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Revelations

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Buffy Sainthood Observation

If fictional superheroes were eligible for sainthood, Buffy the Vampire Slayer would be a likely candidate.

Portrayed for seven television seasons by Sarah Michelle Gellar, the teenage, cross-wearing Buffy Summers battled and defeated every demon imaginable -- always with a measure of irony and humor.

The silliness of the name and the premise that a blond Valley Girl can overcome evil gave way to scholarly consideration of spiritual themes undertaken by the television series: redemption, resurrection, selflessness, guilt and existential angst, among other subjects.

"Slayage: The Online International Journal of Buffy Studies" (not a joke) lists more than 500 articles in 51 categories, from aesthetics to musicology to vampirology. And recently, Open Court Publishing released the latest book on the series, "Buffy the Vampire Slayer and Philosophy: Fear and Trembling in Sunnydale," a collection of essays by philosophers at major universities.

"'Buffy' gets people thinking," a book reviewer says in the Nov. 7 issue of *Commonweal*, a Catholic magazine. Those who missed the first run of the series, which ended in May, can catch the reruns on UPN (Channel 20 locally).

Support for Pastors Found Lacking

One down side of ministry, religious leaders say, is that congregations do not provide much emotional support for clergy undergoing personal problems, expecting them to put such issues aside so they can focus on the needs of the congregation. A study of why pastors leave the ministry suggests that they also lack denominational support when they come into conflict with their congregation, creating a sense of isolation.

The survey, conducted by Catholic University, included 963 male and female former pastors from the United Methodist Church, Presbyterian Church (USA), Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod and Assemblies of God.

The former pastors cited tensions with laity and church staff as the main reason for leaving their positions. Leadership style was the primary cause of conflict, followed by disputes over finances, changes in worship style and disagreements over construction projects. Forty percent said lack of support from church officials contributed to job-ending stress.

First Amendment Confusion

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The Supreme Court heard arguments last week over whether low-income students majoring in theology should receive state-supported college scholarships, fueling another debate over interpretation of the First Amendment, which begins, "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof."

The Foundation for Individual Rights in Education, a Philadelphia-based watchdog group, says one reason for ongoing church-state disputes is lack of understanding of First Amendment rights, which also include free speech and a free press, the right to assemble peacefully and the right to petition the government "for a redress of grievances."

In a survey of 1,037 students at 339 colleges and universities, released last month, the group said that only 30 percent of undergraduates named the exercise of religion when asked to list First Amendment rights. In a companion survey, college administrators fared worse: Only 21 percent identified religious freedom as a First Amendment right.

Celebration

This month's spotlight: Tohji-taisai, Shinto celebration of the winter solstice.

Date: Dec. 22.

Description: Shinto is an ancient Japanese religion grounded in the belief that beneficent spirits called *kami* exist throughout nature. It is one of two religions -- with Buddhism -- practiced today by most Japanese. Tohji-taisai, the Grand Ceremony of the Winter Solstice, honors the life-giving power of the sun, marking the end of the yin period, when the sun declines in strength, and beginning of the yang period, when its power increases.

More information: www.religioustolerance.org

Religion 101

What is a mandala?

"Mandala" is a Sanskrit word loosely translated as circle, used to refer to kaleidoscope-like images produced by cultures throughout the world. Psychologist Carl Jung called mandalas "archetypes of the collective unconscious," believing that they represent common human needs, such as the search for wholeness. Common mandalas include labyrinths, sand paintings, spiral galaxies and domes.

E-mail questions on religious traditions or practices to religion@washpost.com.

-- Compiled by

Bill Broadway

Saturday in Religion: Archaeological clues to the life of Jesus.

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