

What would Buffy do?

by [Wendy Love Anderson](#) in the [May 17, 2003](#) issue

She's died to save the world, been resurrected, inspired love from social outcasts and forgiven (some of) her enemies. She's also destroyed churches, posed with a hammer and sickle, mocked religion as "freaky," and explained that she hasn't accepted Jesus as her personal savior because she "just got really busy."

Now *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* is ending a seven-season run as the heroine of her eponymous TV show, and she's more controversial than ever: while the religious humor magazine *The Door* named Buffy its Theologian of the Year for 2002, the Parents Television Council is calling on Christians to boycott the show for "making a mockery of the Eucharist" this past Holy Week.

Meanwhile, back on the Hellmouth, where the vampires emerge, Buffy (played by Sarah Michelle Geller) and company are battling the First Evil in order to save the world from yet another apocalypse.

Buffy the Vampire Slayer began its television run as a midseason replacement series based on a mediocre movie, but it has blossomed into a critically acclaimed cult hit and has even generated a spin-off (*Angel*). The show is ostensibly aimed at a teenage audience, but its mix of snappy dialogue and savvy cultural critique has spawned a vocal cadre of older, highly educated viewers.

BTVS is not exactly sympathetic to organized religion. Though the undead can be burned by crosses and holy water--as one would expect from standard vampire mythology--these symbols are much less effective against vampires than a secular stake through the heart. The show does not explore where the holy water comes from, and the only "Anointed One" turned out to be a child vampire.

The churches in Buffy's hometown of Sunnydale are ordinarily abandoned or serve as vampire lairs. Buffy's ex-boyfriend Riley once admitted to regularly attending a church where vampires had briefly taken worshipers hostage, and her friend Willow has identified herself alternately as Jewish and Wiccan in time for Christmas-season jokes. But in BTVS religious belief or practice is overwhelmingly the province of various creatures of evil.

The show has also named several of Christianity's historic failings. Buffy has battled an "ancient order" of militant crusader knights, as well as a Native American "spirit warrior" trying to avenge the wrongs committed against his people by Spanish missionaries. She has also taken on a transdimensional labor camp disguised as a "family values" homeless shelter.

In the series' final story line, Buffy is pitted against a former preacher who wears a clerical collar and enjoys killing young women while identifying them with Eve and the Whore of Babylon; naturally, he turns out to be working for the First Evil. (It was this character, Caleb, who upset the PTC with his eucharistic speculation--most notably about whether Christ could have created white wine at the Last Supper from lymph fluid.)

But a truly anti-Christian show could hardly have such an obvious Christ figure as its protagonist. During the show's first season, Buffy went willingly to death by drowning in fulfillment of ancient prophecy (with an assist from Isaiah). She was revived feeling "strong" and "different." However, this quasi-baptismal experience cannot compare to Buffy's second death, at the end of season five, when, realizing that her blood could save the world, she jumped off a platform with her arms outspread in cruciform position. After her friends used dark magic to resurrect her, it turned out that she had been in "heaven."

For pastoral purposes, it may be more useful to think about what sort of gospel BTVS preaches. All quips aside, the show's plotlines and dialogue repeatedly emphasize the transformative powers of love and the fact that Buffy's success and survival as a vampire slayer are thanks to her inner strength and her loving network of family and friends. She forgives their assorted betrayals as they forgive hers.

From the first episode to the last, Buffy's humanity is what is most striking. When an enemy taunts that he has stripped away her friends, weapons and hope, she tells him that she still has "me." When the primitive First Slayer challenges her in a dream, insisting that all Slayers are solitary killers, Buffy responds that she is not alone, adding, "I walk, I talk, I shop, I sneeze. I'm gonna be a fireman when the floods roll back . . . Now give me back my friends!"

In each season finale, victory over the forces of darkness ultimately derives not from supernatural power but from human (and occasionally vampire) love. This is not an explicitly or exclusively Christian message, but it can certainly be inspiring. As Buffy's friend Willow once suggested, "It's the extra evil vibe from the Hellmouth."

Makes people pray harder." The only real problem with the show for Christians and non-Christians is that it ends this month.