), 3, pp. 11-27.

appearance and sexuality, can best be described as queer.<sup>29</sup> Compared to several of the other male characters on the show, Spike has always been ready to play around with his masculinity. In season three of the series Spike proudly declares that he is love's bitch and man enough to admit it. When it comes to sexual partners, Spike is not queer in the sense of being flexible in the choice of the gender of his partners. He is instead queer in being ready to accommodate «both normative and non-normative forms of sexual behavior, and to play a variety of roles within the latter».<sup>30</sup> Amy-Chinn sums up the character in the following way:

«Spike exemplifies the breakdown of gendered binaries that underpin the heteronormative matrix, and by his actions seeks to legitimate some of those minority sexual practices which generate anxiety. In the process he transforms transgression into empowerment, potential weakness into actual strength and demonstrates the power of being both/and, rather than simply either/or».<sup>31</sup>

Though Spike becomes more passive, at least for a while, in the last season before he gives his life to save the world, even here he is clearly not like everyone else and he is still a vampire very much in love with a slayer. When Buffy tells Spike before he dies, or at least seems to die, that she loves him he gives her a smile and says that he knows that she does not, but that he appreciates her saying so. This in turn brings us to a final issue in relation to sex and saviors in the Whedonverse: love.

### 7. *Love not marriage*

Above, we have looked at the sexuality of savior characters, or characters that do at least take part in saving the world, as an, in a way, independent aspect. However, in the stories sex is not always, but fairly often combined with love. In fact, one could argue that several of the times that sex is shown to be problematic is when it is *not* combined with love. This is in many ways true for Buffy and Spike in Season 6. In this season Buffy does not love Spike and comes to realize that she is using him. The same can be said about Xander and Faith in Season 3. Their short relationship is for Faith only about sex and ends with Faith almost killing Xander. This is not to say that sex is unproblematic when it is combined with love, as we have seen with Buffy and Angel, but the end result still seems to be a lot better.

What should also be pointed out is that sex in the Whedonverse is not something that particularly often takes place between married individuals. Weddings in general tend to end in disaster, with the groom running

<sup>29</sup> D. AMY-CHINN, *Queering the Bitch*, p. 317.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibidem* p. 316.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibidem* p. 326.

away or, as in the case of Buffy's dream-wedding, the bride going up in flames. Buffy's parents are divorced while Xander's spend most of their time fighting. Sex also is very seldom associated with making children and the few children that are born are either monsters or in other ways connected to evil. This is true for the monsters in *Alien Resurrection*, but also for Angel's son Connor who is conceived when Angel is seduced by the vampire Darla. Darla's goal in seducing Angel is to make him lose his soul again, but since Angel does not love her, sex with her is just sex and it does not change him. However, it does change Darla by making her pregnant, something that vampires cannot actually become. The child she carries will naturally be something special, but he is not a future savior, at least not in an unproblematic way. Instead the journey of his life brings him in contact with evil. In other words, sex with the purpose of procreation, a form of sex that is usually promoted by the Christian tradition, in the Whedonverse does not have a happy ending.

In the Whedonverse, sex rarely takes place within traditional family structures or with a traditional family in mind. This is not to say that sex is not to be found in steady relationships with a possible forever in mind. However, these relationships are not sanctioned by church or clergy. Instead they are supported and given meaning and strength by being a part of a community of friends. One exception could perhaps be the one married couple that is a part of Mal's crew, Zoe and Washburn. These two are portrayed as being very much in love, and contrary to many other married couples in the Whedonverse, Zoe and Wash seem to make it work. However, their relationship does not survive. In the final battle, Wash is killed.

#### 8. *Love, sex and salvation*

In the beginning of this article I argued that the Whedonverse could be used as a dialogue partner when reflecting on sex and religion and more specifically on sex and Christianity. As we have seen, the Whedonverse clearly borrows themes from the Christian tradition. With regard to sexuality some similarities can be found, at least if one focuses on the negative aspects of sex in the Christian tradition and the Whedonverse. However, this is hardly a very constructive viewpoint. In this final part I will instead look at the positive sides of sex in the Whedonverse and the many ways these representations can provide a basis for a discussion of sexuality and religion in contemporary society.

A first and fairly obvious observation that can be made when looking at sex and saviors in the Whedonverse is the fact that sex is an important part of life. Sex is something human and something that often, though not always, brings positive things with it. In other words, when the saviors and the other characters in the Whedonverse have sex, they are doing something that is represented as natural. Given that we are talking about

fantasy films here, some supernatural aspects of sexuality are of course to be expected. But all in all, for the saviors sex is usually not represented as something to be resisted, but to be enjoyed with the person(s) you love. In this way the Whedonverse clearly is in conflict with the Christian tradition. However, the point here is not that the Christian view on the sexuality of the savior is the main issue, though it has of course influenced the attitude to sex in this tradition in many ways. What the Whedonverse is making clear, though, is that this is a part of the Christian tradition that does not seem to fit with a contemporary view on sex.

Secondly, the Whedonverse makes it clear that sex is not inherently good or bad. That is not to say that all kinds of sex are good or that a certain form of sex is always bad or evil. Rather what the stories tell us is that sex is good when it is combined with love or at least with respect. Whether one is married or not is not an issue, or whether the sex involves candles, knives or roses. With someone you love it is all, mostly, good. The Whedonverse then takes issue with anyone who wants to limit good sex to certain behaviors and certain relationships. Instead it says that sex in many forms can be something beautiful, even religious, as in *Serenity* where the art of lovemaking is associated with Buddhism. However, by being so clearly present in relation to apocalyptic themes and saviors it is not impossible to see sex as related to issues of salvation in accordance with the Christian tradition as well. In other words, sex and love can sometimes be what saves us. Though from a Christian perspective it is perhaps difficult to accept as good all the forms of sex that the Whedonverse presents, the focus on love is something that the Whedonverse and Christianity could be argued to have in common.

Love then, one could say, makes sex good, but does this go for everyone and all kinds of different sexualities? This is a third area of discussion that the Whedonverse brings to the surface and to which it answers almost univocally yes. The films and TV series clearly do not present characters with a different sexual orientation from the norm as deviant, with the exception of rapists and the like. It would rather seem to argue that saviors are often queer. For some this can perhaps be seen as a direct challenge of Christian ideals. However, this is only one possible reading. The stories could just as well be said to connect with the many queer voices that do exist in the Christian tradition.<sup>32</sup> With this it is not said that the stories directly take issue with this question in either direction. However, with its representations of queer characters the Whedonverse gives us images and characters to relate to, characters that do not glorify or simplify the issue, but instead make it clear that being queer is about being who you are and being accepted as such.

This in turn leads us to a fourth aspect worth taking into account when reflecting on sex and saviors in the Whedonverse. The Whedonverse is

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<sup>32</sup> G. LOUGHLIN (ed), *Queer Theology*.

of course not real. These characters are nothing but fiction. However, as many critics have pointed out, the reasons for why e.g. *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* works so well, is the fact that it is, in a way, full of metaphors.<sup>33</sup> The demons and monsters can be seen as symbols for the struggles that one has to go through when growing up. Through these metaphors the series then manages to deal with real issues. These issues are perhaps made more interesting by being clad in monsters and demons and also in this way kept at a distance, but they are still real issues: such as sex and finding a sexual identity and also in a way finding acceptance for this identity. By not turning away from questions of religion, the show also, in a way, allows for a space to relate religion and sexuality to each other and show how these do not have to be opposites. It should be pointed out that Christianity does not seem to be the religion of choice for many of the characters, but with the presence of Christian symbols throughout the series, Christianity is never entirely disposed of. One could then argue that the show opens up for a form of Christianity that wants to find a new way of looking at questions of sex, just as the show gives us saviors with new ways of looking at how to save the world.

Finally, even though the Whedonverse shows the importance of sex and love and the many ways to be sexual and good and offers us a space to relate sex to religion, it could be argued that a fact that the films and TV series also point to, is that sex is often not the main issue. What several of the works in the Whedonverse show to be worthy of equal, if not even more, attention, are issues such as love, caring for and accepting oneself and the other, trust, not shutting anyone out, hope, never giving up, forgiveness, believing in something, justice and saving the world. Next to all of this, sex is just one issue among many. Sex is of course in the Whedonverse to some degree linked to deeper issues of life and death. Vampires e.g. kill through a very sexually charged act, an act that can also make the living into the living dead. However, when deciding who is the good guy and who is the bad, not to mention who can be a savior and who cannot, sex and who you decide to have it with is not the decisive question.

## 9. Conclusion

Above we have looked at saviors and sex in a large number of works that are all, in one way or the other, part of the Whedonverse. Our analysis has shown that the subject can be looked at from many different angles and that the representations both challenge and agree with ideals in the

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<sup>33</sup> B. TONIK, *Entropy as Demon: Buffy in Southern California*, in R. KAVENEY (ed), *Reading the Vampire Slayer*, New York 2004, pp. 83-99.

Christian tradition. Most importantly though, the material offers a space where these questions can be discussed at, perhaps one could argue, a safe distance. However, whether one sees the results as positive or not, the fact that these representations are out there and are finding an audience show us that there are truths to be found in them, or at least crucial questions asked. With this in mind, one should not forget that the material for this study was not created to deal specifically with these issues. In short, the films and TV series are entertainment products that are created for large audiences, deal with many different issues and can as a consequence be read in many different ways. The results of this study are therefore not to be seen as final, but as one voice in an ongoing discussion. However, one can hope that this discussion will continue with the same openness and fearlessness as many of the characters in the Whedonverse show when meeting fictitious, but metaphorically true monsters.