"Letting that Belief Be Real Enough": Shepherd Book as the Embodiment of Religious Non-Realism in the Whedonverse

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[1] Shepherd Derrial Book (Ron Glass) is perhaps the most mysterious of the *Firefly* and *Serenity* characters. This estimation of Book is grounded in the rather obvious fact that the series and film left so much of his backstory undeveloped. True, the audience received tantalizing tidbits of Book's past. The only thing he wields more effectively than his Bible is a rifle. He dons simple religious garb, but in his pockets can be found an identity card that makes the Alliance spring into action. He now follows in the footsteps of a well-known carpenter, but he also knows the works of ruthless crime boss Adelai Niska (Michael Fairman) and the psychotic dictator-torturer turned warrior-poet Shan Yu.

[2] This essay, however, will shed some light on a different sort of meta-level mystery that shrouds Book's character. Book is (was) invariably portrayed by Whedon and his writers in a positive and sympathetic light. Yet religion and religious figures are typically portrayed dubiously in the Whedonverse, and given Whedon's atheism, this is not surprising.[1] Therefore, it is rather surprising that Book's character is portrayed so favorably. The mystery, then, is this: How should Whedon scholars interpret Book's sympathetic portrayal given the fact that Whedon often depicts religion and religious figures negatively? It will be argued here, via close analysis of "Jaynestown" (1.7) and *The Shepherd's Tale* (Whedon, Whedon, and Samnee), that the

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character of Shepherd Book is most effectively interpreted as embodying Whedon's implicit commitment to a philosophical interpretive theory of religion known as religious non-realism.

The Good Book and the Dao of *Firefly*

[3] Whedon scholars have been prone to interpret Shepherd Book's character in relationship to the other crewmembers. Eric Greene is among such scholars. He contends that Book effectively serves as a sort of inverse reflection or reverse image of Malcolm Reynolds (Nathan Fillion). Referencing Mal's crisis of faith as a result of the Battle of Serenity Valley, Greene contends, "Mal believed once, but no longer. While Book, a former sinner we may assume, now believed. It would seem that just as defeat at Serenity Valley stripped Mal of his belief, something pushed the shadowy Book into the light" (82).

[4] Despite the title of his essay, Greene's overarching thesis is seemingly more concerned with Mal than with Book. According to Greene, each of Serenity's crew members represents some aspect of its captain. In this way, Mal can be understood as a sort of hub that "helped forge a cohesive ensemble, and gave the audience a sense that these individuals were part of an organic whole, distinct but related" (82). As this thesis relates to Book, Greene contends that Book's reverse-image connection to Mal went under-developed. Greene believes this is so not only because the series lasted but fourteen television episodes (not all of them broadcast), but also because Whedon decided to kill off the character in act two of the motion picture. Book's approach to faith and belief—which was of humble devotion and was thus benign and compassionate—was replaced by the Operative's (Chiwetel Ejiofor) approach—which was unwavering and uncompromising and thus prone to zealotry and destruction. So Greene's deeper thesis may be that there are different kinds of faith and different ways believers conduct themselves; some of these are good, but others are bad. Book was good, and the Operative is (was) bad. Furthermore, even if the Operative's approach is one that must be forcibly resisted, Book's approach is far more subtle, and one that deserves Mal's considered attention, even if he gives it only too late. Greene concludes, "Mal is remarkably consistent in his core characteristics, and that opened up an intriguing space between

him and Book, who, as a clergyman, by definition was guided by overarching principles and ideological constructs. Again, had the series had a longer run it would have been nice to have seen that space and those tensions explored more deeply" (86). We can only wonder how or whether Book might have become a direct image of the captain.

[5] Roger P. Ebertz breaks with Greene's analysis in at least two interesting and informative ways. First, Ebertz argues that although Whedon intends Book to represent a fundamentalist Christian, Book is not a stereotypical fundamentalist. According to Ebertz, Book "has a less literal way of interpreting the Bible than most fundamentalists, and he wears vaguely clerical-looking clothes, looking somewhat like a Catholic or Anglican priest" (196). Regarding Ebertz's point about interpreting the Bible and its injunctions, recall that Book takes up arms in "War Stories" (1.10) to rescue Mal and Wash (Alan Tudyk) and, in *Those Left Behind* (Whedon, Matthews, and Conrad), he assists the crew with a heist by distracting the townsfolk with an extra-long and particularly weighty sermon, and later "borrowing" and driving the get-away vehicle.

[6] The upshot of Ebertz's analysis is significant in that it paves the way for alternative interpretations of Book and what the character represents. Unlike Greene, who interprets Book in a rather straight-forward Christian way, and despite Whedon's initial literary intentions, Ebertz argues that Book is most fruitfully interpreted apart from his overtly traditional religious trappings. In proof of this, Ebertz reminds us of Mal's and Book's nighttime conversation on Haven in the film *Serenity*. Mal seeks Book's counsel about how to proceed with Simon (Sean Maher) and River (Summer Glau), especially given the Alliance's renewed interest in the sibling fugitives. When Book advises, "Only one thing is gonna walk you through this," and that is "belief," Mal responds, "I ain't looking for help on high. That's a long wait for a train that don't come." To which Book replies, "When I talk about belief, why do you always assume I'm talking about God?" (*Serenity*).[2] It does indeed seem that Book's character is more complex than a straightforward religious interpretation would allow. If Book were representative of a stereotypical "fundamentalist Christian guy," then he would presumably always be talking about God (Whedon 174)

[7] The second way in which Ebertz's assessment differs from Greene's is that he does not interpret Mal as the hub that provides for an organic unity among the crew; instead, the crewmembers—and Mal and Book in particular—represent an organic dynamic in their own right, and thereby akin to the principles of yin and yang. Germane to ancient Chinese thought and Daoism in particular, the powers of yin and yang are more complementary than they are oppositional; they represent an interchange of the active and passive, of the physical and intellectual, of that which yields and that which remains unchanging. Consequently, opposites do not cancel each other out, as much as depend on the other for their existence. According to Ebertz:

> As yin and yang stand in complementary tension, Book and Reynolds complement one another in dynamic, yet taut, harmony. . . . Each of the characters is a mix as an individual, and each is different from the others. And together they pulsate with life, the life of [spaceship] *Serenity*. Like Daoism itself, the *Firefly/Serenity* series communicates the value of being open to the other, of learning from differences, and of working with, rather than against, others. (201, 203)

Mal and Book represent the opposing but complementary forces associated with skepticism and faith, Simon and Jayne (Adam Baldwin) similarly represent the complementary forces of principled ethical commitment and egoistic pragmatism,[3] and Inara (Morena Baccarin) and Wash and Zoe Washburne (Gina Torres) similarly represent the complementary forces of contractually-arranged companionship and marital intimacy. Therefore, Ebertz reminds us that in the 'verse (and the greater Whedonverse), what initially seems obvious may admit deeper—and perhaps unexpected—explanations.

Book's Doubt and Redemption

[8] K. Dale Koontz's interpretation of Book and his religiosity can be likened to Greene's in that she offers a more or less straightforward, but still quite intuitive, account of the character. However, in some ways, her assessment reaches a depth that surpasses Greene's. This begins with her insightful assessment of religion in the Whedonverse: "As one might

expect for a creator with an atheistic point of view, Joss Whedon rarely presents formalized religion in a positive light in his work" (119). She reminds us of the *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* episode "Anne" (3.1) as evidence of her claim, but there are others, of course, including the misogynist (de-frocked) priest Caleb (Nathan Fillion) from season seven of *Buffy*. To her credit, Koontz also observes, however, that with Shepherd Book, "Whedon creates a dynamic man of faith who is depicted as embodying positive qualities of faith such as kindness, compassion, and a willingness to defend the helpless" (119). These exemplary moral qualities allow Book to form caring relationships, based in mutual respect, with each member of Serenity's crew, despite their respective vivid idiosyncrasies of character and circumstance.

[9] Koontz's interpretive thesis regarding Book focuses on the roles that faith and doubt play in the Shepherd's life, and how that interplay connects with Serenity's crew, and Mal in particular. According to Koontz, and plausibly so, doubt is inherently tied to faith. Whedon provides glimpses of Book's doubt as early as "Serenity" (1.1). In a very Whedonesque role inversion of an elegant prostitute offering benediction to a tentative preacher, Book seeks Inara's guidance regarding his choice to join Serenity's crew. As she tends to Book's wounds, and given the various violent, criminal, and morally questionable events of the episode, he looks up and quietly muses, "I believe. I just think I'm on the wrong ship" ("Serenity").[4] She looks serenely down upon him, gently places her hand upon him, and quietly reassures him, "Maybe. Or maybe you're exactly where you ought to be." Whedon provides another important glimpse of Book's doubt, although one not discussed by Koontz, in "Out of Gas" (1.8). As the ship's life support system slowly fails, Book takes to his quarters to find comfort in his Bible. As he reads, River lingers in the open door and shares with him, "Don't be afraid. That's what it says. Don't be afraid." Book quickly surmises that her abrupt comment refers to the Bible; he simply responds, "Yes." River continues, "But you are afraid." He again responds, "Yes." If Book completely trusted Scripture, he (probably) would not fear his impending death. The fact that he does clouds whether he believes in its truth.[5]

[10] According to Koontz, the doubt that occasionally grips Book—about his effectiveness in being a stable moral and spiritual guiding presence for the crew, or in Scripture itself—does not undermine his successes in spurring positive transformation among the crewmembers. She writes, "Merely because Book doubts his own effectiveness doesn't mean that he is not an effective force for good and Whedon uses the Shepherd to bring about fundamental changes in the way other characters relate to the 'verse itself" (129). In this way, and following Greene, Book's doubt is a good thing; it supplements his faith. In fact, Koontz continues, Book's success is highlighted by the Operative's failure. The Operative has complete and total faith in the Alliance and its ambitious goal to make the world—all the worlds—a better place. He has no doubts about this plan or his role within it, and this leads him to commit various atrocities for the sake of the Alliance's vision. Furthermore, Koontz contends that the Operative is foiled by Mal exactly because Book successfully inspired the captain to regain some of his deep-seated beliefs—and the requisite conviction required to act on them—even if Mal retains his doubts about Book's God and the prospects that his "aim to misbehave" will be successful. This synthesis of belief and doubt spurs Mal to be a force for good in the 'verse. She writes, "The Shepherd is clearly coded as a man with a dark past who has rejected that past in favor of leading a life marked by compassion and service to others. . . . Shepherd Book tries mightily to be a righteous man and to serve as a role model for those around him" (130). Book serves as this model even in death, as the now iconic "I aim to misbehave" scene in *Serenity* picturesquely attests.

[11] Koontz acknowledges that many details of Book's past are left uncovered; for example, how to interpret his claim, psychically "overheard" by River in "Objects in Space" (1.14), "I don't give half a hump if you're innocent or not—so where does that leave you?" or why he would introduce himself to Kaylee in the pilot episode by sharing, "Book. I'm called Book" ("Serenity"). Yet for Koontz, one thing about Book is certain: He represents the idea that the path to redemption is not uniform. Regardless of one's shadowy past, or the misdeeds it contains, one can seek atonement for them and make important and striking strides in that quest. Furthermore, one need not seek

redemption with the steely resolve of Angel (David Boreanaz). One may seek as Book does, not always sure of himself and often doubting his actions and beliefs, but in doing so, always striving—and sometimes stumbling—toward that goal, and serving as a role model for others in the process. In fact, building on Koontz's analysis, Whedon's deeper message may be this: the very fact that we are sometimes uncertain advantageously keeps us open to different possibilities and alternative paths to our goal, which thereby further ensures our chances of success.[6]

Jaynestown among the Faithful

[12] Gregory Erickson's approach to Book and religious faith is similar to Ebertz in that he offers a non-standard or atypical perspective. And just as Koontz is to Greene, it seems that Erickson's analysis, in some ways, extends beyond Ebertz's. Indeed, Erickson offers a complex postmodern analysis of *Firefly* and *Serenity* generally, especially in terms of the messages regarding ethics, religion, and meaningfulness. As he sees it, and especially in "Serenity," "The Train Job" (1.2), "Bushwhacked" (1.4), and "Jaynestown," Whedon's *Firefly* offers "faith, morality, and religion [as] interwoven in contradictory and revealing ways that question the idea of what it is to be human and explore the possibilities of creating meaning within a space of nothingness" (168). Science fiction often explores the relationship between ethics and religion and what it might mean to be human, but Erickson contends that *Firefly* resists offering any definitive answers; the series does explore such issues, of course, but does so through misdirection, confusion, and paradox. For example, he notes that although Mal has rejected God and religion, he continues to affirm a strong code of right and wrong, about which Erickson asks, "But what standard of ethics does Mal believe in and where does it come from?" (171).[7]

[13] Erickson's analysis is stimulating; it is also far-reaching. For the purposes of this essay, his assessment of "Jaynestown" is most directly relevant. Erickson insightfully contrasts Book's exchange with River regarding the Book of Genesis with the Canton mudders' interpretation of Jayne's last (brief) visit to their moon. River attempts to "fix" Book's Bible by scribbling in the margins and tearing out pages. She does this because she believes it is broken; it is broken because it

does not make sense, and she is doing what she can to free it of contradictions and false logistics. Book attempts to calm her by explaining, "It's not about making sense. It's about believing in something, and letting that belief be real enough to change your life. It's about faith. You don't fix faith, River. It fixes you" ("Jaynestown"). Yet Erickson contends that Book's poignant words are subverted by the Canton mudders' faith in Jayne because the mudders' belief seems to be misplaced. Jayne is a brigand's brigand and a breaker of God's commandments. Jayne is far from a hero—by his own admission later in the episode. This leads Erickson to ask:

> Has the mudders' faith in Jayne "fixed" them? Is there a difference between Book's faith in the Bible and the mudders' faith in Jayne, which are both based on stories or events that "don't make sense," and indeed are not, for the most part, factually true? If the episode demonstrates (as it seems to) that faith in Jayne is the wrong kind of faith, does it by implication question the faith of (the) Book? (177)

All of this, at least initially, certainly sounds like Whedonesque misdirection.

[14] Expounding on his rhetorical-sounding questions, Erickson claims that Mal darkly parodies Book's position on faith via Mal's closing words of the episode. Jayne is mystified about the mudders' faith, and especially as it led one young man to give up his life to save Jayne's. Jayne laments, "Don't make no sense. . . . Hell, they're probably stickin' that statue right back up." Mal quickly replies, "Most like," but then adds, "Ain't about you, Jayne. 'Bout what they need." Erickson's analysis of the episode, at least as it pertains to the role of faith, is layered. He notes the contradistinction between Mal's pragmatism and Book's commitment to the Bible. This seems indicative of a paradox, because both offer interpretations of faith from different perspectives, but the episode seems to support both of their views. Yet he also claims that Book's and Mal's positions are similar in that they "assert the power of faith above and beyond any core essential presence of truth" (199).[8] Erickson does not pursue this line very carefully, and allows it to drift (via Jayne's knocking over his own statue) into the seeming confusion of faith persisting even after the "death of God" that has occurred in

contemporary society. Erickson sums up, "Yet God continues to be an influential presence in the twenty-first century, and even after hearing the 'truth' about Jayne, a mudder sacrifices his life to save him. Is this noble or foolish?" (178). Erickson tentatively concludes his analysis of "Jaynestown" by offering one of two readings of the episode: Either faith, even if pragmatically useful in fixing things, remains on some level foolish, or Book's view of faith is not foolish, but only if his words are reinterpreted and deconstructed so as to embrace the paradox they express.[9]

"Worthier" Journeys

[15] In a mere 48 pages of graphic novel text, *The Shepherd's Tale* conveys what Whedon fans and scholars had hoped for: an informative glimpse into Book's past.[10] *The Shepherd's Tale* can be profitably interpreted as a series of interconnected segments or "chapters," told in flashback sequences. The beginning of each chapter is signalled by large block lettering, which provides the reader a time frame for the depicted events. The first time stamp appears on text page one with "Haven Mining Colony." Yet this is where Book's story tragically *ends*. Recall that in the movie *Serenity*, Book is mortally wounded on Haven. This is chapter nine of *The Shepherd's Tale*. The first chapter of Book's story begins on page 44, depicting events occurring 44 years before Book's death on Haven—44 BBD.[11]

[16] Chapter one depicts a teenager sneaking into his shabby apartment home. His father is unconscious on the couch; when awake, the man physically abuses his son. The teenager dreams of floating away, thereby escaping his father's clutches. In the next few frames he does escape, declaring, "I am in control. . . . I'll protect myself, take what I need and keep moving. Because it's every man for himself" (47-48). The last line of the novel, correspondingly, is "This life is mine" (48). This is where Book's story in *The Shepherd's Tale* begins.

[17] The intervening chapters depict a young man named not Derrial Book, but Henry Evans. Henry has continual skirmishes with local authorities due to constant criminal activity. To avoid being arrested, he joins the burgeoning resistance movement against the Alliance and volunteers for a very dangerous mission. He becomes an

Alliance mole. The assignment requires him to assume a new identity. In a dark alley, he accosts a young man and strangles him to death. Looking through the deceased's belongings, Henry finds an identification card that reads "Derrial Book." Not only does Henry take the young's man life, he steals his identity. Soon after, Cadet Book, as a result of his penchant for violence when conducting prisoner interrogations, swiftly becomes Officer Book. Although it seems he is destined for military greatness, his fall from grace is as swift as his rise through the ranks, after he orchestrates the most devastating military defeat in Alliance history. Immediately dishonorably discharged, and now of no use to the Independents, the man called Derrial Book becomes an indigent drunk.

[18] One day Book wakes up in a shelter and is given warm chicken soup. Pausing to ponder the bowl on the table, he muses that the table is held up by the floor, and the floor rests on the planet, all held in place by the gravity of the star at the center of the solar system. He continues, "All of creation supports this bowl, which supports the soup, which supports me" (18). He has never mused philosophically before. Having something of an epiphany, he asks, "What do I do with the life it gives me?" (19). He pauses momentarily to consider the answer to his own question. He then gulps heartily and exits the shelter. Holding his head high, he stumbles upon an abbey. Not too long after that, he ambles to the Persephone shipyards, and meets a young woman twirling a colorful parasol. She says, "You're gonna come with us" (13).

[19] Accordingly, we now know why Book introduces himself to the parasol-twirling Kaylee (Jewel Staite) in the awkward way that he does. He is called Book, but his given name was Henry Evans. Although Greene is correct that Henry committed acts that many would deem sinful, Henry probably would not have deemed them as such because he was not religious. Furthermore, Henry's un-Christ-like penchant for violence served him well as an Alliance interrogator, which sheds light on his disturbing dialogue in "Objects in Space," and his service as a high-ranking Alliance officer (arguably) explains the Alliance's conspicuous reaction to finding the identity card in his pocket ("Safe" 1.5).[12] Thus it does not quite seem correct to claim, as Greene does, that something pushed Book into the light. It seems closer to the truth to claim that he stumbled upon it. Consonant with Ebertz's view, Book's

revelation in the homeless shelter was not a religious experience in any obvious sense; rather, it seemed to be more of a philosophical epiphany in that he finally realized that the world is so much more than his egoistic and selfish concerns. And following Ebertz further, just as there are forces that support his existence, Book will now dedicate his life to supporting the lives of others, and in this way serve as the yin to the yang which pervades much of the world around him (and of which he was a cause). This ethically significant belief, which does later take a religious turn (yet not an overtly conscious one) will be his cornerstone of meaningfulness in what often seems to be a meaningless existence.

Interpretations of Religion

[20] It seems plausible to contend that when most people think, speak, or act in religiously significant ways, they presuppose that the corresponding beliefs are true, which is to say that the object of the relevant belief exists as a real feature of the world. So, when Christians, Jews, or Muslims pray to God, and ask for guidance, they believe that God actually exists, and indeed cares about earthly affairs. Philosophically speaking, this interpretive perspective of religion is called religious realism. Contemporary philosopher and theologian John Hick defines the term this way:

> Religious realism is the view that the objects of religious belief exist independently of what we take to be our human experience of them. For each religious tradition refers to something (using that word in its most general sense) that stands transcendingly above or undergirdingly beneath and giving value or meaning to our existence. . . . And what I am calling the realist option understands such language in a basically realist way as referring to an object of discourse that is "there" to be "referred to." (174-5)

So, religious realism is the view that religiously significant claims, for example "God exists," are either true or false, and whether they are true or false is independent of our beliefs about them. Furthermore, most religious realists make the further claim that if religious beliefs are false, then there is little reason to be religious. The fundamental goal of

religion is to attain salvation or liberation, but if God (or some transcendent entity) does not exist, then one cannot be saved or liberated.

[21] A competing philosophical interpretation of religious belief and practice is often called religious non-realism. Religious non-realists contend that there is sufficient reason to be religious even if religiously significant transcendent entities do not exist or religious significant beliefs are false. Hick describes the view in this way: "Non-realist interpretations of religious language are part of the wide overlapping family covered by . . . religious humanism which find deep significance and important guidance for life in the religious symbols, myths, stories and rituals cherished by the great traditions" (190).[13] Religious non-realists tend to be atheists or agnostics, but they are not anti-religion. Religious non-realists hold that religiously significant beliefs, myths, and rituals are important for what they symbolize or represent, but their importance is explained in terms of the function(s) of religion and not doctrinal truth. Consequently, religious belief, faith, and practice retain their significance, and this is so independent of whether God exists, or Jesus is divine, or Allah transmitted the Qur'an to Muhammad.[14]

[22] One of the more prominent religious non-realists is Ludwig Feuerbach. Regarding theistic belief and practice, Feuerbach holds that humankind unconsciously and involuntarily creates God via projecting an idealized conception of human nature onto the cosmos. This projection is largely ethical in nature. The moral attributes of God—love, justice, mercy—are ascribed to him exactly because we worship these qualities. These qualities have intrinsic value and we immediately recognize their importance. Feuerbach writes:

> God, as an extramundane being, is nothing else than the nature of man withdrawn from the world and concentrated in itself, freed from all worldly ties and entanglements, transporting itself above the world, and positing itself in this condition as a real objective being. . . . The divine being is nothing else than the human being, or, rather the human nature purified, freed from the limits of the individual man, made objective. (66, 14)

Religion provides us an effective way to seek ethical ideals; as a result of pursuing moral excellence, one thereby becomes a better person, and that is clearly important in its own right. In this way, then, religious language, beliefs, and behavior remain of the utmost importance, even if we unconsciously project God (or some other transcendent being) onto reality to pursue our ideals.

[23] The ethical significance of religious belief and practice has been acknowledged by both religious realists and non-realists. Hick, who professes an intriguing synthesis of realism and non-realism in his interpretation of religion, believes that the ultimate goal of what he terms post-axial religion is salvation or liberation, and he further holds that each of the world's major religious traditions provides an effective framework for achieving it. However, despite the doctrinal differences between the separate traditions, salvation/liberation is attained by religious adherents undergoing a transformation from self-centeredness to other-centeredness as a result of encountering the transcendent reality. Hick puts his stimulating thesis this way:

> The function of post-axial religion is to create contexts with which the transformation of human existence from self-centeredness to Reality-centeredness can take place. . . . Let us then explore the possibility that the transformation of human existence which is called salvation or liberation shows itself in its spiritual and moral fruits. . . . There are accordingly Buddhist saints, Muslim saints, Christian saints, and so on, rather than simply saints. However, there is an all-important common feature which we can both observe today and find reflected in the records of the past. This is a transcendence of the ego point of view and its replacement by devotion to or centered concentration upon some manifestation of the Real, response to which produces compassion/love towards other human beings or towards all life (300-301).[15]

Saintly figures are those historical and contemporary persons who provide strikingly visible evidence of spiritual and moral growth in being compassionate towards others. They are called by different names—bodhisattvas, gurus, mahatmas, masters, and saints—but they are similar

in that their lives attest to the possibility of being liberated from an ego-centric view of the world. Thus, for Hick, it seems that the very function of religion is to provide adherents an ethical ideal, and one that offers significant outcomes for those who follow it well.[16]

"Religiosity" and *Firefly*

[24] Not many scholars are willing to weave together religious realism and non-realism to the extent Hick does. In fact, the only obvious realist element of his view is the insistence that an adherent's saintly transformation occurs as a result of properly encountering the transcendent religiously-significant reality (or Real). If this transcendent reality does not exist, then Hick's resulting view is distinctively non-realist in its approach. Yet the various religious traditions could still presumably facilitate the development of saintly figures even if the transcendent real they respectively profess does not exist (or if it exists in a much different way than each believes).

[25] Despite Shepherd Book's literary origins as a "fundamentalist Christian guy," closely the character as portrayed in *Firefly*, *Serenity*, and *The Shepherd's Tale* does not obviously convey a clear commitment to religious realism, and this is not terribly surprising given Whedon's personal commitments. It is true that Book has undergone a striking transformation from egoistic, petty criminal to a more saintly figure who, as Koontz notes, embodies "positive qualities" such as "kindness, compassion, and a willingness to defend the helpless" (119) . Furthermore, it is true that Book accomplished this, at least in part, by taking religious orders with his brethren at the Southdown Abbey and "following the footsteps of a carpenter for some time" ("Heart of Gold" 1.13). Yes, he performs religious rites and often carries his Bible. It is also true that he appeals to religiously significant examples, such as the parable of the Good Samaritan, when assessing what ought to be done in ethically significant situations. However, the impetus of his transformation—his "soup bowl revelation"—was not a religious experience in any traditional sense of the term. It occurred not as a result of Book encountering the transcendent Real; it was more of a philosophical epiphany. Furthermore, as the brief but poignant exchange

with River in "Out of Gas" shows, Book has doubts about the doctrinal truth of his religious commitments.

[26] The text that tips the interpretive scales toward religious non-realism for Book's character is *Serenity*. Book's reproach of Mal regarding belief is resounding: "When I talk about belief, why do you always assume I'm talking about God?" Book's dialogue might be interpreted as an implicit affirmation of any religious perspective, with Buddhism being the most likely alternative, but his dying words to Mal—"I don't care what you believe, just believe it"—cuts against it (*Serenity*). It seems that, with his last raspy breaths, Book is pleading with Mal to discover some sort of anchor or cornerstone that reenergizes his moral core. Mal has become overly pragmatic and ego-centered, and Book knows this; this is Book's last attempt at correcting Mal's path so that he begins his transformation to be more concerned with the well-being of others. In some ways, this interpretation takes religious non-realism to its conceptual limits because it implicitly advocates the position that (organized) religion is not necessary for moral and spiritual growth. But it does conform to the basic tenet that religion's essential purpose is to facilitate such growth. For some, there might be non-religious, or completely secular, ways to facilitate the relevant transformation, but for many of us, religion is what we need. It provides us the exemplary (saintly) figures of Jesus, Buddha, and Krishna to inspire us and guide us on our path to overcoming our self-centered view of the world to an other-centered view of the world. In this way, we can be saved or liberated from the limitations of selfish concerns, even if not saved or liberated in the more metaphysical sense that religious realism affirms.[17]

[27] If Book is best interpreted as embodying religious non-realism, then many of the interpretative difficulties noted by Erickson about "Jaynestown" are effectively resolved. The religious non-realist does not require that Jesus, Buddha, or Krishna, respectively, were actually divine/transcendent beings or that all of our beliefs about them are historically accurate. In fact, the religious non-realist can accept that such exemplars were not actual historical figures. What is crucial for the non-realist is that such figures serve as ideals—perhaps in the ways projectionist theorists similar to Feuerbach suggest—that inspire and guide our moral and spiritual development. Such religious figures

thereby serve as symbols that represent the relevant ideals. Therefore, contrary to Erickson, Mal is not obviously parodying or disparaging either Book or the mudders. The mudders have found what they need not in traditional religion, but by crafting their own symbol of someone who inspires and guides them on their path. True, most of their beliefs about Jayne Cobb are false; it is odd that there is a statue of him in Canton, and we can sympathize with Simon when he says "This is what going mad must feel like" when that statue is discovered ("Jaynestown"). But the importance of the statue is in what it represents: the idea of someone who would aid others not for selfish gain but simply to benefit those in dire need. True, the mudders have projected such ideals on Jayne falsely, and thus if they worship him in any sort of quasi-religious way, then their faith in the historical man is misplaced. However, these facts do not subvert what Jayne's statue represents; what it represents can account for why the young mudder sacrificed his life for Jayne's and why the mudders were probably re-erecting the statue as Serenity was departing Canton.[18]

[28] Religious non-realism satisfyingly offers a similar interpretive explanation for the exchange between Book and River. Religious faith can fix one in the relevant moral and spiritual sorts of ways, and it is not crucial that one's faith-based beliefs be true. River's attempt to fix the Bible is thereby wrong-headed, and Book attempts to explain that her correcting its "faulty logistics" is beside the point. The crucial importance of religious faith and practice is "about believing in something, and letting that belief be real enough to change your life." By allowing religious belief to be real enough, it provides many with what they need: The motivation and courage to leave their close-minded and selfish view of the world behind to embrace a completely different view of the world where each of us can be a force of good exactly because we act from compassion and humble devotion to the needs of others.

[29] Religious non-realism also sheds light on the importance that symbols play in "Jaynestown," which is something that has seemingly gone unnoticed in the literature. First, note River's rather awkward attempt to apologize for accosting Book's Bible: "I tore these out of your symbol, and they turned into paper—but I want to put them back. . . ." Whedon and his writers (Ben Edlund especially) are clearly

conveying the idea that Book's Bible is a symbol, which is representative of those beliefs and practices that Book has made real enough for him to change his life. After his epiphany in the homeless shelter, religion provided him with what he needed to go from an ego-centered approach to an other-directed approach to life. The words on the disparate pages are not crucial; the ideas they convey may be false or contradictory. But this confusion has occurred because River has taken them apart from the whole, and she wishes to make it whole again so that it can convey its true symbolic meaning. Furthermore, this interpretation is bolstered by Book's comment later in the episode about his unkempt hair (after it has frightened River): "Like the book, it symbolizes. . . ." Although Zoe interrupts him, it seems clear that Book was about to explain that it is not the way he in fact grows and wears his hair that is important, but rather what that practice symbolizes—his commitment to making his religious belief real enough to change his life.

[30] The second direct reference to the importance of symbols in the episode occurs between Inara and her client, the twenty-six year old virgin Fess Higgins (Zachary Kranzler). Magistrate Higgins (Gregory Itzin) has arranged Inara's visit on his son's behalf; evidently, it embarrasses him that his adult son is still a virgin. Upon the completion of their intimate act, Fess quietly admits to Inara, "I just thought I would feel . . .different, after. . . . Aren't I supposed to be a 'man' now?" Inara insightfully replies, "Our time together, it's a ritual, a symbol. . . . But it doesn't make you a man. That you do yourself" ("Jaynestown"). The use of symbol in this exchange is closer to the way it is used in reference to the mudders. That is, it is not used in an overtly religious sense, even if it could be interpreted in such a way. But the important point seems to be that the act itself is not all that significant; furthermore, Inara claims that Fess's father's belief that it makes him a man is simply false. However, it does, or at least can, symbolize the beginning of a transformation from childhood to adulthood, and thus a transformation from a small view of the world to a larger one. Fess must make the necessary strides for himself, even if Inara in some ways—both physically and emotionally—helps him take the first steps.

Religious "Freakiness"

[31] Accordingly, it seems that interpreting *Firefly*—and the character of Shepherd Book in particular—through the lens of religious non-realism provides satisfying results. It also offers novel insights regarding the ways in which religion is conveyed across the wider Whedonverse. Whedon's negative or disparaging depictions of religion, it can be now argued, invariably have a common theme, namely, that the relevant depictions involve religiously significant beliefs and practices that harbor ethically dubious messages. Koontz refers to the *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* episode "Anne," where the antagonist uses religious motifs to lure young people into his demon dimension for his own selfish purposes. A similar theme occurs in "Where the Wild Things Are" (4.18), where the antagonist, female this time, runs a children's home in ways that are far from compassionate.[19] Furthermore, Whedon's commitment to religious non-realism also explains the negative treatment of sacrificing innocent lives in the name of religious purposes, with the *Buffy* episodes "Inca Mummy Girl" (2.4) and "Reptile Boy" (2.5), most quickly coming to mind, but so does the *Angel* episode "Expecting" (1.18). And, of course, the portrayal of Caleb as evil—the First's (i.e., the First Evil's) right-hand man—is easily explained on a non-realist account; he preys upon young girls for his own selfish and cruel perspectives (rather than praying for them as Book would do).[20]

[32] Sometimes what passes as religion is freaky, but being religious need not always be so. If the thesis of this essay is roughly correct, then it is not the case that Whedon disparages all religiously significant beliefs and practices. It is not religion itself that is problematic, at least not necessarily, but how one's faith manifests and how religion is practiced and the methods by which it is practiced. In part, this upholds Greene's distinction between the Operative and Book. The Operative, assuming that his attitudes toward the Alliance qualify as religiously significant, conducts himself with such blinding zeal that he is willing to harm innocent children for the sake of the Alliance's ideal vision of the future. Book's religiously significant behaviors are more cautious and receptive to the needs of those around him; he is sometimes unsure of himself (as Koontz notes), but he always stumbles forward toward the ideal of universal compassion (set before him by a certain carpenter). Religious non-realism thus also clearly distinguishes

Book from Caleb and his ilk; that is, those who employ religion for selfish motivations rather than employing it in ways to facilitate compassion for others.[21] Therefore, it seems that the meta-level mystery associated with Book can be dispelled by affirming that, for Whedon, Book embodies what is proper and good in religion, even if Whedon himself is not religious.

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[1]Buffy's (Sarah Michelle Gellar) often quoted, "Note to self: religion freaky," in "What's My Line, Part I" (2.9) serves as an indicator in this regard. Wendy Love Anderson was among the first Whedon scholars to recognize Whedon's penchant for portraying religion negatively; she writes, "What is striking about the Buffyverse conception of religion is how regularly and frequently it is demonized, in both the literal and figurative sense of the term" (214).

[2]All quotes from *Serenity* are transcribed by me from DVD subtitles.

[3] For a discussion of "rational egoism" and Jayne as "a parody of the ideal man as conceived by [Ayn] Rand," see J. Douglas Rabb and J. Michael Richardson on "Jaynestown," 322-23.

[4]All dialogue from *Firefly* has been verified or quoted from Joss Whedon's *Firefly: A Celebration*.

[5]It might argued that Book fears dying, especially given the crew's dire circumstances in "Out of Gas," but not death itself. Regarding this idea, Book seeks comfort for his current predicament; however, it remains true that he does not find it, which is a bit surprising if he had complete trust in Scripture. Alternatively, it might be that Book fears he has not done enough to warrant redemption and thus God's favor. This interpretation seems to affirm Koontz's basic thesis about Book's lack of certainty regarding his own efforts. I am grateful to the issue editors for suggesting that this scene deserves further scrutiny.

[6]The most obvious Whedonverse example of someone who always stumbles forward because she is constantly open to alternative paths is probably Buffy; however, she is not seeking redemption (at least in any obvious way). Thus, it may be that Faith (Eliza Dushku) is a more relevant example. Recall her poignant exchange with Angel at the prison in "Judgement" (2.1): "The road to redemption is a rocky path . . . . Think we might make it?"—"We might." Faith is keeping her options open by accepting Angel's help, and now stumbles forward on her jagged path as a result. Moreover, the Operative is clearly someone who fails exactly because his convictions blind him to alternative paths or possibilities.

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[7]For a non-postmodern analysis of Mal's ethical code and its source(s)—and, in effect, an answer to Erickson's question—see Dean A. Kowalski, "'You're Welcome on My Boat, God Ain't': Joss Whedon on Ethical Foundations," 102-22.
[8]This echoes a claim made by Ebertz, who also attempts to make sense of Book's position on faith: "It is the faith itself, not the object of one's faith that matters most" (199).
[9]Erickson's preferred solution is the second alternative. Although a complete exposition of Erickson's preferred view is beyond the scope of this essay, his position relies on understanding River's character in a distinctively non-linear way so as to reinterpret the relevant issue into one of how the meaning of any text or myth cannot be fixed in any permanently stable way. As such, meaning, like spaceship *Serenity* itself, is always moving between things, which allows for permanent paths of possibilities for meaning. Erickson seemingly believes this is the best anyone can hope for "out in the black" of space.
[10]For the purposes of this essay, page one is signaled by the first page containing story dialogue, making the last page 48. Although Zack Whedon penned most of the dialogue, Joss Whedon provided the original outline, which undoubtedly included the major events of the story. It also seems safe to assume that Joss Whedon had final dialogue/script approval.
[11]The synopsis of *The Shepherd's Tale* presented in this section is adapted from Dean A. Kowalski, "'Where Does Any Story Begin?': Book Chapters and Whedonverse Choices."
[12] It's not clear that Book's backstory seamlessly accounts for the Alliance's reaction in "Safe." If Book were some sort of deep cover Alliance agent or spy (somehow analogous to the Operative), perhaps Book would receive the treatment he did, but *The Shepherd's Tale* strongly suggests that he was dishonorably discharged. If Book had "intel" on Alliance protocols, it would make more sense to let him die (at least from the Alliance's perspective). Thus, some mysteries about Book remain despite *The Shepherd's Tale*.
[13]As Hick correctly points out, religious non-realists tend to be a diverse lot, and various non-realists will interpret the importance of religion differently; nevertheless, one of the common (even if not universal) themes among them is an ethical component.
[14]Accordingly, when someone prays for the well-being of another (as Book does for the crew), the religious non-realist will interpret this in a way that does not require God to exist. The value of the prayer, however interpreted, must remain intact even if God does not exist to hear it (even if most religious realists see little reason to pray to a non-existent God).
[15]Hick furthers his position on salvation/liberation by demonstrating how each of the major world's traditions possesses scripture that attests to goodwill, love, and compassion; see pages 316-25. Of course, Hick is providing the framework for a

theory of religion known as religious pluralism, for which he is one of the foremost advocates.

[16]Hick is far from alone in his estimation of religion. Keith Ward, another noted contemporary philosopher and theologian writes, "Religion is primarily concerned with the transformation of the self, by appropriate response to that which is most truly real" (153).

[17] Book has not been interpreted via religious non-realism (as far as I know) in the literature. The two *Firefly/Serenity* essays in the recently published *Joss Whedon and Religion* do not discuss it. However, religious non-realist elements are persuasively discussed in that volume via W. Scott Poole's "'I'm Sorry I … Ended the World': Eschatology, Nihilism and Hope in *Cabin in the Woods*."

[18]For a more secular, but perhaps still consistent with a religious non-realism interpretation of the mudders' quasi-worship of Jayne, see Eric Hobsbawm's *Bandits*. My thanks go to the issue editors for making me aware of this resource for additional "Jaynestown" scholarship.

[19]"Where the Wild Things Are" offers a particularly vivid and direct connection to Whedon's depictions of the Miranda tragedy and the Operative's role in trying to keep it hidden in *Serenity*. The children's home supervisor, Genevive Holt (Kathryn Joosten), maliciously mistreated the children merely because of their developing hormones, or as Whedon might say, for simply being human. Furthermore, Holt's strong religious convictions were such that she was absolutely convinced that she was benefitting the children, but this only blinded her to the psychological damage she was causing. On sexuality, religion, and Whedon's view of the nature of humanity in *Serenity*, see Rhonda V. Wilcox's " 'I Do Not Hold to That': Joss Whedon and Original Sin," esp. 156-57 and 164-65.

[20]For a different interpretation of religion as it pertains to *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, see Gregory Erickson's "'Religion Freaky' or a 'Bunch of Men Who Died?': The (A)theology of *Buffy*." See also Anderson, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer and Philosophy*.

[21] Note that the religious non-realist can also have good grounds for believing that Caleb ought to have been de-frocked. Apart from whether Caleb's sinful actions are an affront to God in the realist sense, he acts contrary to the essential ethical purpose of religion, and is thereby worthy of censure.