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May The Force Be With You...And Also With You: An Examination of Religion in and the Cultural Impact of Star Wars

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*When I was making Star Wars, I wasn't restrained by any kind of science. I simply said, 'I'm going to create a world that's fun and interesting, makes sense, and seems to have a reality to it.'*¹

Though the world of *Star Wars* may seem completely fantastical, George Lucas, the creator of the franchise who is quoted above, admits that there is some type of reality in his creation. Here, Lucas discusses his embedding of reality into the Star Wars Universe. One could argue that the reality to which he is referring is the human condition or modern fears of political turmoil. The clearest and most memorable aspect of the Star Wars Universe, however, is the Force, and the ways in which the beliefs surrounding it mirror the human understanding of religion. According to Wookieepedia, the official Star Wars encyclopedia (complete with citations), the Force is “an energy field that connected everything in the universe.”² For the purpose of this essay, when using “the Force,” I will be referring to either this definition, the general belief system surrounding the Force, or both. The general belief system to which I am referring has three basic tenets: the Force is real; it connects all things in the universe and maintains balance; and with it one can accomplish things that one could not do without it. Below, I aim to explore the similarities between the Force and the human understanding of religion.

The methodology I will be using to examine *Star Wars* and the Force includes the utilization of the theories of Clifford Geertz, an anthropologist of religion who argued that religion is a system of symbols, the belief in which is verified by ritual and consecrated behaviors; as well as the theories of Emile Durkheim, another religious anthropologist who argued that religion centers around a unified set of beliefs and practices, usually relating to the

¹ "George Lucas Quotes." BrainyQuote. Accessed April 2019. https://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/george_lucas_578032.

² "The Force." Wookieepedia. Accessed April 2019. https://starwars.fandom.com/wiki/The_Force.

sacred, which is any arbitrary thing that is set apart and forbidden. I will also compare the Force to general tendencies of gnosticism, a religious movement from the first through fifth centuries with many different branches that tended to follow similar trends and ideologies, and perform close “readings” of various lines, imagery, characters, and plot points in several of the *Star Wars* films.

There has been a good deal of scholarship on myth and religious structure, though there is a scarcity of research dedicated solely to religion and myth in *Star Wars*--virtually none--situating my research to pave new paths and form new hypotheses as an important addition to the existing scholarship. The path I aim to pave is this: the Force functions as a religion within the *Star Wars* Universe. The Force’s religious role fits with Geertz’s five-part definition of religion, including the importance of rituals and symbols, as well as Durkheim’s definition including the set apart and forbidden “sacred.” The beliefs and practices surrounding the Force are also similar to those of gnosticism. While a notable exception to these comparisons exist, the Gray Jedi, the seemingly paradoxical existence of Jedi who are neither light nor dark in fact supports the similarities between gnosticism, Durkheimian theory, Geertzian theory, and The Force. Further, through the exploration of religious themes and imagery in *Star Wars*, we can extrapolate the influence that pop culture has on our understanding of religion, and vice versa.

A Note on Terminology

In the following essay, I will use *Star Wars* (italicized) to refer to the movies and other media released by LucasFilms, and *Star Wars* (unitalicized) to indicate the general world or franchise. I use Universe (capitalized, usually following “*Star Wars*”) to refer to the complete world of *Star Wars*; the reality as it is for characters within it. Lastly, I use universe (lower case)

to discuss either the astronomical concept or the cosmic understanding of all things being contained in one “universe.”

Methodology

In the following paper, I will analyze religious themes and imagery in *Star Wars: A New Hope* by examining the film through a Geertzian and Durkheimian lens. Additionally, I will examine the ways in which the Star Wars understanding of the universe is similar to that of the gnostics (in general). I will round out my analysis by doing close “readings” of the movie, looking at specific scenes, characters, and motifs.

Clifford Geertz was a pioneer in symbolic and interpretive anthropology, a branch of anthropology that aims to understand what the practices of a people *mean* to them rather than, perhaps, the perceived utility of an action. In the 1970s, Geertz became “associated with heralding the ‘interpretive turn’ in anthropology and steering the discipline, or the sociocultural part of it at least, away from research designs patterned on the natural sciences.”³⁴ Geertz believed that it was vital for his field to abandon the façade of scientific objectivity, and allow anthropology to become “engaged in the study of meaning rather than in the pursuit of predictive laws,” focused more on symbolism and meaning than empirical absolutes.⁵ Utilizing what he called “thick description,” a way of understanding the meaning of people’s actions to them, Geertz wrote lengthy essays and articles in order to delve deep into the vitality of human actions,

³ "Clifford Geertz." New World Encyclopedia. March 3, 2017. Date accessed December 1, 2018. http://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Clifford_Geertz.

⁴ Thompson, Matthew D. "Clifford Geertz." Oxford Bibliographies. January 11, 2012. Date accessed December 1, 2018. <http://www.oxfordbibliographies.com/view/document/obo-9780199766567/obo-9780199766567-0035.xml>.

⁵ Thompson, “Clifford Geertz” 34.

lives, and existence.⁶ Though his work was not universally embraced by all anthropologists, he definitively altered the entire field, not only in method and study but in the legitimizing of anthropology as a social science.⁷

In his chapter “Religion as a Cultural System,” Geertz provides a five-part definition of religion.

(1) a system of symbols which acts to (2) establish powerful, pervasive, and long-lasting moods and motivations in men by (3) formulating conceptions of a general order of existence and (4) clothing these conceptions with such an aura of factuality that (5) the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic.⁸

Geertz begins by defining religion as a system, and all that follows in his definition describes what the system is, what it does, and the means by which it accomplishes what it does. This system is comprised of symbols, which Professor Jeffrey Wattles of Kent State University defines as the “bearer of meaning, e.g., an object, event, quality, or relation; a tangible, public, observable, concrete embodiment of ideas, attitudes, judgments, longings or beliefs; something outside the organism influencing the social and psychological processes that shape public behavior.”⁹ Examples of symbols include the Star of David, deities, and sacred texts. These symbols are utilized in regular ways, such as the Torah being brought out during Shabbat services, while it is otherwise secured in a glass case. The symbols are also used to create and maintain an understanding of an order of existence. For example, the Bible gives a literal order for the creation of the world, as well as an indication of how humans should live in it. Symbols

⁶ "Clifford Geertz." Encyclopedia of World Biography. *Encyclopedia.com*. Date accessed December 1, 2018. <https://www.encyclopedia.com/history/encyclopedias-almanacs-transcripts-and-maps/clifford-geertz>.

⁷ Thompson, "Clifford Geertz" 36.

⁸ Geertz, Clifford. *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays*. Fontana Press, 1993, pp. 90.

⁹ Wattles, Jeffrey. "An Anthropological Approach to Religion." *An Anthropological Approach to Religion A Summary of*. 2002. Accessed April 2019.

<http://www.wabashcenter.wabash.edu/syllabi/w/wattles/geertzppt2.htm>.

are given veracity as well; the Bible is written without a hint of metaphor or allusion, allowing it to be read literally, the Star of David is reminiscent of the protection G-d gave to David in his life, and most religions agree that some type of god is real. The regularity of the symbols' use, combined with the explanation of the order of existence and veracity lent to them, imbue the symbols with the power to create emotions, evoke memories, and establish "long-lasting moods," all of which "seem uniquely realistic."¹⁰

Geertz focuses "The Interpretation of Cultures" on ritual, and religious action/practice.

It is in ritual—that is, consecrated behavior—that this conviction that religious conceptions are veridical and that religious directives are sound is somehow generated. It is in some sort of ceremonial form—even if that form be hardly more than the recitation of a myth, the consultation of an oracle, or the decoration of a grave—that the moods and motivations which sacred symbols induce in men and the general conceptions of the order of existence which they formulate for men meet and reinforce one another. In ritual, the world as lived and the world as imagined, fused under the agency of a single set of symbolic forms, turn out to be the same world...it is the concrete acts of religious observance that religious conviction emerges on the human plane.¹¹

For Geertz, ritual is central to religion. Belief may exist in the minds of practitioners, but what is to keep them from altering their beliefs, or deciding that their current beliefs are false? Through ritual, Geertz argues, are beliefs confirmed. The world as a believer imagines it to be is merged with the world as imagined through consecrated behavior, creating a complete worldview as well as reinforcing and confirming previously held beliefs. Another role religion plays, according to Geertz, is to make suffering not disappear, but to make suffering sufferable.¹² Religion cannot take away all "physical pain, personal loss, worldly defeat, or the helpless contemplation of others' agony," and therefore functions to make all of these bearable.¹³

¹⁰ Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays* 90.

¹¹ Geertz, Clifford. *The Interpretation of Cultures*. New York: Basic Books, 2000, pp. 112.

¹² Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* 90.

¹³ Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* 104.

Much like Geertz, Emile Durkheim did most of his work in the field of sociology and anthropology. In his essay *Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*, Durkheim works through the nature and meaning of religion. He settles on the following definition: “A religion is a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things, that is to say, things set apart and forbidden—beliefs and practices which unite into one single moral community called a Church, all those who adhere to them.”¹⁴ The two main points Durkheim makes in this and further essays are that the sacred is any arbitrary thing that is set apart and forbidden, and that religion centers around a *unified* set of beliefs and practices.

There are two additional aspects of the Durkheimian theory of religion that are important to know in order to understand Durkheim’s theory: functionalism and collective consciousness. Functionalism is the idea that if something disrupts society, society must react in order to reach a new social equilibrium. Collective consciousness is a set of shared beliefs, moral attitudes, and ideas that operate as a unifying force in society.

Geertzian theorists believe that the most important aspect of understanding culture, including religion, is setting aside as much bias as possible, investigating rituals and symbols, and discovering the *meaning* behind beliefs and actions, disregarding hypotheses about the utility of said actions and beliefs. Durkheimian theorists seek to understand religion by looking at both the practices and beliefs of a group, specifically those relative to sacred things, and how they function to maintain equilibrium and unification in society. Both theorists believe that what an action or belief means to the people who do/hold it is the pinnacle of understanding religion. In addition to the application of Durkheimian and Geertzian theory to the Star Wars Universe, I will

¹⁴ Durkheim, Emile. *Elementary Forms of the Religious Life* (selections), in Carl Olson, editor, *Theory and Method in the Study of Religion*. Toronto: Wadsworth, 2003, pp. 222.

examine the similarities between the common gnostic understanding of the universe and the Star Wars understanding of the universe, as well as analyze imagery and symbolism in *Star Wars: A New Hope* by doing cinematic close readings.

Historiography

There are several sources that are relevant to individual elements of this paper, though only two engage with Star Wars and religion together. Mark Juergensmeyer writes about the concept of cosmic war, which plays a central role in both the diegetic Universe of Star Wars and as an extra-diegetic narrative device.

Perhaps the most important aspect of cosmic war is that it provides an all-encompassing worldview for those who accept it. It identifies the sources of good and evil in the world, explains why things occur, provides moral justification for those who lead the battle against evil, and gives a promise of victory in the future. It offers a view of ultimate order and a template of social reality that embraces most aspects of life.¹⁵

What Juergensmeyer describes here also well describes the Force, as it is the source of both good and evil, explains events, provides justifications, and promises to guide those who trust it.

Star Wars is mentioned directly in Markus Altena Davidsen's article *The Religious Affordance of Fiction: A Semiotic Approach*, in which Davidsen utilizes Star Wars as an example of a fictional narrative that contains mechanisms for veracity, allowing the fictional to feel real.

A curious aspect of late modern religion is the emergence of fiction-based religions, such as Jediism, based on George Lucas' Star Wars saga, and Tolkien spirituality, based on J.R.R. Tolkien's literary mythology about Middle-earth. This article draws on narrative semiotics to explain why some fictional narratives (and not others) afford religious use and have hence given rise to fiction-based religions. I show that to afford religious use it is not enough that super-natural fiction tells about supernatural agents; it must also, to some extent, construct an aura of factuality around these supernatural agents. The main aim of this article is to identify and discuss those textual 'veracity mechanisms' that in various ways

¹⁵ Juergensmeyer, Mark. "Cosmic War." Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Religion. May 2016. DOI: 10.1093/acrefore/9780199340378.013.65, pp. 9.

can help achieve such a sense of factuality. Each veracity mechanism is discussed and illustrated with examples from supernatural fiction, especially from *Star Wars* and *The Lord of the Rings*.¹⁶

In Davidsen's work, however, *Star Wars* is used to discuss its real-world impacts, such as Jediism, and not the impact of the Force upon the characters within the *Star Wars* Universe.

Catholic blogs, surprisingly, have ample to say on the topic of religious, specifically Christian, imagery and themes in *Star Wars*.¹⁷ Though not academic or peer-reviewed, the topic is clearly on the minds of many people, academic and non-academic alike.

The most pertinent writings on religion and *Star Wars* are found in Joseph Campbell's *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* and *The Power of Myth*. In the former, Campbell describes "monomyth," the concept that all culturally significant myths around the world follow the same pattern, known as the Hero's Journey.¹⁸ The Hero's Journey consists of three parts: *departure*, *initiation*, and *return*, each of which is broken down into several smaller sections. Campbell cites myths from all locations, ages, and peoples, pointing out that they all follow a similar, sometimes identical, pattern.

¹⁶ Markus Altena Davidsen (2016) *The Religious Affordance of Fiction: A Semiotic Approach*, Religion, 46:4, 521-549, DOI: 10.1080/0048721X.2016.1210392, pp. 521.

¹⁷ Papendrea, James L. "Examining the Christian Imagery of *Star Wars*." Catholic Exchange. December 14, 2017. Accessed April 2019. <https://catholicexchange.com/examining-christian-imagery-star-wars>.

Souza, Fr Raymond De, Philip Kosloski, Ed West, and Raymond De Souza. "Star Wars' Religious Imagery Is More than Just Coincidence." Catholic Herald. August 04, 2017. Accessed April 2019. <https://catholicherald.co.uk/commentandblogs/2017/08/04/star-wars-religious-imagery-is-more-than-just-coincidence/>.

"May the Force Be with You: Viewing 'Star Wars' through a Catholic Lens." TheCatholicSpirit.com. May 04, 2017. Accessed April 2019. <https://thecatholicspirit.com/news/local-news/may-force-catholics-explore-catholic-side-star-wars/>.

"A Catholic's Guide to *Star Wars*." Denver Catholic. December 13, 2017. Accessed April 2019. <https://denvercatholic.org/catholics-guide-star-wars/>.

"What the *Star Wars* Franchise Can Learn from the Roman Catholic Church." Religion News Service. September 25, 2017. Accessed April 2019. <https://religionnews.com/2017/09/22/what-the-star-wars-franchise-can-learn-from-the-roman-catholic-church/>.

¹⁸ Campbell, Joseph. *The Hero with a Thousand Faces: Third Edition*. Novato, CA: New World Library, 2008.

In *The Power of Myth*, Campbell engages with Star Wars directly. Bill Moyers, Campbell's interviewer, is the first to make the connection between Star Wars and religion. "After our youngest son had seen *Star Wars* for the twelfth or thirteenth time, I said, 'Why do you go so often?' He said, 'For the same reason you have been reading the Old Testament all of your life.'"¹⁹ Indeed, Moyers recognized Star Wars as "a very old story in a very new costume."²⁰ An example of the monomyth, given by Campbell, is the story of Moses.²¹ The story of the Biblical figure is very similar to that of Luke Skywalker: both are called to a greater mission, receive supernatural aid, are tempted, and eventually reconciles with their past and family background. These parallels imply that the structure of Star Wars is similar to the structure of religious stories created thousands of years ago.

The most comprehensive piece of writing on Star Wars and myth/religion is Mary Henderson's book, *Star Wars: The Magic of Myth*, which focuses solely on the mythical and religious aspects of the Star Wars Universe. Drawing upon Campbell and Carl Jung, Henderson writes that there are common symbols throughout myths, which is hypothesized to be due to "certain psychological urges and instincts" in humans.²² Henderson discusses the Force, and draws on Durkheimian theory.

In many ways, the Force combines the basic principles of several different major religions yet it embodies what all of them have in common: an unerring faith, in a spiritual power. The French sociologist Emile Durkheim stated that religion provides an individual with inner strength, purpose, meaning, and a sense of belonging. In the *Star Wars* saga, the Force provides all of these things to those who know how to tap into it.²³

¹⁹ Campbell, Joseph, and Bill D. Moyers. *The Power of Myth*. Edited by Betty S. Flowers. Anchor Books, 1991, pp. 23.

²⁰ Idem 179.

²¹ Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces: Third Edition* 23.

²² Henderson, Mary. *Star Wars: The Magic of Myth*. New York: Bantam, 1999, pp. 17.

²³ Idem 44.

Henderson concludes that Star Wars fits into Campbell, Jung, and Durkheim's understandings of myth, and that the myth took so strong a hold in the popular majority because, when the original trilogy first debuted, it was at a time that "95 percent of Americans said that they believed in God, but only 43 percent attended religious services," implying that the rest of America needed, and indeed found, their mythos—and perhaps even place of worship—within the Star Wars Universe.

Due to the fact that there is only one text that I could locate that was devoted solely to Star Wars and its relationship to religion and myth, my scholarship will build off of the small number of existing works, as well as pave new paths of theories, patterns, and possibilities. I will take a fresh look at the subject by applying Geertzian and Durkheimian theory, and hopefully unearthing further meaning, religious or otherwise, that is to be found within Star Wars.

Star Wars: A New Hope

The main primary source for this essay will be the fourth movie, *Star Wars: A New Hope*.²⁴ With a cacophony of brass, this film begins with an opening crawl of background information. The galaxy is in a civil war, between the Empire and the Rebels. The latter group has stolen plans to the Death Star, the new weapon of the empire. Princess Leia, who obtained the plans, is intercepted by the Empire. She hides the plans in the droid R2-D2 who, along with the android C-3PO, manages to flee through an escape pod to the planet Tatooine. On this planet lives Luke Skywalker, who resides with his aunt and uncle, who are moisture farmers. The family purchases the droids, and Luke discovers a holographic message from Leia, in which she

²⁴ When referring to films by number, I will be referring to their time in-universe: for example, the fourth film in-universe is the first in our time. *Star Wars: A New Hope* was released in 1977 CE, taking place in 0 BBY. The film that is first chronologically, *Star Wars: The Phantom Menace*, took place in 32 BBY, came out in 1999 CE.

requests assistance from Obi-Wan Kenobi. Luke searches for “Old Ben” Kenobi, who Luke believes to be a Tatooine hermit. Obi-Wan reveals himself to be a Jedi Knight, and tells Luke that his father was once a Jedi. The Empire kills Luke’s family, and so he decides to accompany Obi-Wan to Alderaan, the planet to which Leia asked the plans to be taken.

They visit the cantina and meet Han Solo and Chewbacca, who agree to give Luke and Obi-Wan passage to Alderaan. When the motley crew arrives, they find that the planet has been destroyed by the Death Star. The Death Star then captures the *Millennium Falcon*, Han and Chewbacca’s ship. Luke, Han, and Chewbacca rescue the captured Leia, and Obi-Wan sacrifices himself in a lightsaber battler with Darth Vader so that the rest can escape. The plans to the Death Star reveal a weakness in the structure that can destroy it. After several failed attempts by other pilots to hit the weakness, Luke turns off his computer targeting system and allows himself to be guided by the Force, and he succeeds and destroys the Death Star. Leia awards Luke and Han medals from the Rebel Alliance for their heroism.²⁵

Geertz and *Star Wars*

Geertzian theory is applicable to the Star Wars Universe and the function of the Force within it in four main ways: Geertz’s system of symbols definition, lack of empirical absolutes, ritual/action fusing the world as lived with the world as imagined, and making suffering sufferable. Geertz’s five-part definition of religion is followed by the Force precisely. Additionally, the Force lacks clear limits and boundaries much in the way that Geertz believed religion to lack measurable constants. In *Star Wars*, actions such as trusting the Force allow the world as imagined to enter the world as lived, and therefore confirm beliefs about the Force’s

²⁵ *Star Wars: A New Hope*. Directed by George Lucas. 1977. United States: 20th Century Fox, DVD.

role in the lived world. The Force also works to make suffering sufferable by promising balance; if there is suffering, the Force ensures that there is simultaneously prosperity somewhere else in the universe. For example, when Alderaan is destroyed, and millions of people died, perhaps a planet was created, or a species that was previously unable to have children were suddenly capable of creating new lives.²⁶

The Force fits within Geertz's five-part definition of religion. First, it is a system of symbols, including the belief in the Force, lightsabers, and Jedi. The Force creates understandings of an order of existence through midi-chlorians, the existence of which is viewed as a fact, which creates moods and motivations such as embracing the light side of the Force, all of which seem uniquely realistic.

The Force has been described in a myriad of ways by Jedi Masters throughout the centuries, though no description is quite the same. Additionally, there exists no outline for what limits the Force has: neither Obi-Wan nor Jedi Master Yoda could tell you where the Force stops, or even how far it goes. By lacking a strict set of rules, the belief system surrounding the Force in the Star Wars universe falls under one part of Geertz's definition of religion, in that there are no predictive laws to the practice of the Force.

Another way in which the Force fits the Geertzian understanding of religion is that, through various practices, rituals, and actions, the world as lived fuses with the world as imagined. One example of this fusion is at the end of *Star Wars: A New Hope*, when Luke turns off his computer guiding system and chooses to allow the Force to be his guide.²⁷ Though not quite a ritual or ceremony, the act of abandoning himself to the Force allows Luke to fuse his lived world, which had lacked the Force for so long, with his imagined world, in which the Force

²⁶ *Star Wars: A New Hope*. George Lucas, 1:16:07.

²⁷ *Star Wars: A New Hope*. George Lucas, 1:55:55.

guides those who trust it. This act reaffirmed the real, tangible nature of the Force for Luke, the Rebels, and for the audience watching the film.

Another function of the Force similar to Geertz's understanding of religion's function in society is making suffering sufferable. The Force is repeatedly referred to as the force in between all binaries; life and death, peace and violence, warmth and cold. For example, in *The Last Jedi*, Rey sees that the Force surrounds all things, is what allows death and decay to bring new life.²⁸ The implication is that the Force maintains balance, and that even when there is death, violence, and cold, the world will always have life, peace, and warmth because of the Force. "Every action in the universe had an equal and opposite reaction elsewhere."²⁹ Therefore, when one is suffering, one can know that there is good and peace somewhere that will come to balance out current pain.

In many instances, the Force is proven to lack predictive laws, be reaffirmed through action, and make suffering sufferable. Throughout all nine films, the Force retains these aspects, and qualifies as a religion under Geertz's social and cultural understanding of religion.

Durkheim and *Star Wars*

The Force as it fits into the Star Wars Universe is much like Durkheim's definition of religion: there is a unified system of beliefs and practices which creates a single moral community, which includes aspects that are set apart and forbidden, and the Force provides a means for functionalism in the Star Wars Universe as well as a means to create collective consciousness.

²⁸ *Star Wars: The Last Jedi*. Directed by Rian Johnson. 2017. United States: 20th Century Fox, DVD. 0:49:26-0:49:31.

²⁹ "Cosmic Balance." Wookieepedia. Accessed April 2019. https://starwars.fandom.com/wiki/The_Force.

The beliefs and practices surrounding the Force within the Galactic Republic,³⁰ as well as the Rebels who remained faithful to the Force after the Republic's fall, are a unified system, in which all believe that the Force is what holds the universe together, maintains cosmic balance, and can guide those who trust it. The Force and the beliefs surrounding it brought together a single moral community, the Jedi Knights. Knighthood is set apart and forbidden, almost overtly sacred: In order to become a Jedi Knight, one must be chosen to undergo the process, pass a series of trials, tests, and training, and then be accepted by the Jedi Council before being allowed into Knighthood, members of which wield the authority to use the Force to maintain peace in the galaxy.³¹ Jedi Knights were also required to study the Force away from their families, making the training process and Knighthood even more separate from the rest of the galaxy.³² The unified system of beliefs surrounding the Force, forming the moral community of Jedi Knights which includes powers of the Force that are set apart and forbidden allow for the Force to fit neatly into Durkheim's definition of religion.

The Force provides a means and explanation for both functionalism and collective consciousness in the Star Wars Universe. Similar to the Geertzian theory that religion makes suffering sufferable, the Force's balanced nature is reminiscent of Durkheim's theory of social equilibrium, on the cosmic scale. In the Star Wars Universe, light cannot exist without darkness, and darkness cannot exist without light, implying that no matter how much darkness exists in the current moment, there will be light to balance out the dark.

Every action in the universe had an equal and opposite reaction elsewhere.

³⁰ The Galactic Republic was the polity peacefully governing the Star Wars universe for several thousand years. Under the Republic, the Jedi's flourished.

³¹ "Initiate Trials." Wookieepedia. Accessed April 2019. https://starwars.fandom.com/wiki/Initiate_Trials.
"Jedi Youngling." Wookieepedia. Accessed April 2019.
https://starwars.fandom.com/wiki/Jedi_youngling.

"The Gathering." Wookieepedia. Accessed April 2019. https://starwars.fandom.com/wiki/The_Gathering.

³² "Initiate Trails." Wookieepedia.

If someone had good luck, at the same time, someone would have an equal amount of bad luck. If two people fell in love, elsewhere two lovers were separated. If one person found three credits, then another person would lose three credits at the same time.³³

Collective consciousness can also be found in the Star Wars Universe. For example, in *The Last Jedi*, Kylo Ren and Rey have some type of mental link through the Force, and are able to speak to each other across incredible distances.³⁴ Kylo and Rey create a shared reality, similar to a collective consciousness, just on a much smaller scale. Another example of collective consciousness in *Star Wars* is the Rebel Alliance. The Rebel Alliance is held together by their set of shared beliefs, ideas, and moral attitudes surrounding the Force, which end up operating as a unifying force in their group.

In the Star Wars Universe, the Force is surrounded by a unified system of beliefs and practices which creates a single moral community. This community includes aspects that are set apart and forbidden, as agreed upon by said moral community. Additionally, the Force repeatedly acts as a means for both functionalism and the creation of a collective consciousness. All together, these aspects qualify the Force, in the context of the Star Wars Universe, as a religion under Durkheim's definition of religion.

Gnosticism

Another lens through which one can examine the religious motifs, themes, and imagery in *Star Wars: A New Hope* is by comparison with a religious movement: gnosticism. Gnosticism arose between the first and fifth century of the common era, and is an umbrella term.³⁵ There

³³ "Cosmic Balance." Wookieepedia. Accessed April 2019. https://starwars.fandom.com/wiki/The_Force.

³⁴ *Star Wars: The Last Jedi*, Rian Johnson. 0:45:03.

³⁵ King, Karen L. "What Is Gnosticism?" Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2005, pp. 7.

were many types of gnostics and branches of belief and practice; some were Christian, some were Jewish, and some belonged to non-Abrahamic traditions.³⁶ The variety of gnostic ideas were not well or widely accepted, and many modern Christians still label them as heretical to this day. Each branch of gnosticism had distinct beliefs and practices, and had general tendencies that most types followed. These general tendencies include a binary understanding of the universe, the belief that humans mirror this binary, and the belief that knowledge lies within. These will be the focus of the comparison to the Force and Star Wars.

The gnostics, in general, are perhaps most well known for their dualistic understanding of the universe. The gnostic way of thinking about the world is in “either”s and “or”s, such as good and evil, spirit and material, knowledge and ignorance.³⁷

For [this] division takes place again in these regions in [the manner] we have mentioned from the [beginning]. However the soul, on the other hand, [has] different shape<s>. The shape of the soul exists [in this] form, i.e. (the soul) that came into existence of its own accord.³⁸

In the fragments before this quote, one could infer that the “on the one hand” to match the “on the other hand” here is regarding the shaping of the body. This reinforces the strict binary belief regarding the nature of the universe. Although there are ways to embrace good and knowledge, crossing over from the evil and ignorant side of the universe, the barrier remains strictly binary.

The gnostics tended to believe that humans mirrored the duality of the world; humans are material, though they contain within them a divine spark.³⁹ Humans are ignorant of said spark,

³⁶ Pagels, Elaine. *The Gnostic Gospels*. New York: Random House, 1979, pp. 49, 120.

Rasimus, Tuomas. *Ophite Gnosticism, Sethianism and the Nag Hammadi Library*. Vol. 59, No. 3. Brill, 2005. JSTOR. pp. 7.

³⁷ Ehrman, Bart D. *Lost Christianities*. Oxford University Press, 2003.

³⁸ Evans, Craig A. *Nag Hammadi Texts and the Bible: A Synopsis and Index*. Leiden: Brill, 1993, pp. 466.

³⁹ Pearson, Birger A. "Gnosticism as Platonism: With Special Reference to Marsanes (NHC 10,1)." *The Harvard Theological Review* 77, no. 1 (1984): 55-72. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1509519>.

though they can access this spark through intuitive means. "Be silent in order that you might know...the Knowledge stood outside of him, because it belongs to him."⁴⁰ Gnostics believed that all knowledge is gained from oneself, as the knowledge is already possessed by each individual. In fact, knowledge was so central to gnosticism that the movement is named after knowledge. "Gnosis [is] esoteric knowledge of spiritual truth."⁴¹ Knowledge cannot be found through study, books, teachers, or any other external means, though one can be guided to finding internal knowledge by a mentor.⁴²⁴³ For the gnostics, there is no sin, only ignorance. Knowledge lays on the opposite side of that binary, and is the only thing that can redeem and liberate humans and humanity.⁴⁴

Gnosticism and *Star Wars*

In the Star Wars Universe, the Force's main characteristics are very similar to the characteristics of gnosticism. Both systems of belief rely heavily on a dualistic understanding of the universe and retrieving knowledge by interior means. Additionally, both view humans as mirrors for the universe, and view knowledge as the way in which one can liberate and redeem oneself.

⁴⁰ Evans, Craig A. *Nag Hammadi Texts and the Bible: A Synopsis and Index*. Leiden: Brill, 1993, pp. 464.

⁴¹ King, Karen L. "What Is Gnosticism?" 5.

⁴² Lang, Karen Christina. "'Via Negativa' in Mahāyāna Buddhism and Gnosticism." *The Eastern Buddhist*, NEW SERIES, 14, no. 1 (1981): 43-60. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/44361589>.

⁴³ Turner, John D. "The Gnostic Threefold Path to Enlightenment: The Ascent of Mind and the Descent of Wisdom." *Novum Testamentum* 22, no. 4 (1980): 324-51. doi:10.2307/1560524.

⁴⁴ Duchesne-Guillemin, Jacques. "Knowledge and Ignorance." In *Encyclopedia of Religion*, 2nd ed., edited by Lindsay Jones, 5199-5211. Vol. 8. Detroit, MI: Macmillan Reference USA, 2005. Gale Virtual Reference Library. <http://link.galegroup.com/apps/doc/CX3424501737/GVRL?u=taco25438&sid=GVRL&xid=b5e7559d>, pp. 5202.

In the *Star Wars* films, the Force is explicitly split into two parts, the dark side and the light side. The Force, much like gnosticism, is split into a binary of good and bad, honesty and corruption, rules and disorder. There is little to no room for a wielder of the Force to be in between the two sides.

Knowledge of the Force is found through interior means: quite literally, as those who are “Force-sensitive” are said to have a “high concentration of midi-chlorians—microscopic, sentient lifeforms that shared a symbiotic relationship with the Force—in their blood.”⁴⁵ For example, when Obi-wan Kenobi is first training Luke in the ways of the Force, he instructs the young man to “act on instinct,”⁴⁶ utilizing hidden interior knowledge that Luke already possesses. Obi-Wan repeatedly tells Luke to look within for answers, for all Luke needs to know is inside of him already and cannot be found through external means, much like the gnostic understanding of knowledge. Luke is a shining example of the ways in which humans act as mirrors for the dualistic nature of the world. Luke already possesses the “spark” of the Force within him, despite being a material being. He is ignorant of said spark until he looks within himself. Additionally, one could argue that Luke literally has the Force inside of him, as he likely has a high count of midi-chlorians in his blood as a Force-sensitive.

The Force, or more specifically knowledge of the Force, is proven time and again to be redemptive and liberating. One instance of this occurs in *Return of the Jedi*. In the film, Luke uses his strong connection to the Force while confronting Darth Vader and the Emperor. Darth Vader saves Luke, at the cost of his own life. As Darth Vader is dying, Luke says “I’ve got to

⁴⁵ "The Force." Wookieepedia. Accessed April 2019. https://starwars.fandom.com/wiki/The_Force.

⁴⁶ *Star Wars: A New Hope*, George Lucas. 1:01:45.

save you,” to which Darth Vader responds “you already have.”⁴⁷ Here, Luke is able to not only redeem and liberate himself, as the Emperor attempted to turn him to the Dark Side, but his father⁴⁸ as well, through his connection to the Force.⁴⁹

The Force in many ways imitates gnostic conceptions of the universe. Both conceive of the universe as binary, and that humans mirror the dual nature of the universe. Additionally, both believe that knowledge can only be gained through interior means, and is the way in which one can liberate and redeem oneself. These similarities imply that the Force has religious qualities, and may well be defined by gnostics as a religion.

An Exception to the Rule? The Gray Jedi and the Star Wars Expanded Universe

Although not in the official Star Wars canon, there appears to be an exception to the dualistic and functionalist nature of the Star Wars Universe in the Star Wars Expanded Universe. In films and video games such as *Star Wars: Rebels*, *Clone Wars*, and *Star Wars: Knights of the Old Republic I and II*, there appears a new kind of Jedi: Gray Jedi. The qualifications for Gray Jedi are varied, depending upon the source, and the following are the four most common descriptions of Gray Jedi. They are those who “walked the line between the light and dark sides of the Force without surrendering to the dark side;”⁵⁰ “Jedi who distanced themselves from the Jedi High Council and operated outside the structures of the Jedi Code;”⁵¹ Jedi that in any way

⁴⁷ *Star Wars: Return of the Jedi*. Directed by Richard Marquand. 1983. United States: 20th Century Fox, DVD. 2:01:06-2:01:10.

⁴⁸ Darth Vader was formerly Anakin Skywalker, who sired Luke.

⁴⁹ This particular exchange contains a lot of loaded quasi-Christian meaning as well; Luke wants to “save” and redeem people, similar to the idea that through belief in Christ, one’s soul can be saved and redeemed. Luke is definitely a messianic figure, as he saves the rebellion on multiple occasions. See the close reading section for further analysis of a Luke-as-Christ analogy.

⁵⁰ “Gray Jedi.” Wookieepedia. Accessed April 2019.

https://starwars.fandom.com/wiki/Gray_Jedi#cite_note-JATM-4.

⁵¹ Ibid.

disagreed with the Jedi High Council,⁵² Jedi who “consider themselves beholden only to the Force,”⁵³ and cared not for code or strict schools of belief.

The existence of these middle-ground Jedi appear to complicate, if not completely dismiss, the similarities between the Force and the general tendencies of gnosticism. Indeed, they are an exception, and may be argued in as such. However, I offer three reasons as to why the Gray Jedi do not tear apart the connection between the Force and gnosticism; indeed, they may make the connection stronger. First, the Gray Jedi are not canonical, and therefore hold no bearing in an argument strictly about the canonical films and Universe. Second, many hold doubt that Gray Jedi even exist, insisting that they must be categorized as either light or dark. Those who do believe that the Gray Jedi exist often claim that “some Jedi thought that Gray Jedi carried the dark side's influence within them, even if the Gray Jedi did not always realize it.”⁵⁴ This idea is deeply gnostic: the Gray Jedi mirror the duality of the world, holding both the light and a spark of dark within them. Therefore, despite appearing to be a glaring exception to the completely dualistic world of Star Wars, the Gray Jedi reinforce and support the notion that the Force and the world of Star Wars is deeply similar to the gnostic understanding of the universe.

Star Wars: A Close Reading

A close examination of the primary source material—the canonical films, specifically *Star Wars: A New Hope*—gives insight into the many ways in which religious and Christian imagery play a role in the Star Wars Universe. From character arcs analogous to Christian theology to similarities between *Star Wars* characters and religious and Biblical figures, the *Star*

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

Wars franchise is full of religious imagery, serving purposes such as foreshadowing, morality signaling, and showing the audience the religious nature and significance of the Force.

In the beginning of *Star Wars: A New Hope*, large hairy creatures called Banthas appear onscreen, ridden by Tusken. Banthas have massive curved horns, thick and ribbed material curling down and around the sides of the Banthas' heads. This is fairly blatant Devil imagery, signaling to audiences that the creatures associated with Banthas are not on the side of the protagonist; the Tusken are, in fact, not on the side of the film's protagonists, and even attack Luke and strip his ship.⁵⁵

Another example of morality signaling is the similarities between Yoda and yogis.⁵⁶ Yogis are known for being wise, ethical, and living in the wilderness. When Yoda first appears in *Star Wars: The Empire Strikes Back*, he is portrayed as a wizened old Jedi master, living alone in the swamps of Dagobah. Additionally, Yoda is frequently quoted giving counsel to others, supporting what he believes to be ethical no matter the cost.⁵⁷ There are similarities between the yogi belief system and the Force, as well. "In the yogic texts the stated goal of yoga is to discover and become one with the Divine within (Atman)."⁵⁸ The yogi belief that there is a divine spark within people mirrors both the gnostic belief and the Force belief in midi-chlorians. "[Becoming one with the divine] is to be accomplished by becoming attuned to *prana*, the healing life energy which follows the natural laws of the universe."⁵⁹ *Prana* in the yogic belief is,

⁵⁵ *Star Wars: A New Hope*, George Lucas. 0:28:57-0:29:37.

⁵⁶ "Why The Theology of Star Wars Is Deeper Than It Might Seem." On Religion Why The Theology of Star Wars Is Deeper Than It Might Seem Comments. December 24, 2015. Accessed April 2019. <http://www.onreligion.co.uk/the-theology-of-star-wars/>.

Henderson, *Star Wars: The Magic of Myth* 186-187

⁵⁷ "Yoda." Wookieepedia. Accessed April 2019. <https://starwars.fandom.com/wiki/Yoda>.

⁵⁸ Wilson, Stephen R. "Becoming A Yogi: Resocialization and Deconditioning as Conversion Processes." *Sociological Analysis* 45, no. 4 (1984): 301-14. doi:10.2307/3711296, pp. 304.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

for this comparison, equivalent to the Force in the Star Wars Universe, as both are an energy that spans all things. From their common living habits to their beliefs and practices to the similarity in spelling, Yoda of the Star Wars Universe is very similar to a yogi.

One of the most over-the-top examples of religious imagery and morality signaling in the Star Wars Universe is first seen in *Star Wars: The Force Awakens*. Kylo Ren, the films' newest antagonist, sports a red lightsaber with a cross-guard, the first lightsaber to do so. Kylo's lightsaber is an upside-down cross, immediately signaling to audiences—especially in Christian societies such as the United States of America—that he is unequivocally the villain of the story. Despite the fact that the upside-down cross is not *technically* a sign of evil, the symbol has been appropriated in media and popular culture, creating a new meaning in the eyes of the general public.⁶⁰

Instances of religious, specifically Christian, reference appear in dialogue throughout the films. In the second half of *Star Wars: A New Hope*, Princess Leia is rescued by Luke, Han Solo, Chewbacca, C3PO, R2-D2, and Obi-Wan Kenobi. When news of Leia's escape reaches the Empire, all are shocked and confused, save for Darth Vader, who simply states, "Obi-Wan is here. The Force is with him." This statement mirrors one frequently heard in churches all around the world; "God/the Holy Spirit/the Lord be with you," "God is with [him/her/them]," or some variation of this. The Force is likened to a religious force, that is with the faithful and worthy, protecting and guiding them.

Fascinatingly, the most overtly religious character in *Star Wars: A New Hope* is C3PO. The droid is frequently making remarks such as "we're doomed," "we seem to have been made

⁶⁰ "Here's What An Upside Down Cross Really Means." Thought Catalog. October 09, 2018. Accessed April 2019. <https://thoughtcatalog.com/erin-cossetta/2018/04/heres-what-an-upside-down-cross-really-means/>.

to suffer,” and “thank the maker.”⁶¹ The idea of fate, destiny, and predetermination are much on the mind of C3PO. One could perhaps dismiss this, chalking his behavior up to the fact that he is a droid, and *knows* that he was created, which may have a kernel of truth to it. However, one could also make the argument that C3PO is an example of a Christian person: he is created by Anakin Skywalker (the Father), rescued, repaired, and restored by Luke Skywalker (the Son), and surrounded by the Force (the Holy Spirit, in this analogy). Were one watching the Star Wars films without the knowledge that Darth Vader is Luke’s father, this parallel to Christian theology is excellent foreshadowing, especially for audiences from a Christian society.

In all of the Star Wars films, there is a significant amount of overt religious, specifically Christian imagery. These cinematic devices, including the similarity of Yoda to yogis and the glaring imagery of Kylo Ren’s upside-down cross-shaped lightsaber, serve to signal morality, demonstrate the religious nature of the Force, and foreshadow.

Synthesis

As demonstrated through the usage of Geertzian and Durkheimian theory, as well as comparison to common trends in the many sects of gnosticism, the Force functions as a religion within the Star Wars Universe. The Gray Jedi, who appear to contradict the theoretical and practical comparisons, actually support the fact that The Force functions as a religion within the Star Wars Universe. Additionally, there is an abundance of religious imagery throughout the films.

At this point, the reader may be wondering: who cares? Why study religious imagery and themes in a fictional film franchise? What are the broader implications? The religious imagery

⁶¹ *Star Wars: A New Hope*, George Lucas. 0:16:03, 0:09:09, 0:19:45.

and themes, specifically the Christian ones, in *Star Wars* help us see the relationship between religion and popular culture. The fact that so many pieces of science fiction media contain themes of religion as we as humans understand religion implies that the beliefs about religion held by those who create said media are held as facts, things inherent to the nature of religion. Therefore, when creating worlds a long time ago in galaxies far, far away, we project our beliefs on to places, times, and aliens that have no exposure to Earth's understanding of the universe, of G-d, or of the nature of religion. Additionally, the presence of this imagery in *Star Wars* and other science fiction suggests that popular media has the power to recode and reinforce popular and Christian-influenced beliefs about religion and the cosmic battle between good and evil.