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MAY THE FORCE BEWITCH YOU: EVALUATING THE STAR WARS WORLDVIEW

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SYNOPSIS

For nearly forty years, the Star Wars motion picture saga has captivated audiences the world over. With three new films on the horizon, Star Wars remains culturally relevant and iconic. Its music, sounds, visual effects, characters, and extensive merchandising resonate with millions of people. But technical brilliance and commercial success do not always equate with truth. The Star Wars worldview may at first glance appear to support Christian morality, such as the reality of good and evil, the search for meaning and redemption, and the pursuit of virtue. In reality, however, Star Wars is replete with non-Christian worldview concepts, including elements of Gnosticism, Taoism, Hinduism, Buddhism, Eastern meditation, occultism, and moral relativism. Star Wars, for instance, posits a yin-yang balance of opposing powers, which it calls “the Force” — a prominent thread in the films that has much in common with Taoism. Monistic pantheism is another element of the Star Wars movies that, in this case, borrows heavily from Hinduism. Moreover, aspects of the occult are prevalent in the Star Wars films and infuse various discussions and training involving the Force. Occult elements of Star Wars include telepathy, telekinesis, mind reading, and spiritism, to name a few. In addition, when it comes to its epistemology, Star Wars roots knowledge firmly in the realm of subjective feelings, urging viewers with pithy admonitions such as, “Feel, don’t think.” Far from being Christian, the Star Wars worldview is, on multiple levels,

diametrically opposed to Christianity. The films may be entertaining, but the claims they make about faith, reality, knowledge, and morality do not correspond with truth.

A long time ago, in May 1977, filmmaker George Lucas launched a blockbuster movie franchise and global phenomenon with the release of *Star Wars*. Originally comprised of three motion pictures, three more were released beginning in 1999.¹ In late 2015, the films continue with *Star Wars: Episode VII—The Force Awakens*, to be followed by two additional films in 2017 and 2019. The *Star Wars* films have significantly influenced millions of people the world over, and not just children. With stunning special effects, archetypal characters, and epic storylines, *Star Wars* remains a major influence not only in filmmaking but also in areas of merchandising, theme parks, video games, books, television programs, graphic novels, and in philosophy and religion. In 2012, media empire Disney purchased Lucasfilm, including the rights to the *Star Wars* franchise, for \$4 billion, ensuring continued exposure of the *Star Wars* worldview. Nearly forty years after the release of *A New Hope*, the films and their various derivative properties remain an influential global force on the collective human experience. With combined box office totals for six films in excess of \$4.4 billion² and merchandising revenue estimated at \$27 billion,³ *Star Wars* wields considerable influence. This article will evaluate the *Star Wars* worldview, concentrating primarily on its metaphysical views, but also touching on ethics and epistemology.⁴

EVALUATING THE NEW LITERATURE

Some might object to analysis of the *Star Wars* films. After all, they're "just" movies. On one level, we can enjoy the films as entertainment, but in other ways we must respond to the ideas underlying the films, especially given the extent of their reach. Films can have a powerful influence on worldviews—how we see and understand reality. No medium, be it film, art, literature, or music, exists in a vacuum. In short, ideas have consequences.

In addition, film is in many respects the new "literature." The world has largely shifted from an age of print-based exposition to an age of film-based entertainment.⁵ This radical shift requires apologists to adapt, particularly by learning to exegete film. We must learn to apply the skills of hermeneutical interpretation and analysis to film that we are used to applying to print.

But how can we go about evaluating popular culture sensibly?⁶ In *Art and the Bible*, Francis Schaeffer provides four ways of evaluating art: “(1) *technical excellence*, (2) *validity*, (3) *intellectual content, the worldview which comes through* and (4) *the integration of content and vehicle*”⁷ (emphasis in original). There is no doubt that Star Wars pushes technical boundaries. This was especially true in relation to the first three films, which all came before the advent of powerful computer-generated graphics. Instead, George Lucas and his team had to derive creative ways of presenting epic material on the big screen. It is in the area of technical excellence that Star Wars demonstrates *common grace*, meaning that since human beings are created in God’s image, everyone possesses the capacity to contribute positively to the world via exemplary achievements. As such, Star Wars contains examples of superb music, sound effects, visual arts, and more.

Validity in relation to the judgment of art means “whether an artist is honest to himself and to his worldview or whether he makes his art only for money or for the sake of being accepted.”⁸ Applied to filmmaking, has the filmmaker “sold out” in some way or compromised their ideals? Even a cursory study of George Lucas and his creation of *A New Hope* demonstrates his bold commitment to his art, including the philosophical ideas underpinning the story.⁹

Schaeffer also asked if the form of the artistic content is the best fit for conveying the artist’s ideas, specifically looking at “how well the artist has *suited the vehicle to the message*. For those art works which are truly great, there is a correlation between the style and the content. The greatest art fits the vehicle that is being used to the worldview that is being presented.”¹⁰ Given the popularity of motion pictures as an influential contemporary entertainment form, combined with Lucas’s mastery of the cinematic medium, one can conclude that film is indeed the best form for Star Wars.

Finally, what kind of ideas does a work of art present, and are the ideas correct or not? “As far as a Christian is concerned,” says Schaeffer, “the worldview that is shown through a body of art must be seen ultimately in terms of the Scripture. The artist’s worldview is not to be free from the judgment of the Word of God.”¹¹ We must be careful, however, not to dismiss all ideas originating in non-Christian sources. Truth, after all, can be mixed with error. Given the scope of common grace, even an existentialist work of despair, for example, can contribute positively by helping people see their helplessness apart from God, thus driving them to seek meaning.

The remainder of this article will focus on the intellectual content of the Star Wars films, specifically looking at the philosophical and religious ideas, their implications, and how they compare to Christianity. First, let us ask, “Can anything good come from Star Wars?”

A FORCE FOR GOOD?

While some Christians have overly praised Star Wars' benefits,¹² it remains true that there are positive elements in the films. First, heroes in Star Wars often seek wisdom. Luke Skywalker, the archetypal young hero, truly desires to learn and grow in wisdom, seeking instruction from the elderly Jedi Obi-Wan and, later, Yoda. Wisdom is valuable, as Scripture repeatedly states (see Proverbs 8, for example), but our search for wisdom must be tempered with discernment. Second, characters in the Star Wars films often desire to do good. They see difficulties and injustices that they wish to correct, whether it is overthrowing a corrupt empire, freeing slaves, or opposing oppression. Third, characters in the films are determined to combat evil. This is seen in rebel opposition to the villain Darth Vader, as well as by seeking to destroy the planet-obliterating Death Star (*A New Hope*). Fourth, at times characters behave altruistically, sacrificing themselves for others. In *A New Hope*, for example, Obi-Wan risks his life in order to allow his friends to escape, then willingly allows Darth Vader to strike him down. Fifth, the films demonstrate that faith and truth are in some ways a journey that each of us must persevere to complete. In *The Empire Strikes Back*, for example, Luke receives training that requires him to face dark fears as well as make a decision to help his friends, costing him the loss of a hand. As Kierkegaard stated, "Truth is not something you can appropriate easily and quickly...you must be tried, do battle, and suffer if you are to acquire truth for yourself."¹³ Finally, overcoming temptation is viewed positively, especially in reference to those who reject the "dark side" of the Force.

THE STAR WARS WORLDVIEW

The Star Wars worldview is syncretistic. Like the New Age movement of the 1970s, 1980s, and beyond, Star Wars blends a variety of elements from disparate religions and philosophies.¹⁴ Unfortunately, what often occurs when this is attempted is a jumble of incoherent, contradictory ideas. Consequently, Star Wars hardly presents a coherent worldview. There are elements that bind the Star Wars philosophy together—the Force and desire to bring balance to it, for instance—but as a whole, the Star Wars worldview is a blending of ideas, religions, and philosophies. These ideas do not hold together well on their own and certainly do not hold together when mashed together.

What are some of the philosophical and religious threads that weave through the fabric of Star Wars?

- Gnosticism
- Taoism

- Hinduism
- Buddhism
- Meditation
- Occultism

It is beyond the scope of this article to evaluate each of these viewpoints thoroughly. Nevertheless, a brief mention of each, their presentation in Star Wars, and their relevance in relation to Christianity is in order.

Gnosticism. One key aspect of Gnosticism is its view that matter is “bad,” while spirit is “good.” In *The Empire Strikes Back*, Yoda states, “Luminous beings are we, not this crude matter.” In contrast, Christianity does not oppose physical matter. As C. S. Lewis stated, “[God] likes matter. He invented it.”¹⁵ This is why we see the early Christian church responding to forms of Gnosticism, such as in 1 John 1:1: “That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we looked upon and have touched with our hands” (ESV). Christ was not simply a spirit creature seeking to show His followers that flesh is bad, and spirit is good. Rather, Christ truly did come in the flesh—the Incarnation.

Taoism. A Chinese philosophy, one element of Taoism has to do with the dualism of yin and yang, which are “opposing, but, at the same time, balancing and interacting forces within nature.”¹⁶ In *The Phantom Menace*, a discussion about a “chosen one” leads to the question, “You refer to the prophecy of the one who will bring balance to the force?” In *Attack of the Clones*, one character says to Obi-Wan, “If the prophecy is true, your apprentice is the only one who can bring the Force back into balance.” Within the worldview of Star Wars, the Force consists of light and dark sides, but rather than seeing these sides as truly good or bad, the goal of the Jedi is to balance the Force, much like yin and yang. Although Christianity is sometimes accused of holding to dualism, this is false. God and Satan are in conflict, but this is not in any way portrayed in Scripture as dualism or Taoism. God is the all-powerful Creator of the universe and all that is in it, while Satan is a created, finite being.

Hinduism. Hinduism is a broad family of beliefs, allowing for some degree of diversity. However, when it comes to forms of Hinduism that involve nondualistic or monistic pantheism, such as Advaita Vedanta, Star Wars suggests much of this perspective. In monistic pantheism, all is one, and all is permeated by an impersonal energy or force. In

A New Hope, Obi-Wan remarks, “The Force is what gives a Jedi his power. It’s an energy field created by all living things. It surrounds us and penetrates us, it binds the galaxy together.” In *The Empire Strikes Back*, Yoda states, “Life creates it [the Force], makes it grow, its energy surrounds us and binds us...you must feel the Force around you, here between you, me, the tree, the rock, everywhere.” Pantheism is completely foreign to the Christian worldview. Within Christianity, as in Judaism, God is the transcendent Creator who is separate from creation; He acts in the world, but He is not an impersonal energy force flowing through it.

Buddhism. Like other world religions, Buddhism is diverse, but relevant points include the view that spiritual liberation or enlightenment relies on detachment from desire. Jedi in certain respects follow the path of Zen Buddhism, training their minds on the path to enlightenment as they seek to achieve an elevated state (Buddhahood). Much of the training administered by Yoda is rooted in such Buddhist ideals. In *Revenge of the Sith*, we are told, “Train yourself to let go of everything you fear to lose,” thus approximating the Buddhist teaching to avoid attachments.¹⁷

Meditation. Meditation, too, plays a key role in Star Wars—particularly meditation that seeks to clear the mind. In *The Phantom Menace*, Yoda encourages a character to “quiet your mind” in order truly to get in touch with the Force. In Christianity, the central human problem is not attachment or desire but human sin, and the solution is radical repentance and redemption that is available only through Christ, not Buddhist-inspired meditation. Moreover, Christian meditation is not to empty the mind or achieve enlightenment but to focus on God and His truths.

Occultism. Occultism seeks to access or manipulate supernatural or paranormal powers. In Star Wars, occult elements include levitation, telepathy, telekinesis, mind reading, divination, clairvoyance, and contact with ascended masters (spiritism). In passages such as Deuteronomy 18, Scripture forbids occult practices, which rely not on God but on evil powers.

DO WHAT YOU FEEL IS RIGHT

At first glance, the Star Wars films appear to favor a moral universe, especially when one considers the extent various heroes go to thwart evil. However, the foundation of ethics for Star Wars is sand. If the Force is all one, permeating everything, then there is

no room for actual evil or actual good. In *Revenge of the Sith*, one character says, “Only Siths [dark Jedi] deal in absolutes,” suggesting moral relativism. If all is truly one, then there is no room for ethical disagreements. Good and evil are part of the same whole and ethics in such a structure degenerate to relativism.

The epistemology of Star Wars fares no better. In *The Phantom Menace*, a Jedi says, “Feel, don’t think,” which succinctly sums up the Star Wars approach to knowledge. Truth is also relative within Star Wars. In *Return of the Jedi*, Obi-Wan states, “Many of the truths we cling to depend on our point of view.” Prior to this, Obi-Wan justifies a lie by stating, “What I told you was true, from a certain point of view.” Within the framework of Star Wars philosophy, epistemology is largely subjective, as are its ethics. Its ethics are moral relativism or situational ethics, not Christian ethics rooted in God’s transcendent and absolute moral standards.

FORCE AND FAITH

Does Star Wars present Christian themes and provide us with a sort of Christian allegory? No. Many key ideas in the Star Wars films are rooted in non-Christian religion and philosophy. There is no way to reconcile the personal, transcendent God of Christianity with the impersonal, pantheistic Force of Star Wars. Moreover, those who would see the Holy Spirit as equivalent to the Force are theologically confused. The Holy Spirit is the third *person* of the Trinity, not an impersonal “force,” energy, or breath of God. Furthermore, even though Anakin Skywalker is said to be the “chosen one” and of virgin birth, such superficial similarities to Christ are radically different from the nature, purpose, and atoning work of Jesus. As to the dualism of Star Wars, while it is true that Christianity includes elements of good and evil as part of the cosmic struggle recounted in the Bible, the manner in which it is presented is far different than the way it is presented in Star Wars.

Death in the Star Wars universe joins the enlightened with the impersonal Force, but Christianity posits that death unites believers with the personal God of the universe while they retain their individuality. Redemption in Christianity, moreover, is the result of repentance and trust in Christ and His atoning work that God offers via grace, not works. Star Wars offers self-driven enlightenment via the path of the Jedi through what essentially amounts to works. Finally, in *Revenge of the Sith*, we are told that a deceased Jedi “has learned the path to immortality,” suggesting that esoteric knowledge can lead to immortality.

MAY THE FORCE BEWITCH YOU

George Lucas once said, “I remember when I was 10 years old, I asked my mother, ‘If there is only one God, why are there so many religions?’ I’ve been pondering that question ever since, and the conclusion I’ve come to is that all religions are true.”¹⁸ It is no surprise, then, that the Star Wars worldview promotes a syncretism of beliefs that is at odds with the central tenets of Christianity. Moreover, enlightenment is not salvation. Star Wars posits a works-based system of salvation that is self-centered, not Savior-centered. In the religion of the Jedi, individuals are in charge of their own enlightenment. When it comes to questions of truth and knowledge, Christianity calls us to test evidence, using the intellect to understand and critically investigate. Faith is involved, but it is not a blind faith. In contrast, the world of Star Wars encourages individuals to “feel” rather than “think” and to search inside themselves for answers. This is not to say that we should dismiss all intuition, but it should not be our guiding principle of seeking truth.

Finally, we must not allow the technical brilliance and special effects of Star Wars to overpower our understanding or assessment of the worldview the films communicate. High production values do not always equal high truth values. This does not mean we cannot appreciate the films as artistic expressions or enjoy them as entertainment, but it does mean that we cannot overlook or dismiss the confused ideas they present or the influence those ideas can have on viewers.

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NOTES

- 1 This article will address the six major motion pictures in the Star Wars saga, which include the following in order of theatrical release: *Star Wars: Episode IV—A New Hope* (1977); *Star Wars: Episode V—The Empire Strikes Back* (1980); *Star Wars: Episode VI—Return of the Jedi* (1983); *Star Wars: Episode I—The Phantom Menace* (1999); *Star Wars: Episode II—Attack of the Clones* (2002); and *Star Wars: Episode III—Revenge of the Sith* (2005). For the sake of brevity this article will mention specific films by their subtitles and use Star Wars to refer to the entire set of films.
- 2 “Box Office History for Star Wars Movies,” available at <http://www.the-numbers.com/movies/franchise/Star-Wars>.
- 3 “Star Wars Total Franchise Revenue,” available at <http://www.statisticbrain.com/starwars-total-franchise-revenue/>.
- 4 Metaphysics is the branch of philosophy addressing questions about ultimate reality, such as the

existence of God, His nature, and the meaning of life. Epistemology is the branch of philosophy addressing questions about knowledge.

- 5 See, e.g., Robert Velarde, "Film Is the New Literature," available at <http://www.patheos.com/Resources/Additional-Resources/Film-Is-the-New-Literature.html>.
- 6 See, e.g., T. M. Moore, *Redeeming Pop Culture* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P and R Publishing, 2003) and Kenneth A. Myers, *All God's Children and Blue Suede Shoes* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1989).
- 7 Francis A. Schaeffer, *Art and the Bible* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1973), 62.
- 8 *Ibid.*, 63.
- 9 Some would argue that Lucas has since "sold out," compromising his artistic integrity.
- 10 *Ibid.*, 69.
- 11 *Ibid.*, 64.
- 12 See Dick Staub, *Christian Wisdom of the Jedi Masters* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2005); Caleb Grimes, *Star Wars Jesus* (Enumclaw, WA: WinePress Publishing, 2007); and John C. McDowell, *The Gospel according to Star Wars* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2007). For a response to those who claim the original Star Wars trilogy is a Christian allegory, see Norman Geisler and J. Yutaka Amano, *Religion of the Force* (Dallas: Quest, 1983).
- 13 Charles E. Moore, *Provocations: Spiritual Writings of Kierkegaard* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2003), 51.
- 14 While it is true that filmmaker George Lucas was influenced by certain thinkers such as Joseph Campbell and, notably, Campbell's Jungian-influenced work *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, this article will not delve deeply into the biographical details of Lucas; instead it will focus on the six key Star Wars films.
- 15 C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (New York: Macmillan Publishing, 1952), 65.
- 16 Dean C. Halverson, *The Compact Guide to World Religions* (Minneapolis: Bethany House, 1996), 221.
- 17 Irvin Kershner, director of *The Empire Strikes Back*, has stated that he wanted to include Zen Buddhist ideas in the film (Geisler and Amano, 34).
- 18 Bill Moyers, "Of Myth and Men," *Time*, April 26, 1999.