

“Hokey Religions and Ancient Weapons”: The Force of Spirituality

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Hokey religions and ancient weapons are no match for a blaster at your side, kid.
—Han Solo, in *A New Hope* (1977)

The *Star Wars* films are well known for breathtaking special effects and aesthetic beauty, but there is also a spiritual reason behind their appeal. The films express the quest for meaning and purpose in a galaxy desperately needing balance. The quest for balance within the Force as the Jedi's singular most important goal is poignantly reflected in the story of Anakin Skywalker (Sebastian Shaw; Jake Lloyd; Hayden Christensen), Jedi Knight, father of Luke Skywalker (Mark Hamill), and known in his adulthood as the Sith Lord Darth Vader (David Prowse; James Earl Jones, voice). George Lucas has said that Anakin is the ultimate protagonist of the films, and, indeed, Anakin serves as a microcosm for the galaxy, so that his inner balance and spiritual well-being relate closely to that of the entire galaxy (Snider 1A-2A). Anakin is like Jesus in a Taoist world, a figure who falls from grace, unable to resist the Dark Side, but who ultimately fulfills the prophecy of bringing balance to the Force. The lessons that Anakin learns in the *Star Wars* galaxy “far, far away” are thematically similar to lessons articulated in more traditional philosophical and religious frameworks, such as Taoism, Buddhism, and Christianity, sharing some fundamental perspectives with these traditions and even functioning religiously for some viewers.

On Method

The question of religious influence on the *Star Wars* films is tricky, hardly helped by George Lucas's repeated insistence that any religious imagery is completely unintentional. The question taps into deep-seated academic debates about the relationship of a director's cultural, social, and experiential background to the film; about film as communication through image, text, and sound; about the viewers' role in creating meaning; and, indeed, about the complex relationships between culture and cultural artifact. As Graeme Turner has astutely observed, "film is not [just] one discrete system of signification" but is both "a cultural product" and a "social practice" (50). In short, it is difficult to say how much of any given film results from the director's own influence and how much should be attributed to the larger cultural systems that surround it.

Even given these qualifications, it would be a mistake to ignore the way that film *does* function religiously for some modern viewers, providing a sense of meaning and identity—and in our analysis—offering a vision of hoped-for balance in a chaotic, unbalanced world. John Lyden, who draws on Clifford Geertz's functional definition of religion, argues that film, like religion, can provide a set of symbols that mediate values, create motivations for behavior, provide a model of reality, and provide a narrative representing the way the world should be (45). Few films fit this definition better than the *Star Wars* series, which for decades has provided symbols, values, motivations, models, narratives, and hopes for millions of viewers, not to mention having produced a thriving community based upon these elements.

For Lyden, film can function as religion insofar as many viewers "desire alternate worlds because we find our own imperfect" (53). Film answers this need, showing us "how the world is as well as how it might be," offering an idealistic vision of a world in which things make sense, where justice and peace ultimately prevail (55). Jennifer E. Porter's observations (in chapter 6) rightly point out the difficulties of drawing the line between those who jokingly identify themselves as "Jedi Knights" and those with a "religious" conviction about this identity. Lyden cautions us that "questions about the 'truth' of religious beliefs must be bracketed by the religion scholar as they can never be definitively answered" (55). Perhaps the most we can say is that regardless of Lucas's intentions, the films *do* function religiously for some viewers. Providing analogues with other forms of religious experience is a helpful place to start to begin to understand this phenomenon.

Our analysis focuses on how the films offer viewers an articulation of the desire for balance, a theme that is important to many of the world's religious traditions and basic to Anakin's story. Our discussion focuses on thematic parallels between the films and select elements of Taoism, Buddhism, and Christianity, three religious traditions in which views about balance are clearly

articulated, though, with more space, we could also have included elements of Hinduism, Jainism, Islam, and other traditions. With these cautions in mind, we provide a thematic analysis of the *Star Wars* films, pointing out how the films parallel other religious traditions in providing a model for viewing reality and crafting a picture of how the world should be. We especially focus on the notion that the *Star Wars* films, like traditional religious texts, describe a cosmos out of balance and in desperate need of healing, and we argue that, for some viewers, the films also nurture the development of values that motivate behavior. The question of whether or not the films' relationship to these religious traditions results from direct influence or reflects new synthetic cultural and religious processes in a modern multireligious age, we leave to the reader to decide.

Taoism: The Balance of the Way

Taoism is rooted in the teachings of the sage Lao Tzu about the Tao (the Way) and the balance of yin (passive energy) and yang (active energy) within the Tao, although it is well known that Taoist teachings are much older than Taoism's great literary master. As John Blofield observes, "this [Taoist] perception of existence as a vast and timeless ocean of spotless purity upon which, through the interplay of dark and light, a myriad illusions play like ever-changing cloud formations or restless waves, is of such immense antiquity that none can say whence it first arose" (1). Many of the foundational tenets of Taoist philosophy still enjoy popularity, even though Taoist beliefs have largely been integrated into Confucian, Buddhist, and other Asian traditions such as *ch'i kung* (a modern Chinese program of self-exercise and therapy), not to mention the numerous schools of martial arts that are associated with Asian philosophies, such as *wu-shu* or *kung-fu*. As Liu Xiaogan quips, "The term Taoist may denote as much of an attitude as a person" (233).

The similarities between the Force and the Tao are instructive. As Xiaogan explains, early Taoism embraced several grounding principles: "that the Tao is the unique source of the universe and determines all things; that everything in the world is composed of positive and negative parts; that opposites always transform into each other; and that people should take no unnatural action (*wu-wei*) but follow the natural law" (232). Such a description sounds remarkably similar to the Force in *Star Wars*. The Tao and the Force are both nonmaterial in essence, infused within all things, and drive the movement of the world even though their existence cannot be directly perceived.¹

In the *Star Wars* galaxy, the principle aim of the Jedi Knights is to understand and use the Force, which, as Obi-Wan Kenobi (Alec Guinness; Ewan McGregor) tells Luke, is "what gives the Jedi his power. It's an energy field created by all living things. It surrounds us and penetrates us. It binds the galaxy

together" (ANH). In his teachings about the Force, Yoda (Frank Oz, voice) tells Luke that "life creates [the Force], makes it grow. Its energy surrounds us and binds us" (*The Empire Strikes Back*, 1980). The Force, like the Tao, is the energy that unites all of life together and directs it toward its appropriate end. The Force is light and dark; the Tao is yin and yang.

At first glance, the *Star Wars* worldview seems to partly defy the interconnectedness of dark and light supported in a Taoist perspective, instead presenting a rigidly dualistic division of light and dark: Anakin embraces the Dark Side but eventually returns to the Light Side; he is always completely devoted to either one or the other, and his moral value is easily determined based upon his allegiance. However, a closer reading reveals that Anakin, like other characters who inhabit the *Star Wars* world, contains within him constantly interacting opposites; his good choices are inextricably intertwined with other choices not so obviously benevolent, and his most redemptive act, saving Luke by destroying Palpatine (Ian McDiarmid), is itself undeniably violent and destructive. The palette of Taoist philosophy brings this interpretation into focus for film viewers, whether Lucas intended to import Taoist wisdom or not. Anakin's choices, far from being blanket choices for good or evil, reflect the complex amalgam of human experience and invite us as viewers to consider the difficulty of our own moral choices.

Such complexity is consistent with Taoist advice, as the *Tao Te Ching* explains: "The clearest Way seems obscure; / The Way ahead seems to lead backward" (chapter 41). Anakin indeed goes ahead in a way that seems "to lead backward." First he destroys the Jedi instead of the Sith, then later he destroys the Sith and paves the way for his son to reestablish the Jedi Order.² At the end of *Revenge of the Sith* (2005), Obi-Wan is disturbed by Anakin's choices, because he cannot yet see their larger implications. The Jedi Master says, "You were supposed to destroy the Sith, not join them! Bring balance to the Force, not leave it in darkness!" Anakin's actions suggest that perhaps the only way to restore balance in the galaxy is for him to join the Dark Side first, an experience that allows him to see both sides of the Force clearly, and to make choices that honor the complexity of the whole. Anakin's choice to embrace the Sith rather than simply destroy them may also hint at his persistent reluctance to see things in absolute dualisms, a perspective that allows him to fall but also allows for his ultimate redemption. Taoist wisdom teaches that in everything there lies the seed of its opposite, and such wisdom seems particularly applicable here.

The film also reflects features of one of the most widely emphasized teachings of Taoism, *wu-wei*, or nonaction and noncontention, the wisdom of which informs many schools of martial arts today. Those who understand *wu-wei* will act in a manner that flows naturally from the circumstances of the moment and accords with the Way. The *Tao Te Ching* explains that "[t]his is why sages

abide in the business of non-action, and practice the teaching that is without words" (chapter 2). The Jedi are taught to value the strength of nonaction, so that every act flows naturally from the Force, based on the circumstances of the moment, as with a Jedi's ability to deflect laser blasts seemingly with little effort. Blofield describes Taoist wisdom of *wu-wei* as "avoiding action that is not spontaneous, acting fully and skillfully by all means but only in accordance with present need, being lively when required but never over strenuous and certainly not strained, eschewing artfully calculated action and every activity stemming from profit motive" (10). Jedi Knights, too, are taught to pursue actions from a calm awareness of their surroundings with strength that "flows from the Force," as Obi-Wan tells Luke (ANH). In *Return of the Jedi* (1983), the ideal of *wu-wei* is reflected when Luke tells Han Solo (Harrison Ford) and Chewbacca (Peter Mayhew) to surrender their weapons to the Ewoks instead of trying to fight their way out. The violent response is most natural to Han, who prefers a "good blaster" to "hokey religions" based on beliefs about the Force, but Luke knows that nonaction and noncontention will eventually have more desirable effects. This insight is proven correct when they are able, as a result of nonviolence, to enlist the Ewoks' help in destroying the Imperial Forces guarding the shield generator on Endor. Luke's wisdom could have been drawn directly from the *Tao Te Ching*: "Sages enact non-action and everything becomes well ordered" (chapter 3).

The ideals of *wu-wei* are intricately related to the selflessness that is also a central goal of Taoism. Doing without doing enables one to let go of one's clinging to oneself and to flow more easily in accord with the Tao, letting its greater sense of the "way" become one's own. Anakin reflects this ideal in his childhood, as his mother Shmi (Pernilla August) relates: "He gives without any thought of reward. He knows nothing of greed" (*The Phantom Menace*). Taoist sages, also, "act with no expectation of reward" (*Tao Te Ching* chapter 2). By being selfless, the Taoist sage and the Jedi Master are capable of living very long lives, like Master Yoda, who lives 900 years. The Taoist teachings of sages like Ko Hung confirm that longevity is closely related to balance, spiritual perception, and meditation (Blofield 32–3).

Just as Taoists attempt to attain balance in a violent world, so also the Jedi Order seeks balance in a galaxy increasingly thrust into war and political unrest.³ In *TPM*, when Qui-Gon Jinn (Liam Neeson) is fighting with Sith Lord Darth Maul (Ray Park), an energy field temporarily closes between the two in the middle of combat. While Maul paces back and forth like an animal awaiting his prey, Qui-Gon calmly kneels down and begins meditating, completely engaged in the moment and demonstrating the Taoist belief in *wu-wei* (Porter 31). In much the same way, Obi-Wan Kenobi allows Darth Vader to strike him down without even resisting, because he knows that noncontention will actually increase his power. He says to Vader, "You can strike me down but I will

become more powerful than you can possibly imagine" (ANH). By letting go and becoming one with the Force through his very death, Obi-Wan increases his power by losing it, just as Taoist sages become immortal through the release of contingent, imperfect individual human existence when they become one with the Tao. Obi-Wan's refusal to fight affirms the wisdom of nonviolence achieved through an awareness of the interconnectedness of all things, dark and light.

Recognizing the value of non-action, both Taoists and Jedi Knights wish to avoid war and violence whenever possible.⁴ The *Tao Te Ching* reads, "A military victory is not a thing of beauty" (chapter 31). Similarly, Yoda says to Luke, "Wars not make one great" (ESB). His words share the sentiments of a passage in the *Tao Te Ching*: "Those good at fighting are never warlike. / Those good at attack are never enraged" (chapter 68). Yoda embodies the wisdom of a Taoist sage in his attitude about war and violence, even though (and perhaps because) he is the most powerful Jedi in the galaxy.

When forced into combat, however, the Jedi willingly, if regretfully, use their powers to restore order and uphold justice. The recognition that violence is sometimes required in the overall balance of things is also acknowledged in the *Tao Te Ching*: "Those who are good at military action achieve their goal and then stop.... They achieve their goal but only because they have no choice" (chapter 30). The necessity of violence must be viewed within a pragmatic framework for Taoists, since its only justification is the eventual restoration of balance. As Yoda advises, "A Jedi uses the Force for knowledge and defense, never for attack" (ESB). This ideal is directly reflected in the films when Qui-Gon Jinn and Obi-Wan Kenobi venture to Naboo to negotiate with the Trade Federation Viceroy, Nute Gunray (Silas Carson) (ROTS). The wise Jedi, like the wise Taoist sage, will embrace *wu-wei* whenever possible as the most effective means of honoring the Tao and the Force.

Early in his life, Anakin seems to embody the values of *wu-wei* when he observes that "the Jedi are selfless ... they only care about others," whereas the Sith "think inward, only about themselves" (ROTS). However, as Anakin begins his journey toward the Dark Side, his actions accord less with the balance idealized within the Tao and the Force. In *Attack of the Clones* (2002), instead of being patient and following the ideals of *wu-wei*, Anakin impulsively rushes to his mother's aid on Tatooine, a choice that leads him to violence. When Anakin has joined the Dark Side to gain "the power to save Padmé" (Natalie Portman), as Palpatine promises him, she is no longer his to save.⁵ As Anakin is increasingly motivated by his own desire for power and control, he is less able to view violence as a last resort. As Obi-Wan tells Anakin, his "lust for power" has lost him Padmé. Anakin's loss of balance culminates when he becomes a Sith Lord and leads the slaughter of the Jedi at the Temple. Anakin's own loss of insight is reflected in the larger loss of balance in the galaxy, which

tips increasingly in the direction of darkness, gradually becoming engulfed by it. Put within Taoist terms, things have become imbalanced with too little yin and too much yang, as Anakin seeks greater and greater control over himself, over the galaxy, and over the Force.

Buddhism: Beyond Desire

The Buddhist doctrine of *upaya* supports the notion that the teachings of Buddhism should be disseminated according to the audience's spiritual, intellectual, and moral condition: "To the Hindu elite it presented its teachings in Sanskrit, to the Chinese in Chinese. In Tibet, where the pre-Buddhist religion of Bön contained magical features, it presented itself in a magical guise" (Abe 73). The earliest followers of the Buddha were eager to share the *dharma* (Buddhist wisdom) with "whoever was willing to accept it, in their own language, and in their own culture" (72). Therefore, if *Star Wars* indeed can be an effective means to learning the principles of nonattachment, it seems likely the Buddha would be all for it as a vehicle, regardless of authorial intent.⁶

Especially in its portrayal of the need for balance, the *Star Wars* films reflect marked thematic similarities with the ideals of Buddhist wisdom as taught by the great teacher Siddhartha Gautama and as developed by his numerous followers. The name of the films' greatest heroine, Padmé, seems to directly evoke the Buddhist mantra: "Om Mani Padme Hum," which means the "jewel in the lotus," the wisdom that can bloom even in the mud of life. Buddhism teaches about the interconnectedness of the entire world and embraces the Doctrine of the Middle Way, which eschews extreme solutions to the quest for enlightenment and urges moderation and balance in all things. The Buddha's first sermon, delivered at Deer Park, urges listeners to steer a careful course between "the two extremes of overindulgence and self-mortification," or between selfishness and self-destructiveness (Abe 108). As Walpola Rahula notes, Buddhism teaches that "all thoughts of selfish desire, ill-will, hatred and violence are the result of a lack of wisdom—in all spheres of life whether individual, social or political" (49). In the *Star Wars* films, the teachings of the Jedi Masters endorse a similar view of moderation and responsibility, urging students to recognize their relative place within the Force, to respect themselves and others, and to embrace nonviolence as the path of choice.

As the leading and oldest Jedi Master, Yoda functions as a wisdom teacher in the *Star Wars* galaxy, offering insights that, though not necessarily culled directly from Buddhist sources, certainly accord in certain respects with main principles of Buddhist teachings. Indeed, Yoda's great wisdom and desire to teach others may mark him as a sort of *bodhisattva*, one of the wisdom teachers of Mahayana Buddhism, who remains in the causal universe to raise others

toward enlightenment. Just as Buddha attained enlightenment through meditation and deep thought, so too Yoda has reached an awareness of his relationship to the Force and teaches his students about the Force as the unifying agent that permeates all things in the galaxy.

The Jedi Order expresses a particular affinity with Zen Buddhism, which combines a respect for martial arts and fencing with a strong emphasis on meditation and self-mastery (*Star Wars: The Power of Myth*). As Zen Buddhist priest Walter [Ritoku] Robinson has observed, in both Zen Buddhism and in the Jedi Order, there is an emphasis on the strong connection between mind and body. Combining aspects of Taoism, Buddhism, Asian fighting techniques, and teachings about the *ch'i* (inner spiritual force), Zen Buddhism recognizes that action is as much a part of life as nonaction and acknowledges, like Taoist philosophy and the Jedi teachings, that there are times when one must use both body and mind to achieve balance (30).

Buddhism is grounded in the teachings of the Buddha, offering to adherents a basic guide to coping with the ubiquity of suffering in a material, causal world. As a spiritual master, Yoda also teaches about the origin of suffering and hints at a means for its elimination. As Yoda tells Anakin in *TPM*, "Fear leads to anger. Anger leads to hate. Hate leads to suffering." Anakin, however, struggles with the wisdom of moderation, expressed in the films as a respect for balance within the Force. When Anakin is afraid of losing his mother, he is unable to temper his emotions and rushes to Tatooine, where he becomes enraged at the Tusken Raiders who captured her and slays them in a fit of rage. As a mature Jedi, Anakin is expected to overcome attachments to people and to emotions, because, as Yoda warns Anakin, "Death is a natural part of life. Rejoice for those around you who transform into the Force. Mourn them, do not. Miss them, do not. Attachment leads to jealousy. The shadow of greed, that is" (*ROTS*). A Buddhist aims to extinguish the dichotomy between the self and the interconnected world, much as Jedi Master Yoda tries to feel the Force around him and within him, accepting death as natural within a changing, impermanent world.

The Four Noble Truths of Buddhism teach that one can overcome suffering through overcoming desire, a teaching that the Jedi Masters teach the Jedi Knights, instructing them how desire can throw even Jedi Knights out of balance. Such wisdom is echoed in the work of Thich Nhat Hanh, a modern Vietnamese Buddhist teacher: "Sometimes we are overwhelmed by the energy of hate, of anger, of despair. We forget that in us there are other kinds of energy that can manifest also. If we know how to practice, we can bring back the energy of insight, of love, and of hope in order to embrace the energy of fear, of despair, and of anger" (191-2).

Relatively early in his career, Anakin tells Padmé that he wants to be "the most powerful Jedi ever" (*AOTC*). Once he has begun to acquire some power

for himself, however, he again tells her, "I want more" (*ROTS*). The serenity of the Jedi way is not enough for Anakin. He continually lusts for more individual power, creating imbalance through his very quest for unexamined autonomy and through his inability to control his desires. As Edward Conze describes the Buddhist iteration of this problem, "The belief in a 'self' is considered by all Buddhists as an indispensable condition to the emergence of suffering. We conjure up such ideas as 'I' and 'mine,' and many most undesirable states result" (18).

Anakin's nightmare about his mother's fate and his ill-considered slaughter of the Tusken Raiders is followed by a nightmare about his own wife. His fierce attachment to Padmé and the consequent actions that follow from it are examples of why the Jedi Order forbids marriage or intimate relationships of any kind. Anakin is overwhelmed by desire and lusts for the power to prevent his nightmares from becoming real. He is out of balance, "always on the move," as Obi-Wan says of him (*ROTS*). He has fallen victim to the same sort of pain that the Buddha described in the Benares Sermon: "Truly, it is the thirst or craving, causing the renewal of existence, accompanied by sensual delight, seeking satisfaction now here, now there. That is to say, it is the craving for the gratification of the passions, or the craving for a future life, or the craving for success in this life. This, O monks, is the noble truth concerning the origin of suffering" (qtd. in Van Voorst 84). Anakin has abandoned the ideals of moderation, allowing sheer desire to rule him as he gives himself over to the quest for power and control.

The *Star Wars* films share with Buddhism a respect for meditation as a means to regain equilibrium in an unbalanced world. The principal aim of meditation is the elimination of dichotomous thinking to achieve (or recognize) balance, a perspective that fits neatly with teachings about nurturing balance in the Force through calm contemplation (Bortolin 158). When Luke asks Yoda how he is to know the good side from the bad, Yoda replies, "You will know when you are calm, at peace. Passive" (*ESB*). Through the calm of meditation, Yoda is able to connect with deceased Jedi Master Qui-Gon Jinn and, in so doing, embody the interconnectedness that is the fundamental nature of the Force (*ROTS*). By contrast, a lack of the ability to meditate quietly can have devastating consequences: Had Anakin properly meditated about his options while in the Jedi Temple waiting for Mace Windu (Samuel L. Jackson) to arrest Palpatine, he would have been able to let his desires pass through him and not cloud his judgment. Instead, Anakin is consumed by his desires and violates both Buddhist and Jedi teachings about balance and moderation.

Although the Jedi Order does not teach explicitly about rebirth, Jedi Knights are able to achieve unity with the Force upon death and transcend the material world of existence. Yoda tells Luke in *ESB*, "Luminous beings are we, not this crude matter." Such a teaching accords well with Buddhist teachings

about enlightenment and the ability to transcend the limitations of mere causal reality. In support of this notion, Yoda tells Anakin that death is a part of life, not opposed to it (ROTS). In the *Star Wars* galaxy, enlightenment is possible only for a being strong in the Force who is able to transcend the material world and exist in spirit form after death, like Qui-Gon Jinn, Yoda, Obi-Wan Kenobi, and, ultimately, even Anakin Skywalker. Although not all forms of Buddhism teach about a transcendent plane of reality, many forms of Buddhism do adhere strongly to the notion that one must accept the impermanence of all things, and, in so doing, one can reach a higher realization about all being that allows one a sort of freedom from causality and enables one to live a life of balance in change. This recognition is sometimes described in terms of nonduality, so that “in Buddhism, the nonsubstantiality and emptiness of the notion of good and evil are clearly realized, and reification and substantialization of any sort are carefully rejected” (Abe 120). To be balanced is to desire *neither* good *nor* evil but to see beyond them both to something greater.

Anakin’s loss of balance is reflected in his tendency to let his passions drive his choices, in his rage when crossed, in his unquenchable desire for power and control, and, ultimately, in the loss of his own identity when he is so eclipsed by darkness that he becomes Darth Vader and must encase his own body within a hard black shell. Clinging to embodiment in the crudest of forms, Anakin refuses the teachings of the Jedi Masters about letting go and becoming one with the Force, insisting on loyalty to either one side or the other. In so doing, Anakin rejects the possibility that he might view his own existence as shaped by the movement of something greater than himself. Not until Anakin finally realizes the emptiness of his selfish choices can he regain balance, loosening his grip on blind control, risking his own life to save his son, and symbolically removing his helmet to reveal his vulnerability.

Anakin’s ultimate revelation can be expressed in light of Buddhist wisdom, when he realizes what modern Vietnamese Buddhist teacher Thich Nhat Hanh has expressed about human suffering and integration of the whole human: “In the case of Buddhism, we don’t have to chase the evil spirit away; in fact we embrace the evil spirit, the energy of anger, the energy of despair, the energy of hate, the negative energies. Embraced by the energy of mindfulness, they are transformed. They don’t need to be chased away” (191–2). According to this worldview, neither light *nor* dark exist as entities in and of themselves; instead, there are only ourselves, our choices, and our relationships. The *Star Wars* films show us in Anakin a profound example of the suffering that can result from ignorance and imbalance. Careening into a life dictated by violence and egoism, Anakin must take the hard road back to moderation, to peace, to balance, and to integration of the whole person.

Christianity: Good versus Evil

We end our discussion of religious thematic parallels with a discussion of Christianity, a religious tradition that, at least superficially, offers a markedly different approach from either Taoism or Buddhism to the relationship between light and dark. Given the ubiquity of Christian stories and ideas in American society, Christianity is also one of the most pertinent lenses to consider when attempting to assess what cultural influence Christian stories and beliefs may have played in the architecture of the film plots. Whether Lucas intended to, he has crafted a storyline with distinct thematic parallels to Christian stories about Jesus in the gospels.⁷ However, with its stark dualism of light opposed to dark, of “us” opposed to “them,” the films have the most in common with the gloomy, stylized apocalyptic dualism of John’s *Revelation* on Patmos, in which forces of darkness battle with the forces of light in the end times. Despite the obvious thematic parallels with apocalypticism in the *Star Wars* films, Anakin’s story ultimately undermines the rigid expectations of apocalyptic dualism, exhibiting for us a character who, in his own quest for balance, challenges such an obvious opposition of good and evil and invites us as viewers to see ourselves as capable of the same horror and the same final redemption.

The parallels between Anakin and the Jesus of the gospels are apparent. Jesus and Anakin both came into the world in desert environments in small communities. Anakin Skywalker begins life as the result, like Jesus, of an apparently virgin birth. As the young boy depicted in *TPM*, Anakin is identified as the “Chosen One” who is to “bring balance to the Force” according to an ancient prophecy. Shmi Skywalker, Anakin’s mother, is a slave on Tatooine when Jedi Master Qui-Gon Jinn discovers the boy and remarks, “The Force is unusually strong with him, that much is clear.” When asked who fathered the boy, Shmi responds, “There was no father. I carried him, I gave birth.... I can’t explain what happened.” Qui-Gon believes that Anakin could have been conceived by midi-chlorians, because a very high concentration of them appears in his blood.⁸ This theory adds further weight to Qui-Gon’s opinion that Anakin is the Chosen One who can bring balance to the Force, since such a high concentration of midi-chlorians bodes well for Anakin’s ability to tap into the Force.

Just as Jesus could perform miracles, so Anakin performs miraculous feats, such as successfully racing pods on Tatooine, an act which Qui-Gon claims is impossible without Jedi reflexes. When Anakin is tested by the Jedi Council, he is able to discern what objects appear on a holographic reader without seeing them as the Jedi Masters await his answers. He also harnesses the Force to destroy the Droid Control Ship above Naboo, thus freeing the planet of Trade Federation oppression. Like Jesus, Anakin is expected to do more than perform miracles. Whereas many early Christians expected Jesus to save the Jews

from the Romans, so the Jedi hope that Anakin will fulfill the prophecy of bringing balance to the Force by destroying the Sith. Similarly, as many Christians, following in the tradition of Paul, interpret Jesus' victory over death as the means by which he freed humanity from the power of sin and death, so Qui-Gon Jinn, Obi-Wan Kenobi, and others hope that Anakin will restore balance to the Force by defeating the growing power of the Dark Side.

Neither the gospel writers nor the *Star Wars* films have anything to say about Jesus's or Anakin's teenage years, but when the two appear again as adults, they exhibit markedly different characters. Jesus emerges as a respected leader with a loyal following of disciples who think he is the Son of God, whereas Anakin is less like the self-assured teacher and healer of Galilee and more like a Shakespearean protagonist, riddled by self-doubt and subject to fits of passion and rage. Whereas the gospels present Jesus as a leader who declines Satan's offer of earthly power (Luke 4: 1-13), in AOTC, Anakin is presented as rebellious, impatient and insolent, with an insatiable lust for power and control. The most obvious manifestation of this rage is Anakin's brutal slaughter of Tusken Raiders, including women and children, when he realizes that they have captured and killed his mother. Whereas Jesus of the gospels teaches a message grounded in prophetic demands for social justice, Anakin is increasingly driven by a desire for sheer selfish power at virtually any price.

Having forsaken earlier loyalties to the Light Side for the promise of power on the Dark Side, Anakin brutally defeats Count Dooku (Christopher Lee), cutting off both of his forearms (ROTS). In the midst of the battle, he grabs his opponent's lightsaber and holds his own blue lightsaber in one hand and Dooku's red lightsaber in the other. At that precise moment, Palpatine incites him to end Dooku's life: "Kill him. Kill him now." Anakin's handling of the two sabers simultaneously represents his own moral crossroads between good (blue) and evil (red). Thinking he must choose *either* one weapon *or* the other, he chooses to kill Dooku, a defenseless prisoner, a fateful decision that confirms Anakin's fall into the Dark Side and further reifies the categories of dark and light.

Palpatine is as close to the Devil in the *Star Wars* galaxy as anyone could get and comfortably plays the role of the tempter, the accuser, and the living emblem of darkness. Rising into galactic power like the beast of John's *Revelation*, a creature with malicious designs for undisputed rule, Palpatine has no redeeming qualities from a Christian viewpoint, though he earns reluctantly yielded admiration for his brilliance in battle and his flair for strategy.⁹ Palpatine successfully serves as a metonym for undistilled evil, opposed to the Light Side absolutely. Indeed, the introduction of Palpatine alongside Anakin/Darth Vader calls viewers to carefully compare the two and hints at Anakin's more nuanced characterization as one who might challenge the reified categories of light and dark.

Palpatine reveals to Anakin that he knows the powers of the Dark Side, and he plays upon Anakin's affections by implying that he can help Anakin save Padmé by using the "unnatural" powers of the Dark Side to prevent her death. In his own metaphorical desert of temptation, Anakin cannot resist Palpatine's offer and agrees to serve him, a fateful decision that further reveals Anakin's contrast to Jesus: He has chosen what Jesus rejected and has been tempted by his fierce desire for control. Before long, Anakin has murdered younglings on holy ground inside the Jedi Temple, killed the Separatist leaders on Mustafar, and aggressively confronted his own master, mentor, and best friend, Obi-Wan Kenobi. Anakin's fall into darkness is portrayed through a poignant visual metaphor: Mustafar, a volcanic planet with lava flowing everywhere and dark ash clouding the skies, looks much like the popular Christian vision of hell. After falling to the Dark Side, Anakin has descended onto a planet that outwardly mirrors his own internal spiritual and emotional imbalance. Anakin's choices are cemented when he watches Jedi Master Mace Windu locked in combat with Supreme Chancellor Palpatine. Anakin waits until Mace decides he must kill Palpatine and only then intervenes on Palpatine's side, demonstrating his loyalty toward the Dark Side (ROTS).

When Palpatine is on the verge of killing Luke for the second time, Anakin finally intervenes and saves his son, hurling the emperor into a reactor shaft. This dramatic event thematically resembles the capture and destruction of the beast in John's *Revelation*, who is similarly "thrown alive into the lake of fire that burns with sulphure (Rev. 19:20). Palpatine's fate also resonates with the fate of the dragon defeated by Michael and thrown into the abyss, "so that he would deceive the nations no more" (Rev. 20). This event defines Anakin's rejection of his identity as Darth Vader and signifies a return to the Light Side, allowing Anakin, through analogy, to play the role of God's angel, defeating Satan and casting him away. Indeed, read in the light of John's *Revelation*, it is easy to laud Anakin's shift in loyalty and close the book (or film) confident that justice has been served and Anakin redeemed.

But is such a simple reading the richest one? Given the film's strong thematic affinities with Taoism and Buddhism, two religio-philosophical traditions that defy easy dualistic distinctions, should viewers not look a bit more closely at what the film may be saying about the true nature of the Force and, by extension, about balance between light and dark? In addition to the Taoist and Buddhist ideas contained in the *Star Wars* films' worldview, Anakin's final choice provides a crucial clue that a rigid dualistic reading of the films' presentation of the Dark Side and the Light Side is too simplistic. Anakin cannot be defined solely through his association with the Dark Side or with the Light Side, but only through a complex consideration of his entire life, which resonates with both. He is Anakin *and* Vader and remains both in the end, reclaiming his identity as Luke's father but unable to even breathe for long

without his black shell. Through an act of loyalty and love to his son, Anakin enacts his own redemption, returning to the Light Side and embodying a personal return of the Jedi that reflects his shift from Sith Lord to Jedi Knight, a choice shaped and determined precisely by his fall into darkness.

Thus, Anakin's fulfillment of the prophecies is achieved, but not in the same way as followers of Jesus saw him fulfilling the prophecies about his messianic nature. Whereas the gospels depict a savior who saves through his own passive death, Anakin fulfills the prophecy in a much more complex fashion: He indeed restores balance to the Force, but only by first destroying Alderaan and all its inhabitants, throwing the entire galaxy into disarray, and defeating and killing Palpatine. This messianic figure resembles the Lamb portrayed in John's *Revelation* more than the Jesus of the gospels, since both the Lamb and Vader wreak horrible vengeance, and both save others only through violent annihilation of their enemies.¹⁰ However, as we have shown, the *Star Wars* films resist a simplistic dualism of light versus dark, good versus evil. Anakin/Vader is a figure who saves, but in a very tumultuous, human fashion, and who defeats his enemies, but only by recognizing the enemy within himself, and who, even in his most glorious moment, is less than completely admirable, since he saves his son and the galaxy only after years of abhorrent behavior and only through murdering others. Balance, it seems, is not an idyllic fantasy of easy peace, but comes at a heavy price: Within each of us there lurks both a potential savior and a beast. Any enemy we kill was once a boy or girl, like young Anakin, trying his best to find love and a sense of belonging. Denying a reification of light and dark, good and evil, the *Star Wars* films portray the Force as encompassing both, inviting us instead to strive for balance, making the best choices we can.

"May the Force Be with You": *Star Wars* as Religion

The *Star Wars* films exhibit some intriguing thematic parallels with Taoism, Buddhism, and Christianity, sharing with them an emphasis on the importance of balance and a recognition of the complexity of human moral experience. However, in addition to providing some of the content of religious experience, one can also see that the films function as a religion for some viewers. Indeed, if we utilize John Lyden's definition of religion, then such a designation seems hard to avoid. We have shown already how the *Star Wars* films fulfill two of the items in Lyden's list: they provide a model of reality (the Force in relationship to the galaxy) and a narrative for how the world should be (Dark Side and Light Side in balance). By looking at the activities of the *Star Wars* fan community, we now show how the films also fulfill the remaining items in Lyden's taxonomy: providing for fans a set of symbols that mediate values and creating motivations for their behavior.

Star Wars fans examine the films and their symbolism in as much detail, and with as much dedication, as many devotees examine their own sacred texts. Every possible interpretation, contradiction, or implication is discussed endlessly among the fans at Internet forums, which have become in some ways the functional equivalent of Bible study groups. Although some of the discussion topics are fun and frivolous, focusing on such topics as the short life of R4-P17 in *ROTS*, many fans are also interested in seriously discussing the greater moral implications of the characters' actions and how the philosophy of the Jedi functions within the *Star Wars* galaxy, including how it can apply to life on earth, in our own Milky Way galaxy. Especially when viewed in light of thematic parallels with other religious traditions, the films' representation of the Force points toward an overall argument for balance, perhaps the strongest mediating value of the entire *Star Wars* mythology.

In addition to providing a moral framework, the films also offer a sense of group identity. *Star Wars* Webmasters serve what may be deemed a religious role in the fan community, providing fans with news about the greater *Star Wars* universe and of fan projects. Functioning in some ways very much like ministers, the Webmasters have a wide reach and can sway fans with their editorials and views. *StarWars.com* is like a virtual Catholic Church for *Star Wars* fans, offering a center for discussion and serving as the source of many important announcements. As with any religious group, not all fans agree about the way the Web site should be run. Most notably, in a postmodern quasi-Protestant move, when Lucasfilm revealed that fans would have to tithe for the all-access part of the site, Hyperspace, many fans felt their allegiance to the Official Site wane.

Followers of *Star Wars* are, like followers of other religious traditions, motivated to practice certain behaviors and rituals as part of their group identity. Fans have long referred to the first *Star Wars* trilogy affectionately as the "Holy Trilogy," departing from one another's company by saying, "May the Force be with you." The most devoted groups see their dedication to the films as a motivation to participate in charity or other community events. One of the most committed and well organized sects of *Star Wars* fandom is the 501st Legion, which is a group of more than 2,500 *Star Wars* fans worldwide spanning twenty-one countries ("501st Charter"). Members own various Imperial or Sith costumes and (ironically, given their costume choices) participate in charity and volunteer work. Some fans even create new virtual communities, as is the case with the 501st Legion. Best known for their Stormtrooper-costumed fans, the 501st is divided into garrisons, squads, outposts, and detachments throughout the world that form *Star Wars* fan communities that meet to watch the movies, help local charity events, attend conventions, or discuss costuming. The 501st even handled much of the security for Lucasfilm's officially authorized *Star Wars* Celebration III in Indianapolis, Indiana, before the pre-

miere of *ROTS* in 2005. If religious groups can be defined by their sense of community identity in association with moral beliefs, rituals, and charitable acts, then the 501st surely should be defined in this way.

In the twenty-first century, thousands of *Star Wars*' devotees are fighting for official religious recognition. As Jennifer Porter explains in chapter 6, an e-mail campaign circulated in 2001 asking *Star Wars* fans in Australia and England to mark their religion as "Jedi Knight" on census reports. The grassroots effort forced the U.K. Census Bureau to take the movement seriously enough to provide a code for Jedi Knight on the census forms so that the results could be effectively tabulated. Given the resulting figures,¹¹ the Jedi "religion" would rank fourth in the United Kingdom among all religions if it were officially recognized. Even given the qualifications Porter rightly admits we must place on these results, they can hardly be ignored completely. Furthermore, when viewed in light of a functional definition of religion, such as the one embraced by Lyden and Clifford Geertz, the census figures encourage a serious reconsideration of what criteria are pertinent when determining what groups should be deemed worthy of societal recognition as members of a religion.

Conclusion

The idea that a film series could spur religious devotion may seem odd to some people, but there seems to be no logical reason why a book should be able to serve as the central element of religious teaching and not a film series, especially since proponents argue that *Star Wars* offers as relevant a guide for living as any other religious book. John Lyden has argued persuasively that film can function as religion for some people, claiming that "what we have always called 'religion' is identified by its function in society," and that "this function can be met even by cultural phenomena not normally called 'religions'"(3). The larger question of how one should understand new religious experience in popular culture is beyond the scope of this essay, but it is more than clear that the *Star Wars* films share some fundamental religious themes with some of the world's greatest religious traditions and, furthermore, that many *Star Wars* fans exhibit the same passion, devotion, and sense of community as followers of these traditional religions.

The intense devotion of *Star Wars* fans, when viewed in light of the films' expression of the crucial need for balance within the galaxy, strongly points toward our own societal feelings of imbalance in a world increasingly saturated with violence and mad quests for individual power at the expense of others. Furthermore, the willingness of some fans to dress up as Stormtroopers and even as Darth Vader suggests that there is something particularly compelling about this would-be villain turned savior and his compatriots. One might even go so far as to suggest that such a savior just may be more palatable than a

wholly good savior, as we watch our own world crumble under the whims of men driven by impulse and desire and can only hope for their enlightenment. If the teachings of Taoism, Buddhism, Christianity, and the *Star Wars* films all call for awareness of our connectedness to one another and urge thoughtful consideration of the imbalance created by violent acts toward others, does it really matter if practitioners express their devotion through quiet contemplation in nature, through worship in a shrine or church, through meditation, through viewing movies, interacting with a Web site, or through donning costumes and attending community events? The Force, it seems, can take many different forms, and each of us, just like Anakin, must chart our courses in our own galaxy with the utmost care.

Notes for Chapter 5

1. The *Tao Te Ching* describes the Tao in a way that sounds very much like the Force: "Look for it and it cannot be seen / Listen for it and it cannot be heard / But use it and it will never run dry!" (chapter 35).
2. Anakin does accomplish this goal in future novels authorized by Lucasfilm, specifically the *Jedi Academy Trilogy* by Kevin J. Anderson. See also the *Star Wars: The New Jedi Order* series of books.
3. The background of violence and war in the *Star Wars* movies resembles the tumultuous sociopolitical environment of ancient China during the Warring States Period and the development of such religious and philosophical traditions as Confucianism and Taoism during this period.
4. When the Republic uses its newly created clone army to protect itself from the Separatist droid army, Yoda knows the Republic is in trouble. He says, "The shroud of the Dark Side has fallen. Begun, the Clone Wars have." Similarly, Lao Tzu writes: "Wherever an army resides, thorns and thistles grow" (chapter 30). Sure enough, the standing army of the Republic soon brings about the destruction of democracy in the galaxy.
5. The *Tao Te Ching* says of the Way, "Those who grab hold of it lose it," a statement also useful in describing power in the *Star Wars* galaxy (chapter 64).
6. Works such as Matthew Bortolin's *Dharma* support such a popular reading.
7. Of course, the films also have some intriguing parallels with material from Jewish tradition. Notably, the name "Anakin" is very close the Hebrew term "Anakim," which refers to an ancient pre-Canaanite tribe known for its warlike characteristics, eventually expelled by Joshua from the land (Num. 13:33). The Anakim were closely associated by tradition with the giants of the antediluvian period (Gen. 6:4) and, by some, with the Philistine giants of the David and Goliath stories (I Sam. 17-22). If Lucas did choose this name intentionally, the resonance of Darth Vader with the giants of antiquity is compelling and apt. Apart from the basic similarities between Christian apocalypticism and Jewish apocalypticism, a study of thematic parallels with Judaism in the films is beyond the scope of this chapter.

8. **Midi-chlorians** are essentially an intermediary between the Force and an individual, so the higher the concentration of the microscopic beings in one's blood, the greater the potential and ease for that person to tap into the Force.
9. Actor Ian McDiarmid quipped in a BBC interview that Palpatine's only redeeming quality is his patronage of the arts.
10. For a readable introduction to apocalyptic literature, see Collins, *Crisis and Catharsis*.
11. In Australia and New Zealand, 120,000 people marked "Jedi" as their official religion (Perrott). In the United Kingdom, 390,000 people declared themselves part of the Jedi faith, with up to 2.6 percent of respondents in some areas, like Brighton and Hove, allying themselves with the Force ("Jedi").

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