

## By the Gods—or Not: Religious Plurality in *Xena: Warrior Princess*

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**Abstract:** The problem of religious plurality has been explored not only in philosophical and theological works, but also in popular culture. As *Xena: Warrior Princess* journeys through the ancient world, she interacts with seminal figures, stories, and ideas from various religious and mythological traditions. The television series constructs the stories in a way that makes provocative suggestions about the truth and usefulness of religion in general, about the truth-claims of specific religious traditions, and about the ontological relationships among the metaphysical claims of various religions. The various answers to the problem of religious plurality suggested in *Xena: Warrior Princess* are compared to standard philosophical and theological approaches.

### Introduction

[1] The protagonist of Yann Martel's 2001 novel, *Life of Pi*, is a young Indian boy who attempts to be Hindu, Christian and Muslim at the same time. When the leaders of his three congregations discover his duplicity, they protest that simultaneously practicing multiple religions is not possible<sup>1</sup>—an opinion that would be shared by most real-life practitioners of the three religions. Religious plurality has been an increasingly vexing philosophical and theological problem since the rise of the social sciences in the nineteenth century. How is one to explain the apparent efficacy of the various religions in facilitating meaningful and ethical living in light of their ostensibly contradictory truth claims? Can a person legitimately practice more than one religion?

[2] As globalization has brought religious communities into greater contact with one another and religious diversity to the forefront of public awareness, the problem of religious plurality is addressed not just in philosophical and theological treatises, but also in popular culture texts. One such text that explores the problem of religious plurality with skill and nuance is the television series *Xena: Warrior Princess*, which ran for six seasons in syndication beginning in 1995. The Xena character was created as an evil warlord and temptress in the series *Hercules: The Legendary Journeys*. The spin-off series begins with Xena undergoing an unexplained conversion in which she renounces evil and resolves to spend the rest of her days doing good in order to atone for the misdeeds of her past. Over the course of six seasons of episodes, Xena interacts not only with the gods of classical Graeco-Roman mythology, but also with key figures from several of the world's religious traditions, through storylines that construct complicated relationships among the religious and mythological systems involved.

[3] In this article, I will follow Xena as she interacts with key figures and journeys through formative stories of various religious and mythological traditions. After a brief survey of the standard philosophical approaches to the problem of religious plurality, I will examine Xena's pilgrimage through classical mythology, Taoism, indigenous religion, Judaism, Christianity and Hinduism (Xena does not interact directly with either Buddhism or Islam). How does this television series suggest that we negotiate our way among the various religious systems with

their competing truth-claims? Along the way, I will evaluate *Xena: Warrior Princess*'s approaches to religion in terms of the standard philosophical approaches.

### Typical Approaches to Religious Plurality

[4] In his book *Global Philosophy of Religion*, Joseph Runzo identifies six possible responses to religious plurality.<sup>2</sup> Perhaps the most widely held view of religious plurality is what Runzo calls exclusivism, the view that there is one and only one true religion, and that all other religions are false—and possibly evil! Fundamentalist Christian advocates of exclusivism often view other religions (and sometimes even other branches of Christianity) as the work of the devil. At the opposite end of the cultural spectrum from Christian exclusivism is Runzo's second possible response to religious plurality, antipathy, or the view that all religious beliefs are simply false. Freud and Marx are perhaps the first champions of this form of strict materialism, which assumes that physical processes and social forces offer a complete explanation of reality. Positing the existence of a transcendent realm, in this view, is at best wishful thinking and at worst an impediment to human well-being.

[5] A third possible response to religious plurality, according to Runzo, is simple subjectivism, the view that whatever you believe is true for you. Simple subjectivism is often held uncritically, and is obviously philosophically untenable, as it drains any possible meaning from the designation, "true." Runzo's fourth possible response to religious plurality, pluralism, shares subjectivism's impulse toward tolerance but is more defensible philosophically. Pluralism is the view that all religious traditions are equally true. The Hindu philosopher Sri Ramakrishna expressed the essence of pluralism by comparing the various world religions to separate paths up the same mountain—every path has the same destination, and circling the mountain to bring others around to one's own path is not climbing.<sup>3</sup> Implied in pluralism is also that the various religious traditions are equally false. Transcendent reality, whether we call it God or Brahman, or the Unseen, or the Ultimate, or any host of other names, is infinite. Human minds are finite. Therefore, no system of human thought, or no system expressed in human language, can capture the full meaning of transcendent reality.

[6] Runzo's fifth possible response to religious plurality is inclusivism, the view that one's own religious tradition is the true religion, but that other religions also contain seeds of truth. For example post-Vatican II theologians such as Hans Kung and Karl Rahner have argued that the grace of Christ may be ontologically present and active in the lives of faithful adherents to religions such as Hinduism and Buddhism, even though the adherents themselves are unaware that it is the cosmic Christ who is at work in them. Similarly, Buddhist writers such as the Dalai Lama and Thich Nat Hahn have suggested that Christians can more effectively gain good karma and progress toward salvation by following the Christian path than by converting to Buddhism.<sup>4</sup>

[7] The sixth possible response to religious plurality is henofideism, which is a commitment to one's own religion while withholding judgment on the validity of other religions. Henofideism sees the ultimate question of the referential truth of religious beliefs as unanswerable, and chooses to define truth on grounds of pragmatics or coherence. To Runzo's six options, I would add a seventh—the ancient idea of localism, which associates the various gods with particular

peoples or geographic locations and tends to limit the power of the gods or other supernatural forces to their home regions or native peoples.

### **Xena and Classical Mythology**

[8] Xena interacts frequently with the gods of classical Greco-Roman mythology. Her attitude toward these gods can be summarized in two quotes. In Episode 43, “Ulysses,” Xena helps the epic hero return home to Ithaca. When warned by Poseidon not to get involved in Ulysses’ quest, Xena replies, “Poseidon, if you’ve heard about my dealings with Ares, you’ll know that I’m not afraid of the gods.” Later in the same episode, when Ulysses is greeted by friends in Ithaca who exclaim, “Thank the gods you’re here!” Xena replies, “The gods have nothing to do with it.”<sup>5</sup>

[9] Xena’s relation to classical mythology suggests a posture similar to religious antipathy. Xena’s contention, however, is not that the gods do not exist, but that they are simply no use to humans. People are better off on their own. The gods are petty and self-serving, and the time and resources people devote to honouring the gods could be better spent on more practical means of self-improvement. Indeed, with gods like these, who needs enemies?

[10] The gods of classical mythology, in Xena’s view, are like religion in general in the thought of Marx or Freud—something that humans should have outgrown by now, an obstacle to human betterment, a crutch or opiate that produces more oppression and repression when what is needed is to enhance human freedom.

These gods serve as foils to Xena’s humanism. In episodes in which the Greek gods play a prominent role, the plot generally shows Xena’s moral, tactical, and intellectual superiority to the gods. Either Xena outwits the gods, spoiling their plans to cause harm to someone for whom Xena has become an advocate, or Xena fixes some problem the gods have inadvertently caused through their carelessness.

[11] Xena’s relationship to the Olympian deities is complicated by her past as consort and champion of Ares, god of war. Ares is a regular character throughout the series, constantly trying to woo Xena back to his side, but her relationship with Ares is part and parcel of the evil from which she is seeking redemption. In season six, in a three-episode retelling of the legend of Beowulf (episodes 119-121) and in the mockumentary episode “You Are There” (episode 125), Xena has similar interactions with the gods of Norse mythology. As with Ares, Xena has a past as consort to Odin, but more sinister in that Xena is credited with having seduced Odin to the path of violence and bloodshed. Once Xena redeems herself by transforming the monster Grendel (whom Xena had created) back into Grinhilda and restoring her to her place as queen of Valhalla, Odin becomes a minor obstacle whom Xena must outwit in order to restore the immortality of Ares and Aphrodite.

[12] Xena’s relationship to the Olympian deities represents her relationship to religion in general as a form of antipathy. But it is not the antipathy of modern scientific materialism, which denies the existence of gods or other immaterial beings. Instead, it is a pragmatic antipathy. In other words, Xena re-frames the question of religious belief much the same way Pascal did at the dawn of modernity. Pascal had changed the question from “Does God exist?” or “Are there rational/evidential grounds for theism?” to “Is it prudent to believe in God?” Similarly, Xena

does not question the existence of the gods, but asks instead if it is prudent to serve them—and if so, which ones? Unlike Pascal, Xena tends to give a negative answer to the question of whether it is prudent to serve the gods—though, as we will see, in the Xenaverse not all gods are created equal.

### **Xena and Indigenous Religion**

[13] Xena interacts with indigenous or aboriginal religion primarily through her dealings with a group known derogatively as the Horde, but properly named Pomira. The Horde first appear in season two in episode 44, “The Price,” in which they are portrayed as bloodthirsty savages whose relentlessness in battle makes them a force for which for any civilized army who ventures into their territory is no match. Later, in season four in episode 79, “Daughter of Pomira,” the Horde are revealed to be more complicated.

[14] It seems obvious that the Horde are constructed to represent Native Americans during the period of the settling of the American frontier. The civilized settlement in “Daughter of Pomira” resembles the log forts of *Daniel Boone* episodes, western movies, and “Fort Apache” playsets. The plot—a settler’s young daughter is kidnapped by the Horde chief to replace his own daughter who had been killed—is plucked straight from the archives of American Westerns. And Milo, the Horde-hater, even uses the slogan, “The only good horde is a dead horde,” again evoking the lexicon of Westerns.<sup>6</sup>

[15] The action in “Daughter of Pomira” begins when Xena and Gabrielle, having learned that their settler friends’ daughter Vanessa was kidnapped long ago, happen upon a group of Horde teenagers hunting. Gabrielle observes, “Xena, look. Have you ever seen a blond Horde-girl?” Xena replies, “She looks familiar ...” In this exchange, two mutually exclusive categories, the alien other and the familiar, are brought strangely together. Xena and Gabrielle kidnap Vanessa from the Horde to return her to her parents. After kidnapping Vanessa, they learn that she was not being held as a slave as they had presumed, but was perfectly happy being P’lee, chosen daughter of Cirvik, chief of the Pomira.

[16] From P’lee, Xena learns that the Horde call themselves Pomira. P’Lee informs Xena and Gabrielle of the Pomira worldview: “The sky—the—Earth—kaltaka—all—know—Pomira, s-s-serve Pomira. And—Pomira give—honor ... Pomira honor—life.” Xena responds by questioning the Horde’s relentless way of waging war, to which P’lee replies, “You killers. You—you kill—trees—Earth—all— and—when—we say, ‘No’—go from here—you kill Pomira.” Thus, the Pomira appear to practice the romanticized New Age version of Native American spirituality: they are peaceful nature lovers living in harmony with their environment until invaded by colonizers who provoke them to defend their way of life.<sup>7</sup> Vanessa/P’lee becomes an unwitting emissary between the two cultures, eventually choosing to return to her place among the Pomira, but also forging a truce between them and the settlers.

[17] Yet the Pomira way of life remains alien and other to Xena and the settlers. Virginia Carper summarizes the encounter: “for the ordinary Greek, religion lies outside of their daily lives. The worldly Greeks found the deep religious feelings of the Pomira a cipher.”<sup>8</sup> While this statement does not accurately describe the Ancient Graeco-Roman worldview, it does describe the modern

Western colonialist ideology represented by the “Greeks” in the two episodes. The “worldly” citizens of modern, industrialized democracies find indigenous spirituality just as perplexing as Xena finds the Pomira worldview. Thus Xena encounters the non-dualistic, panentheistic worldview of indigenous religious traditions, but is ultimately unaffected by it.

[18] Some viewers may see the traditions and ceremonies of the Amazons in *XWP* as another analog to indigenous or aboriginal religion. Amazon rituals on *XWP* serve to underscore the idea of preserving sacred traditions handed down from ancestors via oral tradition—certainly a feature of indigenous religious traditions—and feature much drumming and dancing around a fire, not unlike stereotypical depictions of indigenous ceremony. However, it seems that the main point of most of the scenes of Amazon dancing is to display the gyrations of scantily-clad female bodies. Though Xena is consistently a friend of the Amazons, and visits them frequently, she herself generally remains aloof from Amazon rites unless she can use them for her own purposes. Episode 105, “Lifeblood,” hints that many Amazon traditions result from a misinterpretation of a visit by a time traveler from the late twentieth century,<sup>9</sup> and is one of a sequence of episodes in seasons five and six in which Xena tries to convince the Amazons that they are taking their traditions too seriously and seeks to convince them to follow the spirit of their law rather than the letter (episodes 106 and 126, “Kindred Spirits” and “The Path of Vengeance,” are the others).

### **Xena and Taoism**

[19] In the two-part episode, “The Debt” (episodes 52 and 53, in season three), Xena is present during the composition of the *Tao Te Ching*, which in the Xenaverse was written not by Lao Tzu, but by his wife Lao Ma. Lao Tzu is a king in the land of Chin who is kept alive in a semi-conscious, semi-comatose state by his wife Lao Ma’s mystical powers. She rules in his place, saying “It’s my gift to him. He was a vicious tyrant. I’m going to make him the most loved of rulers.” Xena wonders how it is that Lao Ma is not bothered by her husband receiving credit for the good that she does—including the writing of “all that wisdom stuff” into Lao Tzu’s book. Lao Ma replies: “This wisdom comes from Heaven. What difference does it make who gets credit for it—Lao Ma or Lao Tzu?”

[20] Xena had first come to the land of Chin (viewers learn through flashback scenes in the two-part episode) during her unrepentant warlord years after a near fatal encounter with Julius Caesar. After wreaking havoc for some time and getting into a threatening situation, she is taken in by Lao Ma, who has seen into her soul and seeks to mentor her to achieve the greatness that is her destiny. Lao Ma shares with Xena her mystical powers and tries to teach Xena the way of wisdom. Lao Ma demonstrates her powers by shattering a bottle telepathically. When Xena tries to accomplish the same feat, the following exchange occurs:

LM: “Well—try it. [Laughs] I’m sorry, Xena—but you’re trying to attack the bottle with your will.”

X: “What else is there?”

LM: “Exactly.”

X: “What?”

LM: “The entire world is driven by a will—blind and ruthless. In order to transcend the limitations of that world—you need to stop willing. Stop desiring. Stop hating. To conquer others is to have power; to conquer yourself is to know the way.”

The powers Lao Ma possesses also include the ability to levitate, as in *Crouching Tiger Hidden Dragon* and other martial arts films (a genre that stands as a major inspiration for the series).

[21] In season five, in episode 97, “Back in the Bottle,” Xena returns to China after Lao Ma’s evil son Ming Tien, whom Xena had killed, returns from the grave and leads an army on a rampage of destruction with the explosive “black powder.” Here the power Lao Ma has taught Xena turns out to be the power of love. This power of love is expressed in the ability to form an invisible shield which protects Xena and her companions from the weapons of Ming Tien’s forces, and then emanates a green light that turns the hate-filled soldiers of Ming Tien’s army into China’s famed terra cotta warriors (making this one of several *XWP* episodes offering an etiology of an ancient landmark).

[22] The great thing about *XWP*’s account of Taoist origins is that it is just as plausible as anyone else’s reconstruction, given that historians of religion are divided on the issue of whether Lao Tzu even lived at all. However, a couple of things are troubling about Xena’s journey into and out of Taoist tradition. First, the wisdom of the Tao is reduced to a martial arts strategy—though *XWP* is not alone in making this kind of appropriation of Taoist practices. Second, redefining the essence of the Tao as love is problematic. The love envisioned here is not the universal love taught by the Christ-figure Eli, which the show takes great pains to construct as the real meaning of love, but instead the particular love Xena feels for her companion Gabrielle. Xena’s love for Gabrielle is a possessive love that seems out of touch with Taoist notions of non-attachment.

[23] Third, and perhaps most strangely, the powers of the Tao apparently work only in China. The ability to form an invisible force field and turn enemies into terra cotta, as well as the other powers of Lao Ma, would certainly come in handy in other battles. But Xena apparently has access to these powers only in the land of Chin, for she doesn’t use them anywhere else. So in relation to Taoism at least, Xena’s posture toward religious plurality is that of localism.

### **Xena and Judaism**

[24] In several episodes, Xena exhibits a respect for and deference to “the one God of the Israelites” that she has never shown for her own native gods. This deference may be as much to Christianity as to Judaism. But a couple of episodes deal specifically with formative stories in Jewish tradition.

[25] The first of these episodes is a re-telling of the story of Abraham’s sacrifice of Isaac in season one, in episode 19, “Altared States.” In the *XWP* episode the names of the characters are changed to Anteus and Ikus, with an older brother given the thinly veiled name Mael. But in the *XWP* version of the story, it isn’t really God who commands Anteus to sacrifice his son. It is the older brother, Mael, who drugs his father by baking hallucinogenic henbane into his nutbread and speaking through a homemade megaphone (aptly named “that loud-talking thing” by Xena)

when Anteus ascends to his altar to pray, causing Anteus to believe that God has commanded him to sacrifice Ikus.

[26] Along the way, some interesting dialogue illuminates key aspects of the biblical version of the story. First, when Xena and Gabrielle learn that Ikus is running away from home because his father intends to sacrifice him, Gabrielle responds with the incredulity that Kierkegaard suggests Abraham (or anyone else, for that matter) should feel: “Sacrificed? You mean like on an altar, with a knife?” In case there is any doubt about the identity of this deity, when Xena asks which God would command such a sacrifice, the conniving Mael responds: “There is only one true Supreme Deity—The Almighty God of my father—The one whose voice speaks only to him.” And in another parallel to the biblical story, Ikus’s mother explains to Xena that the deity had just previously instructed Anteus to “break with tradition” and name the younger son as the next leader of the clan rather than the older son.

[27] Anteus himself does exhibit the agony and conviction of Kierkegaard’s knight of faith:

Anteus: “Every waking moment of every day since it happened. I keep wondering, Is it me? Have I done something—wrong, and he’s punishing me? Or is this some kind of a—a test, to see how far I’ll go to prove my faith. Or, is He angry with me because He knows how much I love you. Or does His love demand the best, the brightest—You see—it—it never stops.”

X: “You can stop it. You’re still the leader here—You don’t have to do this.”

Anteus: “You’re asking me to deny my God.”

X: “I am asking you to spare your son!”

Anteus: “And teach him what?! That faith is just for those times when it’s convenient to believe? That, that when it gets hard, and, and, and, it hurts to keep faith, y-y-you let go—until it gets easy again? What’s the good in sparing his life if I rob him of the very thing that makes it worth living?”

[28] In the end, Xena succeeds in defeating Mael but fails in her attempt to rescue Ikus, as her chakram misses its target and Gabrielle is unable to retrieve the “loud-talking thing” in order to impersonate the deity in Mael’s stead. But the voice of God intervenes at the last moment and stops Anteus from performing the sacrifice. This episode offers a more palatable portrait of God than the biblical story: in the *XWP* version, God is absolved of the cruelty inherent in the command to sacrifice Isaac, but still gets credit for the rescue. And this time, the disclaimer reassures viewers that “No Unabating or Severely Punishing Deities were harmed during the production of this motion picture.” Humour aside, that the biblical God saves the day in the one episode in the series in which Xena fails to accomplish her mission does seem to make a significant statement.

[29] The second episode dealing with the formative stories of Judaism, “Giant Killer” (episode 27, in season two), places Xena in the midst of the battle between David and Goliath. While the biblical Goliath is between 6 ½ and 9 ½ feet tall, depending on which manuscript tradition one accepts, Xena’s Goliath is a mythological giant of Jack and the Beanstalk proportions. Goliath is an old friend of Xena’s who happens to have hired himself out as a mercenary to the Philistines. Xena tries to convince him that he is on the wrong side in this battle—that the Israelites and their

one God are the good guys and the Philistines are the bad guys—but he will not go back on his agreement with his Philistine employers. In the decisive battle scene, David is able to slay the giant because the sun flashing off of Xena's shield temporarily blinds Goliath. And just in case any of the faithful are offended by the writers' toying with the biblical story, the episode credits include the disclaimer, "No Bible myths or icons were irreparably mangled during the production of this motion picture."

### **Xena and Christianity**

[30] Xena's journey through the biblical stories is relevant to her relationship with Christianity also. The "one God of the Israelites" is also the God of Christians. But Xena also journeys directly through Christian mythology in a profoundly moving way. The cycle of episodes bridging seasons four and five, in which the Christ-figure Xena encounters the Christ-figure Eli, are among the most profound religious texts of the electronic era. In the episodes Xena is crucified, fights (on both sides) in the Miltonian battle for paradise, is raised from the dead, and immaculately conceives a child who is prophesied to be destined to eclipse the Olympian deities. Along the way, these episodes overtly and symbolically convey the core message of Christianity (at least as taught by Jesus of Nazareth).

[31] In episode 82, "Devi," two-thirds of the way through season four, Xena and Gabrielle are traveling in India when they meet a magician named Eli who turns out to be a "devi"—someone who has a divine gift of healing. Eli is obviously intended to represent Jesus of Nazareth. He has a Hebraic name which translated means "my God." His physical appearance and demeanor resemble every Sunday School portrait of Jesus—made especially obvious by his presence in a sea of dark brown, Indian faces. He performs miracles of healing. And he preaches a message of non-violent, universal love. The episode reaches its climax when Eli performs a very Jesus-like exorcism on Gabrielle by uttering the very Jesus-like prayer, "Abba, help me." At the end of the episode, Eli is unsure of the meaning of his newfound power.

[32] We meet Eli again two episodes later in "The Way" and learn that he is now not merely a devi, but an avatar. As Gabrielle explains, "An avatar—is a deity in human form. They're usually destined to save humanity from a great evil." Eli is traveling, healing, and teaching his message of love. "And so, you must cast all hate and violence—from your heart," he is telling a gathering of followers when Xena and Gabrielle chance upon him.

[33] The burden of being God-incarnate weighs heavily on Eli. "It's not as wonderful as you might think. People suffer so," he tells Gabrielle, "it breaks my heart. And they look to—me—for salvation." The "scariest part," Eli confides, is "that I know the truth." *The* truth—the capital T, long e truth—that Eli has come to know turns out to be the Matthean Jesus' doctrine of non-violence: "It's life—that we must revere it—wherever we find it—to bring peace to this world. I have to teach mankind a reverence for life." Gabrielle questions Eli, and he responds with some Jesus-like "turn the other cheek" rhetoric:

G: "So—if someone were to walk up to you—and knock you  
Down—"

Eli: "— then I'd get up."

G: “But if they knocked you down again— “

Eli: “Then I’d get up again—if I could. But under no circumstances would I fight back. If I did—I would simply be perpetuating the cycle of violence that has ravaged the Earth for centuries. That cycle has to be broken, Gabrielle. And the truth—is that that can only be done through nonviolence.”

[34] Xena’s task in this episode—and here is where the inter-religious journey gets complicated—is to protect Eli from Indrujid, the king of the demons, a character based on the Hindu Ramayana epic. So formative Christianity gets intertwined with Hindu mythology. You’ve certainly noted by now that placing “Jesus” in India and calling him an avatar signals an effort by the Xena writers to blend Christian and Hindu mythologies as well as show deference to the esoteric theory that Jesus spent some of his “missing years” in India. I will say more about this episode and how *XWP* constructs Hinduism and its relation to Christianity below. For now, to continue examining the series’ presentation of Christian origins, I will note simply that the episode concludes with Eli embarking on a ship to go “home ... to take the message to my own people.”

[36] Eli resurfaces later in the season in episode 89, “Ides of March.” As this episode begins, we discover that Christian mythology trumps Greek mythology when it comes to the afterlife. Xena’s alter ego and nemesis Callisto has made a deal with the dark god Dahak (probably based on the Persian/Zoroastrian demon Dahaka) to experience oblivion at death rather than Tartarus or the Elysian Fields. But when she dies, she finds herself in the Christian Hell instead. Satan releases Callisto from Hell on a mission: she is to guard Julius Caesar from Xena and ensure his successful rise to power. This is the drama of the New Testament in a small capsule: Caesar represents the forces of evil; Jesus seeks to liberate people from these forces.

[37] Xena is indeed plotting against Caesar, so Caesar finds Gabrielle (who is traveling with Eli and Amarice, an Amazon companion in several episodes) and has them imprisoned in a remote location to distract Xena. Despite the fact that the location of the prison corresponds to a premonition of her own death that has troubled Xena for most of the season, Xena leaves Rome to rescue her friends. Callisto, whose perpetual anger at Xena is greater than her sense of her present mission to protect Caesar, intervenes in the prison battle to ensure that Xena is defeated. Xena and Gabrielle are crucified as a light snow begins to fall. The episode ends with Xena and Gabrielle’s spirits, or ghosts, or vapors, departing from their crucified bodies and floating heavenward. In the meantime, while Callisto has enjoyed watching Xena’s demise, her charge Caesar is assassinated in Rome by Brutus and the others.

[38] Here, the symbolism of Xena as Christ figure is significant—part of the Christian message is that the crucifixion subverts the kind of pretension to power that Caesar represents. Although Julius Caesar himself was dead before the Christian era, he serves here as a symbolic representation of all the Caesars and of the imperial pretension to ultimate power. Xena’s crucifixion contributing to Caesar’s death signals the Christian rejection of the pagan, imperial, militaristic, hierarchical ideology of dominance and submission. And, in case incredulous viewers are asking themselves, “Are they really dead?” the disclaimer answers, “Xena and Gabrielle were killed during the production of this motion picture.”

[39] “Ides of March” is the cliffhanger episode of season four, so viewers have to wait until the start of season five to see if Xena and Gabrielle will remain dead. Since we are expecting an entire season of new episodes featuring our fallen heroes, we suspect that their deaths are somehow temporary. Season five begins with the episode “Fallen Angel,” which takes up where “Ides of March” left off. As Xena and Gabrielle’s spirits are floating heavenward, they pass above a deep chasm. Up from the chasm speed flying demons, while Michael and the angels are descending full-speed from heaven. The demons, led by Callisto, arrive first, grabbing Xena and Gabrielle. The angels manage to free Xena and usher her up to heaven, but Gabrielle is taken captive into hell.

[40] Xena, Michael, and the angels begin planning a rescue operation. Michael warns Xena that it may be too late to rescue Gabrielle—she may have already eaten the food of hell and become one of them. He warns her further that “now you’re an angel—purified and full of compassion. The suffering you see in Hell will break your heart . . . You might be tempted to save Gabrielle from her pain.” This she can do by taking on Gabrielle’s guilt and giving Gabrielle her light (in other words, trading places). Xena and the rescue squadron storm the gates of hell. During the fighting, Xena does give up her light and trade places with one of the demons—not Gabrielle, whom Michael has succeeded in rescuing, but Callisto. If “Greater love hath no man than . . . [to] lay down his life for his friends” (John 15:13, KJV), then surely greater love hath no woman than to sacrifice her eternal life for her enemy. The atonement for which Xena had longed since her conversion to the good at the start of the series is now accomplished: a fire started by Xena’s army (during Xena’s ruthless warlord years) had killed Callisto’s parents when Callisto was a child, initiating Callisto’s becoming evil in the first place. Now Xena offers redemption to Callisto in eternity.

[41] Of course, Xena’s joining the minions of hell causes its own problems. Xena’s superior battle skills shift the balance of power in the spiritual realm. It’s only a matter of time before she has whipped the other demons into a fighting force capable of taking over heaven. Michael decides that he and the angels must launch a preemptive attack before Xena’s forces of evil become invincible. And so the Miltonian battle between good and evil ensues.

[42] Meanwhile, back on earth, Joxer, Amarice, and Eli have removed the bodies of Xena and Gabrielle from their crosses. Eli agonizes over his inability to help his friends despite his gifts. After a Gethsemane-like prayer, he enters the room where the bodies of Xena and Gabrielle lie. The angel Callisto appears behind him, guiding his motions with her unseen arms as he lays his hands on the lifeless bodies and prays. At just the moment when demon Xena in the netherworld has clipped Gabrielle’s wings to send her plummeting forever into the abyss of hell, Eli’s prayer is answered and Xena and Gabrielle are raised from the dead.

[43] A few episodes later, in episode 99, “Seeds of Faith,” Eli is murdered by Ares, the God of war—symbolically linking war and Ares with Caesar and Satan as forces opposed to Christianity, and evoking the historical reality that it was the brutal “Pax Romana” that killed Jesus. Eli refuses to resist, as resisting violence with violence would only be a victory for the forces of violence. His faithfulness to his own teaching enhances his influence, evoking the Christian truism that martyrdom fueled the growth of the Christian movement.

[44] Immediately after her resurrection in “Fallen Angel,” Xena is made pregnant—immaculately, by the touch of the angel Callisto. In “Seeds of Faith,” Xena plans to kill Ares with the dagger of Helios to avenge the death of Eli, but Eli’s reflection appears in the shiny metal of the dagger and Xena holds back from completing the deed. Afterwards, Eli and Callisto appear. Callisto touches Xena again, and her unborn child is ensouled with Callisto’s spirit. Later, in episode 102, “God Fearing Child” the Fates decree that the birth of Xena’s child—“a child not begotten by man”—heralds the demise of the Olympian deities. Zeus plans to kill Xena and her child, but fails when Hercules sides with Xena and kills Zeus. A daughter is born, whom Xena names Eve. Athena takes on the leadership of the Olympian pantheon, who for several episodes try to kill Xena’s child. A plan to fake the deaths of Xena, Gabrielle, and the infant Eve goes awry when Ares, thinking Xena and Gabrielle are really dead, buries them in an ice cave. When they awake twenty-five years later, they learn that Eve has become Livia, a ruthless warrior and consort of Ares (who does not know her true identity) seeking to eliminate the cult of Eli from imperial Rome. Eventually, she has a Saul-of-Tarsus-like conversion experience and accepts her true calling as the messenger of Eli. At Eve’s baptism, a pillar of fire appears and grants to Xena the power to slay gods. The battle with Athena and her kin is renewed. Ares, who has played both sides seeking his own advantage all along, finally sacrifices his own immortality to help Xena defeat his sister Athena. The displacement of the Olympian deities by the Xenaverse’s version of incipient Christianity alludes to the historical reality that Christianity (in form not very redolent of Eli’s nonviolent compassion) eventually came to dominate the Roman Empire and displace the Greco-Roman pantheon. In *XWP*, love proves to be such a powerful force that even the Satan-figure Ares is moved to extraordinary self-sacrifice by it.

[45] Despite the elaborate symbolic and narrative cues denoting the superiority of Eli’s proto-Christian message, the religion of Eli is ultimately trivialized and dropped altogether. Halfway through season six, in episode 125, “You Are There,” Xena steals Odin’s Golden Apples, which have the power to give immortality, to give to Ares and Aphrodite to restore their godhood, because without a sitting god of war and goddess of love, the world is out of balance and people lose control of the emotions of love and aggression. Thus the Christian love taught by Eli is diminished to an abstract principle with no power to motivate actual behaviour, and the displacement of the Olympian gods is reversed. Many devoted fans of *XWP* despised the Eli storyline, as its Christian moralizing seemed to cut against the grain of the series’ general campiness and noted lesbian subtext. Apparently the writers, with their advocacy of Christianity, wrote themselves into a corner from which they could not write an entertaining exit, so they just jumped ship (just like I jumped metaphors in mid-sentence just now). But given that many of the strange turns of season six do not mesh well with the storylines of the first five seasons, the series’ strong presentation of Eli’s proto-Christian teaching stands out more powerfully than the ultimate unraveling of the Eli storyline.

[46] Other episodes interact with Christian tradition in less prominent ways. Episode 33, “A Solstice Carol,” in season two, alludes to the birth of Christianity. At the conclusion of that episode, Gabrielle and Xena happen upon a young couple resembling the customary portrayals of Joseph and his pregnant betrothed Mary. Gabrielle gives the young couple a donkey she has acquired during the episode to make their journey easier. When Xena compliments Gabrielle for her generosity, she replies, “They needed him more than me. Besides, they seem pretty nice.”

The comic suggestion that Mary and Joseph are deserving of special favour because “they seem pretty nice,” followed by their disappearance from the Xenaverse, may be seen as a message about the irrelevance of Christianity that undermines the later valorization of Eli’s simulacra of Christian teaching.

[47] The various Satan-figures who appear at various points in the series may also be relevant to the show’s portrayal of Christianity. The first significant Satan-figure<sup>10</sup> in the series is Dahak, who is prominent in a cycle of episodes in season three, beginning with episode 50, “The Deliverer.” Dahak never actually appears as a character, but is described by followers as “the one god,” and his cult is viewed by some of the Olympian deities as a threat, suggesting comparisons to the one God of the Israelites and the cult of early Christianity. Dahak is revealed to be evil when his followers seduce Gabrielle into performing a human sacrifice, at which point she is impregnated with Dahak’s daughter, whom she will name Hope. As a child, Hope is pure evil, and eventually murders Xena’s son Zolan (in episode 57, “Maternal Instincts”). The season ends with a two-part episode, “The Sacrifice” (episodes 67 and 68), in which Hope is reborn and gives birth to a child—a monstrous creature called the Destroyer. One of the followers seeking Hope’s rebirth says, “The goddess, Hope, is the savior of this world,” and the followers of Hope and Dahak are called “Disciples.” The linguistic parallel with the Zoroastrian demon Dahaka evokes the historical reality the doctrine of Satan probably entered biblical tradition through Zoroastrian influence during or after the Persian period. The portrayal of the followers of Dahak as resembling Christians, and the suggestion that religiously-inclined humans are so dumb that they cannot tell an evil god from a good one, generalizes the antipathy Xena shows toward the Olympian gods to all religions, including Christianity, again undermining the later valorization of the quasi-Christian cult of Eli.

[48] I have already discussed how Satan himself forms part of the background of the story of Xena’s crucifixion and her participation in the Miltonian battle between good and evil in the episodes that span the transition from season four to season five, and how, during these same episodes, Ares becomes a Satan-figure through his co-sponsorship with Satan of the rise of Julius Caesar and his murder of Eli. In season six, in episode 115, “Heart of Darkness,” Xena is involved in the fall of Lucifer. In the previous episode, “The Haunting of Amphibolous,” Xena had killed Mephistopheles to end the haunting of her hometown. Mephistopheles had wanted to destroy Eve, the messenger of Eli. As the killer of Mephistopheles, she had incurred the right/obligation to take his place as the ruler of hell. “Heart of Darkness” begins with the archangels Michael, Raphael and Lucifer coming to Amphibolous to do something about the portal to hell that’s been left open, pouring evil out into the earth, until the new ruler of Hell descends to the throne and the portal closes behind him/her. Xena notices Lucifer’s excessive pride and seduces him into taking her place as the new ruler of Hell. This Satan-figure narrative adds nothing new to the series’ portrayal of Christianity, other than to reinforce the ongoing enmity between Satan and the followers of Eli.

## Xena and Hinduism

[49] We have already seen that, in the episodes “Devi” and “The Way,” the creators of the Xenaverse have blended Hindu and Christian mythologies by placing the “Jesus” character Eli in India. Now I will consider how Xena’s travels with Eli relate to Hinduism. Several plot elements in the Eli cycle are drawn from the Hindu Ramayana epic.

[50] As mentioned above, Xena’s task in the episode “The Way” is to protect Eli from Indrujid, king of the demons. As they travel, while Eli is instructing Gabrielle on the Christian way of love, another character from the Ramayana appears—Hanouman. In the Ramayana, Hanuman is the monkey God, the Son of the Wind who leads an army of monkeys in helping prince Rama rescue his beautiful wife Sita from Ravana, the king of the demons who has kidnapped her.<sup>11</sup> *XWP*’s portrayal of Hanouman combines traces of Hindu iconography with echoes of Chewbakka from *Star Wars* and even the Abominable Snowman from the classic Burl Ives *Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer* movie. No explanation of Hanouman’s identity is given in the *XWP* episode other than that he is immortal and that he is on a mission to protect the avatar Eli.

[51] Indrujit is the son of the demon-king Ravana in the Ramayana, but has apparently ascended to his father’s throne in the *XWP* episode. Indrujit kidnaps Eli along with Gabrielle and carries them away to his demon lair. Hanouman advises Xena to go to the great temple and seek Krishna’s help. Xena prays to Krishna, then in Krishna’s form does battle with the demon and defeats him. That the Hindu love-epic of a young prince doing battle with demonic forces to rescue his beautiful bride is transformed in *XWP* to a story of the warrior-princess battling demons to rescue her beloved female companion is not without implication for the series’ celebrated lesbian subtext. More important for my purposes is what the Eli-Krishna-Hanouman storyline implies about the status of Hindu and Christian metaphysics and their relationship to one another and to other religious teachings.

[52] In a conversation with Gabrielle in the Temple, just before she is seized by Indrujid, Hanouman explains that the way of Eli is “the ultimate way. Few can follow it. Those that do—truly walk with the spirit.” Later, after Xena follows Hanouman’s advice and prays to Krishna, Krishna questions her: “How do you expect to defeat Indrujid?” When Xena replies that she needs Krishna’s help in order to defeat the demon, Krishna responds, “I can’t help you—unless you let me ... You must open up your heart to me ... You have to embrace the way.” Xena has been pondering this idea of “the way” for some time—wondering if the way of Eli is the same as the way of Lao Ma. She has had a vision of a future life in which she is a saint, but wonders how this could be possible, since she accumulated so much bad karma in her life as a warlord and continues to accrue bad karma by committing acts of violence, even if they are now for a good cause. “The way is not for people like me,” she replies.

[53] Krishna challenges her to accept the path she is on—her way in this life is the way of the warrior: “Yes— you—must—not be hesitant to fight in a just cause. It is better to die following your own way, than to live following someone else’s. When you ride into combat—act without attachment—and carry with you the confidence that you are fulfilling your calling in this life. Then you will know the way.” If she follows the way of the warrior faithfully, he reassures her, she will be reincarnated in her next life as a saint.

[54] These exchanges on the nature of “the way” are rich with implications regarding the relationships among the various spiritual traditions. First, Hanouman’s description of the way of Eli as “the ultimate way,” Krishna’s promise that Xena will be reincarnated as a saint, and Xena’s apparent understanding that her future sainthood will resemble the way of Eli all conspire to give both Hinduism and Christianity (at least in an idealized form) an ultimacy that other spiritual traditions lack. On the one hand, two Hindu deities agree that the way of nonviolent love as taught by Eli/Jesus is the highest and most noble of all spiritual paths. On the other hand, Krishna’s acknowledgement that the way of Eli is not Xena’s way and the reaffirmation of the doctrines of reincarnation and karma give Hindu metaphysics an ultimacy over the simpler Christian one of one life/one afterlife. The implied melding of traditions goes something like this: all of us will continue in the perpetual cycle of samsara and karma until a lifetime in which we are finally reborn as pilgrims on the way of Eli/Jesus, and then we will gain salvation.

[55] Other elements of the dialogue complicate the issue. Xena’s comparison of the way of Eli with the way of Lao Ma reopens the question of whether the love taught by Lao La and the love taught by Eli are the same—whether Christianity and Taoism are functionally identical and equally valid spiritual paths. Similarly, the resemblance of Krishna’s advice to Xena (“When you ride into combat—act without attachment”) to the Buddhist doctrine of non-attachment brings yet another form of Eastern mysticism into the viewer’s consideration. Perhaps all spiritual paths are, if not equally noble, at least equally valid in a given lifetime.

[56] Even so, the superiority within the Xenaverse of the Hindu-Christian amalgam seems unassailable. First, the fact that Xena prays to Krishna for help is of utmost significance. Xena has rarely if ever sought the help of any god, and in the rare instances where she does seek a god’s help, it almost always in the form of tit-for-tat bargaining that exploits the gods’ petty desires. By contrast, her prayer to Krishna is in the form of humble supplication associated with sincere religious devotion and spiritual seeking. In the episode, Hanouman describes Krishna as “the ultimate manifestation of the supreme deity,” nothing the show’s presentation diminishes this description. The fact that Xena explicitly seeks the help of Krishna gives the Hindu god a very special status in the Xenaverse.

[57] Second, although the way of love as taught by Eli/Jesus is described by a Hindu deity as the best way, it is not presented as the way for everyone. Most importantly, it is not the way for Xena. In fact, Krishna himself tells Xena that her way for this lifetime is the way of the warrior—it is by fighting for just causes that she will attain good karma. But it is strongly implied that she is to walk in the way of love in a future incarnation. It is worth remembering that, earlier in the series, the biblical God of Judaism and Christianity had also been accorded a place of respect. In the episode “Altared States,” the God of Anteus/Abraham intervenes to save the day when Xena fails to stop the sacrifice of Ikus/Isaac—the only instance in the series of a god working for good independently of Xena and without Xena’s help.

## What About the Other World Religions?

[58] Xena does not interact with Islam. This is quite understandable. Islam does not emerge until the sixth century C.E. Though Xena's travels through the Xenaverse cover a span of roughly 1200 years of Earth history, they end long before the sixth century. So when Xena travels through what we now know as Islamic territories, she encounters either the pre-Islamic jinn or the kind of comic-book stereotypes of pre-Islamic Arabia that caused Arab activists to protest Disney's *Aladdin* film.<sup>12</sup>

[59] Nor does Xena interact directly with Buddhism. Granted, the contents of other spiritual paths are sometimes presented in the series in ways that call to mind Buddhist teachings. Eli's exposition of the ostensibly Christian way of love is couched in "reverence for life" rhetoric that bears resemblance to the Buddhist doctrine of compassion. Krishna advises Xena to go into battle with a Buddhist-sounding attitude of non-attachment. And Lao Ma's Taoist precepts are generic enough that they could pass for Zen sayings; "New Age" spirituality tends to lump Buddhist, Taoist, and Hindu metaphysics together into the broad category of "Eastern" mysticism. The cumulative effect of the reduction of Taoist precepts to the notion of love and the conflation of Christian and Buddhist concepts of non-violence into a path commended by a Hindu deity is to construct a generic love mysticism as the essence of all true religion.

[60] In the series' final episode, Xena travels to Japan, revealing another hitherto unknown part of her past and encountering a new (to viewers), vaguely Shinto, mythology. This mythology is given an ultimacy that the others lack, for Xena dies in Japan for the final time. After having spent time in the Greek, Amazon, and Christian underworlds and paradises, Xena finally dies to spend eternity (we presume) in a Shinto afterlife.

## Conclusion

[61] *Xena: Warrior Princess* negotiates the territory of religious plurality in a variety of ways. First, she shows antipathy toward her native Olympian deities, and to the similar pantheon of deities from Norse mythology. She experiences Taoism and probably Shintoism as transcendent realities at work in particular geographic locales. A broader localism also seems to apply to the doctrine of an afterlife: Xena and others journey to whatever afterlife or underworld is professed in the geographic locale from which they pass through the veil of death. There is also an undercurrent of subjectivism at times in the series. Xena often acknowledges that various religious-spiritual paths may be true for other characters, including Gabrielle, but almost never considers whether any of these paths might be true for her.

[62] Hindu and Christian mythologies, on the other hand, are portrayed as more universally applicable. We might say that, in the Xenaverse, all religions and mythologies are true, but some are truer than others. Despite Xena's preference to remain aloof from spiritual concerns and promote a pragmatic humanism, Christianity and Hinduism both turn out to be true in a most ultimate sense. Affirming the ultimate truth of both Hinduism and Christianity requires some work. On the one hand, the Hindu doctrine of karma trumps the Christian claim to universal applicability: only a few are called to the way of love. On the other hand, the Christian way (at least as embodied in the teaching of Jesus if not in historical/institutional expressions of

Christianity), trumps Hinduism. If the way of love taught by Eli/Jesus is the best—the capital T-true—way, then everyone will be incarnated as a Christian before experiencing *moksha*/salvation.

[63] It should not surprise us that Hinduism and Christianity should both receive top billing in a television series that capped the 20<sup>th</sup> century. After all, in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, it was through the influence of Tolstoy's exposition of the teaching of Jesus that the Hindu Gandhi was awakened to the way of *satyagraha*. And it was in the Hindu practice of Gandhi that the Christian Martin Luther King, Jr., discerned the non-violent love of Jesus. This process, described by Darrel Fasching and Dell DeChant in their book *Comparative Religious Ethics: A Narrative Approach* as “passing over and coming back,” is the spiritual/ethical stance needed in a post-Auschwitz, post-Hiroshima, post-modern world.<sup>13</sup> Xena's pragmatic, humanistic commitment to the good of others guides her interactions with the spiritual traditions she encounters. To blindly accept religious authority—or any other authority for that matter—is dangerous. But a stance rooted in one tradition, open to the collective wisdom of other spiritual and ethical traditions and sources, and committed to the good of all people promises the best possibility for meeting the ethical challenges of a globalized techno-bureaucratic age.

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup>Yann Martel, *Life of Pi* (New York: Harcourt, 2001).

<sup>2</sup>Joseph Runzo, *Global Philosophy of Religion: A Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 2001), 29-43.

<sup>3</sup>See Huston Smith, *The World's Religions* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1991), 72-73.

<sup>4</sup>See Kristin Beise Kiblinger, *Buddhist Inclusivism: Attitudes Towards Religious Others* (Farnham, UK:: Ashgate, 2005), 1-11, and “Identifying Inclusivism in Buddhist Contexts,” *Contemporary Buddhism* 4/1 (May 2003): 79-97; Lucas.Lamadrid, “Anonymous or Analogous Christians? Rahner and von Balthasar on Naming the Non-Christian,” *Modern Theology* 11/3 (July 1995): 363-384; Gavin D'Costa, “Karl Rahner's Anonymous Christian: A Reappraisal,” *Modern Theology* 1/2 (January 1985):131-148; Hans Kung, *Christianity and World Religions: Paths of Dialogue with Islam, Hinduism, and Buddhism* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1993).

<sup>5</sup>All dialogue quoted from *XWP* episodes is taken from the transcripts embedded in the “Episode Guide” at whoosh.org.

<sup>6</sup>Virginia Carper, however, sees the Greek-Horde relationship as paralleling the relationship between colonizer and colonized in Southern Africa in “Disparate Cultures: Shock of the Other; Collision, Apartness, and Resolution,” *Whoosh!* 35 (1999), <http://whoosh.org>. *Whoosh!* is the online journal of the International Association of Xena Studies.

<sup>7</sup>For an discussion and critique of the romanticization of Native American spirituality see Daniel Deffenbaugh, *Learning the Language of the Fields: Tilling & Keeping as Christian Vocation* (Cambridge, MA: Cowley, 2006), 39-68; and Jesse Nash, “‘No More War Parties’: The Pacification and Transformation of Plains Indian Religion,” in *Critical Moments in Religious History*, ed. Kenneth Keulman (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1993), 95-118.

<sup>8</sup>Carper, “Disparate Cultures: Shock of the Other.”

<sup>9</sup>The time traveler is played by Selma Blair, exuding the cluelessness that has become her oeuvre—here a hybrid of the cluelessness she portrays in *Cruel Intentions* and the cluelessness she portrays in *Kath & Kim*.

<sup>10</sup>Hades, who appears intermittently throughout the series in his role as ruler of Greek underworld, does not really function as a Satan-figure in *XWP*. Bacchus is a Satan-figure in the vampire-themed episode “Girls Just Wanna Have Fun” (episode 28) in season two, but no implications from this episode are carried forward into other Satan-figure portrayals.

<sup>11</sup>An accessible version is William Buck, *Ramayana* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976).

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<sup>12</sup> For a more thorough analysis, see William Klossner, "Middle Easterners in *Xena: Warrior Princess* and Other Renaissance Pictures Series," *Whoosh!* 90 (2004), <http://whoosh.org>.

<sup>13</sup> Darrell J. Fasching & Dell deChant, *Comparative Religious Ethics: A Narrative Approach* (Oxford, UK: Blackwell, 2001), 7, 68-70, 297-313.