

SERENITY AND THE THEODICY OF JOSS WHEDON

Carla Alvarez on Film and the Free Will
Defense

John Lennon gave voice to the longing of a disenchanted generation in his song, "Imagine." Speaking to and for a culture ripped apart by civil strife and racial tension, one in which the flower of its youth was sent halfway across the world to the humid jungles of Southeast Asia, the words of Lennon's ballad encourage us to "imagine all people living in peace," one where there is no need for the destruction of war because there is a "brotherhood of man."¹ No conflict. No strife. No grasping for what another has. Lennon had a beautiful vision. So

¹ John Lennon, "Imagine," *Lyrics.com* (Downtown Music Publishing, 1971) accessed April 8, 2019.
<https://www.lyrics.com/lyric/3403160/john+lennon/imagine>

beautiful, in fact, that it seems to echo the promise of the prophet Isaiah.²

This vision, one of perfect peace, seems to be a desirable end. Some might believe it is an end to be achieved at any cost. The pain and suffering in the world is the most oft-referenced argument against and criticism of God. If Lennon could imagine a world of perfect peace, why could not a perfectly good and perfectly omnipotent God manage to bring that about? As David Hume challenges in *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, “is he [God] able and willing [to prevent evil]? Whence then is evil?”³ Director Joss Whedon gives an answer to Hume in his movie *Serenity* (2005) with a visual depiction of the Free Will Defense by Alvin Plantinga.⁴

In Plantinga’s Free Will Defense, he posits that an omnipotent God can do anything that is logically *possible*, but He cannot do that which is *logically impossible*. He cannot make married bachelors or square circles because those things are impossible by their very nature. In the same way, there are

² In Isaiah 35, the prophet foresees a restoration of Zion, one where there is no sorrow, even the animals live in peace, and joy reigns.

³ David Hume, *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, 2nd ed. Digital reproduction (London, UK: Not Identified, 1779), 186.

⁴ Joss Whedon, *Serenity*, Limited Edition DVD, sci-fi (Universal Studios 2005)

certain qualities of creatures that require the existence of the opposite in order for a thing to have virtue. There would be no bravery if cowardice was not an option. Cruelty makes kindness sweet in contrast. We would not have an appreciation of goodness without an understanding of evil. Plantinga suggests that

“A really top-notch universe requires the existence of free, rational, and moral agents; and some of the free creatures He created went wrong. But the universe with the free creatures it contains and the evil they commit is better than it would have been had it contained neither the free creatures nor this evil.”⁵

C.S. Lewis presents the same argument in *Mere Christianity* writing, “. . . free will, though it makes evil possible, is also the only thing that makes possible any love or goodness or joy worth having.”⁶ To have a vibrant and vital world, individuals must be free. It is this freedom to choose right or wrong, love or hate, that brings about true virtue.

⁵ Alvin Plantinga, *God, Freedom, and Evil* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1989), 17.

⁶ C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (New York, NY: HarperOne, 1952),

Plantinga and Lewis discuss this idea in theory. It is Whedon, an atheist, who brings the idea to life in film.

Creating a Perfect World

River: People don't like to be meddled with. We tell them what to do, what to think. Don't run, don't walk. We're in their homes and their heads and we haven't the right. We're meddlesome.

Teacher: River, we're not telling people what to think. We're just trying to show them how.

The opening scene of *Serenity*.

The goal of making a new and better world precipitates the conflict of *Serenity*. In this space western, the known universe is now controlled by a corporate government, the Alliance, which attempts to keep all citizens under regulated order. While ostensibly benevolent, Alliance rule brooks no dissent. Nothing is allowed outside of the approved order. In opposition to this authoritarian rule are pockets of renegades, remnants of the Independents who fought against the Alliance in the Unification War, skirting the edges of society. One of these bands of renegades is led by Mal Reynolds, captain of the ship *Serenity*. He and his crew of misfits smuggle

items on the black market, but his most dangerous cargo is medical doctor Simon Tam and his sister River. Simon risked everything to break River out of a high-security facility operated by the Alliance and they have now taken refuge on the *Serenity* in an effort to stay out of the Alliance's grasp.

River is a psychic, a reader, who "sees into the truth of things."⁷ In their attempt to weed out and crush the Independents, the Alliance had kept River prisoner, experimenting on her to fracture her perception of reality and control her mind. As the doctor heading the experiments tells the Operative who comes to investigate River's escape, "Given the right trigger, this girl is a living weapon."⁸ Their justification for torture and human experimentation is, as the Operative later explains to Mal,

Operative: I believe in something greater than myself. A better world, a world without sin.

Mal: So me and mine have to lay down and die so you can live in your better world?

Operative: I'm not going to live there. There's no place for me there. Any more

⁷ *Serenity*, 11:00.

⁸ *Ibid.* 5:20

than there is a place for you, Malcolm. I'm a monster. What I do is evil. I have no illusions about it, but it must be done.⁹

The Alliance has identified the problem in society as aggression and strife, but their solution is more aggression and inflicted pain. The Operative recognizes this, and recognizes that he himself has no place in the world he is working to achieve. It is the conviction that evil means can bring about a good end that is the most dangerous as Inara Serra, a sometime associate of the *Serenity* crew, explains:

Inara: We have every reason to be afraid.

Jayne: Why? Because he beat up Mal? That ain't so hard.

Mal: He didn't beat me up. Who said that?

Inara: Because he's a believer. He's intelligent, methodical, and devout in his belief that killing River is the right thing to do.

Jayne: So . . . No hope of a reward huh?¹⁰

The Operative will stop at nothing to achieve his ends. He is ruthless in his single-minded

⁹ *Serenity*, 1:08:00.

¹⁰ *Serenity*, 56:20

determination to annihilate anyone that threatens the Alliance's goals.

The Problem of Free Will

The Alliance not only uses physical force, manpower, and psychological conditioning to achieve their unscrupulous ends, they have also developed a secret weapon. The crew of the *Serenity* is set on the road to the discovery of this secret after a bank heist goes wrong. Not only do Reavers (wild cannibalistic perversions of men, reminiscent of J.R.R. Tolkien's orcs in *The Lord of the Rings*, which are a corruption of elves) arrive in the midst of the robbery, but River suddenly goes on the attack after her psychological conditioning is triggered by a subliminal message in a television commercial.¹¹ With the help of a well-wired hacker, Mr. Universe, who accesses a video recording of River before her attack, the crew discovers River mentioned the word "Miranda" right before she is triggered. River

¹¹ Peter Jackson, *Lord of the Rings: Fellowship of the Ring*, DVD (Burbank, CA: Warner Brothers, 2013).

This quote is from the film adaptation (2001). Tolkien had various origins for orcs over the years.

"Do you know how the Orcs first came into being? They were elves once, taken by the dark powers, tortured and mutilated. A ruined and terrible form of life "

explains that “Miranda” is a planet beyond Reaver territory.

The crew makes their way to the planet, disguising the *Serenity* as a Reaver ship. They discover Miranda is a terraformed and developed world, but one that is utterly silent. It is like entering a tomb. As they explore, they find corpses sitting in chairs, lying in streets, completely untouched and with no sign of violence. The discovery of a hologram explains the situation. Not content with brute force or messy psychological conditioning, the Alliance had devised another method, one intended to eliminate the need for those crude methods in the first place. They took the path Lewis predicted in *The Abolition of Man* when he wrote, “But the man-moulders of the new age will be armed with the powers of an omniscient state and an irresistible scientific technique: we shall get at last a race of conditioners who really can cut out all posterity in what shape they please.”¹² The Alliance attempted to “cut out all posterity” in a new image: one which eliminated all human aggression.

In *Mere Christianity*, Lewis suggests that a world without free will and without evil would result in a “shocking alternative,” for “free will, though it

¹² C. S. Lewis, *The Abolition of Man* (New York, NY: HarperCollins, 2001), 60

makes evil possible, is also the only thing that makes possible any love or goodness or joy worth having. A world of automata—of creatures that worked like machines—would hardly be worth creating.”¹³ This came to fruition on Miranda. The air of the planet was poisoned by the Alliance with a gas to make its citizens more docile and to remove aggression. But rather than simply becoming “automata” as Lewis imagined, the results were more drastic. Without the fighting will, the drive, the majority of the citizens lost the will and desire for anything at all. As Plantinga quotes St. Augustine in *God, Freedom, and Evil*, “As a runaway horse is better than a stone which does not run away because it lacks self-movement and sense perception, so the creature is more excellent which sins by free will than that which does not sin only because it has no free will.”¹⁴ The Alliance obviously did not think this way. They attempted to remove the option to choose evil.

But for citizens of Miranda who did not die from lethargy and lack of will, the outcome was horrifying. In .1 percent of the population, removing free will left life devoid of goodness. The hologram

¹³ Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, 49.

¹⁴ Plantinga, *God, Freedom, and Evil*, 17.

discovered contained a recording by an Alliance explorer which revealed the truth:

Explorer: These are just a few of the images we recorded. And as you can see, it isn't what we thought. No terraforming event, the environment's stable. It's the pack. The G-23 paxaloni hydrochloroform that we added to the air processors. It was supposed to calm the population, weed out aggression. Well it works. The people here stopped fighting, and then they stopped everything else. They stopped going to work. They stopped breeding, talking, eating, There were 30 million people here and they all just let themselves die. I have to be quick. About a tenth of a percent of the population had the opposition reaction to the pack. Their aggressive response increased beyond madness. They have become . . . well they've killed most of us. And not just killed, they've done things.

Jayne: Reavers. They made them.

Explorer: I won't live to report this, but people have to know. We meant it for the best, to make people safer.¹⁵

In *Mere Christianity*, Lewis reasons that “the better stuff a creature is made of—the cleverer and

¹⁵ *Serenity* 1:18:00

stronger and freer it is—then the better it will be if it goes right, but also the worse it will be if it goes wrong.”¹⁶ The Alliance attempted to create a new and better world by reprogramming those who were part of the problem. The Operative knew better; in his sinful state he could never be part of this new world, because he would pollute it with his presence. In contrast, the Alliance believed they could fix man as he was: simply tamping down the aggression, the fight or grit, would solve the problem. But what they found is that there is something so essential to the state of being human in that will to fight . . . for good or evil . . . that removing it ends in the destruction of man, whether due to death from the lack of the will to live, or due to corruption into another being entirely. Plantinga suggests that there are certain qualities that are “essential properties.” We would not be human without them.

The Alliance did not eliminate free will, they eliminated the determining drive . . . the force that motivates the choice. Without that drive, most ceased to exist. In the case of the Reavers, the drive was too strong for even the pacifying gas to eliminate. Instead, all feeling, compassion, and connection to other human beings was removed. In

¹⁶ Lewis *More Christianity* 49

Whedon's fictional world, empathy seems to be tied to the driving force behind the will as Lewis suggests in *Mere Christianity*. In their attempt to eliminate aggression, the Alliance eliminated the regard for self. In one set of the population, this resulted in their lack of will to maintain life itself. In the small percentage that became the Reavers, there was a horrible end resulting in beings that were human, but not quite. They not only did not have concern for others, but they had a lack of regard and respect for themselves. All that was left was an inferno of raging aggression. *Serenity* suggests that Plantinga is correct in believing that there may be a very different kind of good that God "can't bring about without permitting evil" and that the particular good is love. The second command of the Master is to "Love your neighbor as yourself."¹⁷ Without the appreciation of oneself as an Imager of God and a respect for what God has made in us, we cannot truly love another.

The Greatest of These is Love

Operative: The boy spent his entire fortune to develop contacts to infiltrate this place.

¹⁷ Mark 12:31

Doctor: He gave up a promising career in medicine. It's madness.

Operative: Madness? Have you looked at this scan carefully, doctor, at his face? It's love, in point of fact: something a good deal more dangerous.¹⁸

The plot of *Serenity* is driven by the conflict created from the Alliance's efforts to assert total dominance, but the underlying theme of the movie is self-sacrificing love. Simon gives up everything and risks all to rescue his sister. River, in turn, takes on a band of Reavers alone to save her friends. Mal continually acts against his own self-interest for the good of others, taking on impossible odds. He not only chooses this course for himself but encourages others to follow. Discovering the Alliance's secret was not enough, it had to be exposed. For the crew of the *Serenity*, the only recourse to check the actions of a force operating with no accountability is to expose the tragedy of the planet Miranda to light.

Mal: Y'all got on this boat for different reasons, but y'all come to the same place. So now I'm asking more of you than I have before. As sure as I know anything I know this. They will try again. Maybe on another world. Maybe on this very ground

¹⁸ *Serenity*, 5:20

swept clean. Maybe a year from now, maybe ten, they'll swing back to the belief that they can make people better. And I do not hold to that. So no more running. I aim to misbehave. Shep used to tell me, if you can't do something smart, do something right.¹⁹

With the posthumous help of Mr. Universe, the crew attempts to broadcast the Miranda exposé to all Alliance-controlled planets. Surrounded by Alliance forces with seemingly no hope of escape, the Operative tells Mal it is over:

Operative: I'm sorry. You should know there's no shame in this. You've done remarkable things, but you're fighting a war you've already lost.

Mal: Yeah, well I'm known for that.²⁰

Fighting on in the face of impossible odds is love which “. . . always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres. Love never fails.”²¹ Whedon makes this underlying theme clear in the closing scene of the film. After successfully exposing the horror of the Alliance's actions on Miranda and coming to a draw with the Operative, the *Serenity*

¹⁹ *Serenity*, 1:21:00

²⁰ *Serenity*, 1:49:00

²¹ 1 Corinthians 13:7-8

sets off for its next adventure with Mal at the helm and River as the copilot. As River launches the ship, Mal instructs his mentee:

Mal: Okay, clearly some aptitude. It ain't all buttons and charts little albatross. You know what the first rule of flying is? Well, I suppose you do since you already know what I'm about to say.

River: I do. But I like to hear you say it. Mal: Love. Can know all the 'verse but take a boat in the air that you don't love? She'll shake you off just as sure as a turn in the worlds. Love keeps her in the air when she oughta fall down . . . Tell you she's hurtin' 'fore she keens . . . Makes her a home.

River: Storm's getting worse.

Mal: We'll pass through it soon enough.²²

The atheist Whedon and the theist Plantinga both agree, "A world containing creatures who are significantly free (and freely perform more good than evil actions) is more valuable, all else being equal, than a world containing no free creatures at all."²³ Without the freedom to choose good, actions

²² *Serenity*, 1:55:00.

²³ Plantinga, *God, Freedom, and Evil* 30

have no meaning. What is more, there is no real being without that free will.

The Greatest Love

But Whedon's explanation still leaves us with a problem. We are back to the beginning, stuck in a world of strife and misery. Is there any hope to achieve the peaceful world of which Lennon and Isaiah dreamed? As Lewis explains in *Mere Christianity*, this longing for a world of peace and unity is one that is inspired by God Himself, "The happiness which God designs for His higher creatures is the happiness of being freely, voluntarily united to Him and to each other in an ecstasy of love and delight compared with which the most rapturous love between a man and a woman on this earth is mere milk and water. And for that they must be free."²⁴

We must be free to be truly good, but we fall short. We have a desire for a world that is different, but as the Operative points out, our sinful nature has no place in it. As the Teacher warns in *The Great Divorce*, Lewis's imagining of a field trip to Heaven from Hell, "the day must come when joy prevails and all the makers of misery are no longer able to

²⁴ Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, 18

infect it: or else for ever and ever the makers of misery can destroy in others the happiness they reject for themselves.”²⁵ Each of us is a “maker of misery.” We have all “gone astray.”²⁶ As we are, we would “infect” the perfect world we so want to reach.

Unlike Whedon, the Master Storyteller has a solution. It is a plan that does not eliminate our very essence of humanness, but one that redeems, restores, and perfects. The prophet Isaiah who foresaw this world of peace also prophesied its method of delivery. He writes as Yahweh, “I, even I, am the LORD, and there is no savior besides Me.”²⁷ God’s plan is the story of the Greatest Love, one where He Himself laid down his life for His friends. This solves Whedon’s conundrum, for in doing so, “He Himself bore the sin of many, and interceded for the transgressors.”²⁸ As a result, “God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we

²⁵ C. S. Lewis, *The Great Divorce* (New York, NY: HarperCollins, 1973), 136.

²⁶ Isaiah 53:6 NASB.

All of us like sheep have gone astray,
Each of us has turned to his own way;
But the Lord has caused the iniquity of us all
To fall on Him.

²⁷ Isaiah 43:11.

²⁸ Isaiah 53:12

might become the righteousness of God.”²⁹ This is the solution neither the Alliance nor Whedon could achieve, for only perfection can perfect. This is the Great Story brought about by Perfect Love.

²⁹ 2 Corinthians 5:21

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