From *Star Wars* to Jediism

The Emergence of Fiction-based Religion

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May the Force Be with You

When Luke Skywalker takes off in his space fighter to attack the Death Star, the seemingly unconquerable imperial space station, Princess Leia wishes him good luck with the words "May the Force be with you." The heroes in *Star Wars* believe that the Force will aid those who combat evil. Those who fight on the side of the Force can overcome even a vastly superior foe—and of course the mission succeeds. In the crucial moment Luke turns off his ship's targeting computer, lets the Force direct his actions, and manages to strike the Death Star at its only weak point. The Force is with him and secures him the victory.

Many *Star Wars* fans playfully greet each other with the phrase "May the Force be with you" and sign their posts on online discussion forums with the abbreviation "MTFBWY." Nevertheless, these fans attribute the Force existence only within the fictional *Star Wars* universe. They do not anticipate that the Force could actually intervene in their own world, the empirical world. By contrast, there is a movement based on *Star Wars* that explicitly distances itself from the mainstream fan culture and in fact does postulate the existence of the Force in the empirical world. The members of Jediism, as this movement is called, not only believe in the Force but also ritually interact with it, mostly through meditation.

The present essay has three aims: (1) to present an overview of the core elements (Force teachings, ritual practices, and legitimization strategies) of Jediism;[1] (2) to compare Jediism with *Star Wars* fan culture and argue that Jediism must be classified as a religion, whereas fan culture must not, because Jediism substitutes ritual and belief for the play

and fascination of fan culture; and (3) to introduce the category "fiction-based religion" and establish Jediism as a member of this subcategory of religion.

Jediism as Religion

Inspired by Steve Bruce, I consider religion to constitute any activity (i.e., cognition, communication, or action) that assumes the existence of transempirical realities (e.g., other worlds, Heaven), supernatural entities with power of action (e.g., gods, spirits), and/or impersonal processes or principles possessed of moral purpose (e.g., karma, *ma'at*).[2] According to this definition, Jediism must be categorized as a religion because its ideas and concerns are formulated with reference to a supernatural power (the Force) and the core of Jediist practice is ritual interaction with the Force (through meditation and, in some cases, prayer and various rites of transition). Jediism is not formally organized into a churchlike institution but is developed, maintained, and transmitted by a network of individuals and groups. Members mostly use the Internet as their medium of communication, but some also meet face to face. They have no physical places of worship, but some Jediists express a wish to build temples in the future.

Fiction-based Religions

Jediism is a new religion. The world premiere of the first *Star Wars* film in 1977 can be taken as its absolute beginning, but not until the rise of mass access to the Internet in the mid-1990s did it develop into a visible, organized, and extensive movement. Jediism is, however, interesting for the study of religion not only because it is a new religion but also because it represents a new form of religion, which I suggest calling "fiction-based religion."[3] In my understanding, a fiction-based religion is a religion that uses fictional texts as its main authoritative, religious texts. That a text is authoritative for a religion means that its members use terminology, beliefs, practices, roles, and/or social organization derived from the authoritative text as a model for their own real-world religion. The term *fiction* refers to a narrative that an author presents without any aspiration to refer to events that have taken place in the real world prior to their enshrinement in a text.[4] In some cases fiction-based religions are grounded in what we can call "fictional religions," that is, religions within fictional narratives, invented by the author and practiced by fictional characters. The Force religion of the Jedi Knights in *Star Wars* is an example of a fictional religion. Jediism, the fiction-based real-world religion, is modeled on the fictional Force religion. Even though the members of Jediism, the Jediists, see *Star Wars* in general as fiction, they consider the theology and practice of the Force religion to be valid in the empirical world.

There are many other examples of (partly) fiction-based religions that all use fictional narratives (science fiction, fantasy, horror) as authoritative texts. One well-known science

fiction example is the neo-pagan movement the Church of All Worlds, which is modeled on the organization of the same name in Robert Heinlein's novel *Stranger in a Strange Land*, from 1961. From the fictional religion in Heinlein's novel, the Church of All Worlds has taken over the water-sharing ritual, polyamory, and the recognition of the divine within all human beings, which they express with the greeting "Thou art God/dess."[5] H. P. Lovecraft's horror story "The Call of Cthulhu," from 1928, and other short stories from his "Cthulhu Mythos" have inspired both Anton Szandor LaVey's Church of Satan and groups of chaos magicians. LaVey explains in *The Satanic Rituals* how one can call upon Cthulhu, Nyarlathotep, and other of Lovecraft's monster gods, and chaos magicians claim to be possessed by these gods, though they still stress their fictionality.[6] A spiritual milieu exists based on J. R. R. Tolkien's fantasy works. Its members believe that Middle-earth is a real place, being either a prehistory to our world or existing on another plane, and communicate ritually with the Valar, the Powers or "gods" of Tolkien's narrative world.[7] Some also believe themselves to be Elves, and in the 1990s the Internet-based Otherkin movement developed out of the Tolkien-inspired Elven community. The Otherkin believe themselves to be nonhumans, such as werewolves, dragons, or angels.[8] Jediism is thus not the only example of a fiction-based religion, but it is probably the largest of its kind and therefore suitable as a case through which to examine more closely this new type of religion.

Star Wars

The Star Wars Narrative

The opening roll-up of all six *Star Wars* movies begins with the same formulaic phrase:[9] "A long time ago in a galaxy far, far away. . . ." This is obviously a transformation of the traditional fairy-tale introduction "Once upon a time in a land far, far away," and *Star Wars* certainly shares a number of traits with fairy tales. The main character and hero, Luke Skywalker, has been raised by foster parents on a desolate farm in the Outer Rim of the galaxy and does not know the truth about his special ancestry and extraordinary powers. The story is full of princesses, noble warriors (Jedi Knights), evil villains, and all kinds of fantastic creatures. When George Lucas, script writer and producer of *Star Wars*, was interviewed around the time of the release of the first movie in 1977, he therefore never referred to his movie as "science fiction" (understood as dystopian anticipation of the future) but always as a "space opera" or "space fantasy." In these terms, *Star Wars* should resemble *Flash Gordon*, not *2001: A Space Odyssey*.

Star Wars is about the battle between good and evil. The peaceful Galactic Republic has become a tyrannical empire, ruled over by a Sith Lord, a kind of evil wizard who can manipulate the Force. A small band of rebels fights for the freedom of the galaxy. Among them is Luke Skywalker, who in the course of the film is initiated into the order of the Jedi Knights,

warrior monks inspired by samurai warriors, Franciscans, and Arthurian knights. The Jedi Knights also use the Force, but only in the service of good. The Force gives the Jedi telepathic and telekinetic abilities and stimulates their perception, cognition, and skill, especially when they use their intuition and let themselves be guided by the Force.

In *A New Hope*, the old Jedi Knight Obi-Wan Kenobi introduces the Force to young Luke Skywalker with the following words: "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."[10] Put briefly, the Force is a nonpersonified divine energy. It takes special training to be able to sense the Force itself, but its effects (levitation, lightning bolts shot from one's fingertips, etc.) are visible to everybody, leaving the reality of the Force unquestionable within the *Star Wars* universe. The existence of the Force is a matter of fact, but its deeper nature remains a mystery into which one can gain (partial) insight only through meditation.

Star Wars *Fandom*

For most fans, *Star Wars* is first and foremost a fairy tale, and fans see the *Star Wars* universe as a fascinating world in which one can playfully immerse oneself. A twenty-year-old woman with the user name Dust from the Danish *Star Wars* fan club skywalker.dk expresses it like this:

> The Jedi, the Force, and the light-sabre battles are probably the things that captivate me the most about the *Star Wars* universe. I have always loved fantasy and love to immerse myself in other worlds or to dream that this boring, commonplace world will turn out to contain something more magical and exciting. I find the idea of a universal Force that binds us all together and gives us supernatural powers deeply fascinating.[11]

Entering the colorful and detailed universe of *Star Wars* is an important aspect of being a fan. Not only do fans like to discuss movies and books, to watch them again and again, and to collect heaps of merchandise and an encyclopedic knowledge of the fictional universe, they also play role-playing games within the *Star Wars* universe, dress up and fight with light sabres, compose their own fan fiction, draw and paint fan art, and so on. They enter the universe, explore it, and expand it.[12]

For many *Star Wars* fans, however, being a fan is not only about entering the fictional world from the empirical world, but also about how elements from the fictional world can enter the empirical world. It is the values of the *Star Wars* narrative, in particular, that are transferred from fictional space to everyday life. These values include an ideal of personal growth, a religious involvement, and a social ethic. The social ethic is emphasized by many fans, who either claim to have changed their ethical views after watching *Star Wars*

or report seeing their own values confirmed in the choices and actions of the *Star Wars* heroes. Will Brooker cites several fans who talk about the ethical impact of *Star Wars* on their lives. One fan formulates it as follows:

> Yoda's theme song calms me from a day and gives me strength to continue helping others in a warm and caring way. He, Obi-Wan, Qui-Gon and Luke are such respectable figures that some of us can't help but aspire to be like them. Sure, we may not be able to lift droids, rocks or X-Wings, but we could "Use the Force" in other ways such as helping, loving, caring and supporting, and be our own personal Jedi.[13]

The four characters named here, Master Yoda, Obi-Wan Kenobi, Qui-Gon Jinn, and Luke Skywalker, are all Jedi Knights. This fan denies that the Force and the supernatural powers of the Jedi have a counterpart in the real world, but he perceives the social ethic of the Jedi ("helping, loving, caring and supporting") as equally valid and important in the real world and in the world of fiction.

Jediism takes its point of departure from the fascination with the Force and the identification with the Jedi Knights as role models that are common in fan culture, although there are, of course, many *Star Wars* fans who are not at all interested in Jedi ethics and Force theology.

"Jedi" as Religious Self-identification

Surprisingly many people are prepared to identify themselves as "Jedi" in a religious context. In the summer of 2009, the *Washington Post* reported that "Jedi" was the tenth most common religious self-identification globally on Facebook.[14] Better known, however, is the "Jedi Census Phenomenon," which has its own entry on Wikipedia. Before the 2001 census in Great Britain, Canada, New Zealand, and Australia, an e-mail circulated urging people to report their religious affiliation as "Jedi." The e-mail was probably a combination of practical joke, a test of the power of e-mail as medium, and political protest against the religious affiliation tick box (even though reporting one's religion was not mandatory). The result was that more than 500,000 people in the four countries reported themselves to be "Jedi." With more than 390,000 self-identified adherents, Jediism emerged as the fourth-largest religion in Great Britain. The largest concentration of Jedi proved, however, to be in New Zealand, where they made up 1.3 percent of the total population.[15] There was no e-mail campaign prior to the following census in 2006, and the number of Jedi dropped dramatically. In New Zealand, for instance, it dropped from 53,715 to 20,262.[16] More remarkable than the fall-off, however, is the fact that so many people continued to state their religious affiliation as "Jedi."

No researcher has attempted to establish how many of the self-identified Jedi Knights on Facebook and in the census really practice a Force-directed spirituality. The president of the Australian Star Wars Appreciation Society estimated in a newspaper interview in

2002, just after the publication of the census results, that of the 70,000 Australian Jedi, 50,000 had identified themselves as Jedi just for fun; 15,000 aimed to "give the government a bit of curry"; and 5,000 "would be hard-core people that would believe the Jedi religion," though for the most part probably only "at a metaphorical level."[17] If we generalize to all countries that participated in the census his approximation that between 5 and 10 percent of self-identified "Jedi" are serious Jediists, we get an estimated 30,000 Jediists in Great Britain, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand combined. To this figure should be added an even greater number in the United States, but so far such figures are pure speculations.

The Mythologization of Star Wars

Star Wars has not achieved its status as myth and cult solely because of its content and its fans. It has also benefited from a process of mythologization orchestrated by film critics, journalists, and George Lucas himself.[18] Though Lucas does not consider himself a Jediist, he has explicitly stated that *Star Wars* can legitimately be viewed as a spiritual resource.

The mythologization process began with the reviews of the second *Star Wars* film, *The Empire Strikes Back*, in 1980. Steven Hart describes the new rhetoric as follows:

> Associate editor [of *Time* magazine] Gerald Clarke, who had praised the original flick for its light-hearted refusal to offer anything like a serious message, now finds "a moral dimension that touches us much more deeply than one-dimensional action adventures can." A sidebar, ponderously headlined "In the Footsteps of Ulysses," cites everything from "The Odyssey" to "Pilgrim's Progress" before concluding that the "*Star Wars*" films "draw from the same deep wells of mythology, the unconscious themes that have always dominated history on the planet."[19]

Since then, Lucas has himself actively participated in the construction of *Star Wars* as a myth. In a famous interview with the journalist Bill Moyers, Lucas explains at length his view of the mythical and religious elements in *Star Wars* and formulates the following programmatic statement:

> I put the Force into the movie in order to awaken a certain kind of spirituality in young people—more a belief in God than a belief in any particular religious system. I wanted to make it so that young people would begin to ask questions about the mystery. . . . I didn't want to invent a religion. I wanted to try to explain in a different way the religions that have already existed. I wanted to express it all. . . . I'm telling an old myth in a new way.[20]

During the interview, Lucas makes three points. First, he considers *Star Wars* to be a "myth" because the narrative carries certain basic values. Second, he asserts that he has

let religion and faith play a central role in *Star Wars* because he deems the authentic human life to be a religious life and because he takes the existence of a divine power for granted: "I think there is a God, no question."[21] Third, he makes clear that even though *Star Wars* is inspired by "real" religions, the movies are fundamentally human-made entertainment and not the result of divine revelation. Therefore, they are unsuitable as the foundation of a religion. When confronted with the fact that young people today draw inspiration for how to live their lives from films, including *Star Wars*, rather than from organized religions, he therefore answers, "Well, I hope that doesn't end up being the course this whole thing takes, because I think there's definitely a place for organized religion. I would hate to find ourselves in a completely secular world where entertainment was passing for some kind of religious experience."[22] According to Lucas, it is desirable for entertainment, including *Star Wars*, to awaken a religious interest, but he sees this interest as no substitute for organized religion.

The Force Religion of the Jedi Knights: The Fictional Religion in Star Wars

Mythic narratives play almost no role in the "Force religion," by which I mean the system of theological teachings, ritual practices, and ethical rules of the Jedi Knights in the *Star Wars* universe.[23] Instead, it focuses on theology, social ethics, and spiritual practice. The sources of this fictional religion are the canonical films and their "extended universe," which comprises official comics, computer games, and more than two hundred novels. The central metaphysical power in the Force religion is, obviously, the Force. In the extended universe, it becomes clear that many different schools have fought over how to understand its true nature. Here I shall briefly touch on just two themes in these theological or, more precisely, dynamological debates. One central theme is the question whether the Force is monistic or dualistic in nature. The Force is usually represented as dualistic, with both a light side (Ashla) and a dark side (Bogan). This dualism is always moral insofar as the light side is good whereas the dark side is evil. The real question concerns the ontological status of the dualism. It is generally agreed that one can either follow the light side and do good or let oneself be seduced by the dark side and work evil. Jedi Masters debate whether a turn to the dark side should be understood as the corruption in an individual of an essentially monistic and good Force, or whether the dark side has its own extra-psychic, cosmological existence. The dominant theology is an intra-psychic dualism (the individual is free to choose between good and evil) encapsulated in a cosmological monism (the Force itself is essentially good). The other important theme is the question of whether the Force is an independent agent. One position views the Force as a passive, dynamistic energy that can be manipulated, whereas according to another viewpoint the Force is a semi-personal, active, and animistic will power with a project of salvation. The second view is implicitly expressed in the common farewell greeting "May the Force be with you."

As a member of the Jedi Order, a Jedi Knight is obliged to live by the Jedi Code. One of the novels summarizes the code in this way:

> Jedi are the guardians of peace in the galaxy.
> Jedi use their powers to defend and to protect.
> Jedi respect all life, in any form.
> Jedi serve others rather than ruling over them, for the good of the galaxy.
> Jedi seek to improve themselves through knowledge and training.[24]

Here an ideal of physical and spiritual self-development is combined with a social commitment to serve, protect, and help others. The last line of the code deserves comment. Jedi Knights are required to acquire knowledge and to train. They have to practice fighting and investigative skills, for the Jedi Order forms a kind of intelligence agency in the Galactic Republic. But through study, meditative contemplation, and guidance by a master, they are also required to gain insight in the Force and learn to interact with it ritually. In doing so they become capable of being guided by the Force and of using it to perform seemingly supernatural acts like clairvoyance, levitation, and the influencing of weaker minds, the so-called "Jedi mind trick."

Jediism: The Fiction-based Religion

Outside the *Star Wars* universe, the fictional Force religion serves as the basis for a loosely organized religious movement that is made up of several small, independent, but networked groups. Although throughout this essay I have used "Jediism" to designate the entire movement and "Jediists" to refer to all its members, several different terms are in use. Some members prefer to name their religion "Jedi Realism" or "Jedi Philosophy" and to self-identify as "True Jedi," "Real Jedi," or "Jedi Realists" (to emphasis the difference between the fictional Jedi and themselves) or simply as "Jedi" (to emphasize their likeness to the fictional Jedi). Jediists use the different terms in order to position themselves in relation to each other, but the particle *Jedi* is used in them all. The ideas and practices of Jediism stem primarily from *Star Wars*, but are also inspired by other religious traditions, such as Christianity and Westernized Buddhism and Taoism.

In April and May 2008 and February 2010, I visited the homepages and discussion forums of seven Jediist groups: the Temple of the Jedi Order, the Jedi Foundation, the Jedi Church, the Jediism Way, the Jedi Sanctuary, the Force Academy, and the Ashla Knights. The Jedi Church is based in New Zealand, the Force Academy in Great Britain, and the rest in the United States. All use the English language, but participants in the online discussions can in principle live anywhere in the world. In my analysis of the homepages, I aimed to answer the following four questions: (1) How does the group categorize itself?

(2) How does the group view the Force? (3) How does the group legitimate the fact that its religion is based on a fictional text? and (4) What are the practices of the group? Based on this source material, I can sketch what a collection of elite Jediists (homepage owners and active online discussants) understand to be the most important Jediist ideas and practices and how they position themselves in relation to fans and more conventional religions. The data collected do not allow me to say anything conclusive about whether common group members (let alone solitary Jediists) share these points of view or anything about their social backgrounds. Since I used only online sources, my knowledge of offline practices was limited. With these reservations in mind, let me present a sketch of Jediism as a religion in the empirical world.[25]

Dissociation from Fandom and Self-identification as "Religion" or "Spirituality"

Jediists describe the *Star Wars* films as "wonderful,"[26] and they display an extensive knowledge of the *Star Wars* universe in their discussions—traits that normally characterize fans. Nevertheless, they find it imperative to distance themselves from general *Star Wars* fandom and to emphasize their own seriousness and sincerity in opposition to the playful and ironic fans. Accordingly, interested visitors on the Jedi Sanctuary site are addressed as follows: "Some of you might think that the Jedi Sanctuary is like a SW fan club, or just a joke. It's not. It's a real path that we follow, and we take it seriously. When we say, 'May the Force be with you,' we believe it and mean it."[27]

In opposition to the category "fan club," three of the seven groups I have analyzed define Jediism as a "religion" (or "church"). The Jedi Church does not speak of Jediism, but simply of "the Jedi religion,"[28] and the Temple of the Jedi Order considers Jediism "a real living, breathing religion."[29] Both groups are legally authorized to perform marriages, and since December 14, 2005, the Temple of the Jedi Order has been recognized as a nonprofit religious and educational corporation under Texas law, granting members the right to deduct contributions from their tax bill.[30] The Temple of the Jedi Order clearly considers a high degree of institutionalization and official recognition as a prerequisite for counting as a real religion. The Jedi Church and the Jediism Way, by contrast, see no problem in combining self-description as religion/church with dissociation from the dogmatic and collective aspects of institutionalized religion. The former stresses that the "Jedi church has no official doctrine or scripture,"[31] and the Jediism Way explains that it is a religion because of its members' shared belief in the Force despite the absence of collective rituals.[32]

In the other four groups, Jediism is more often referred to as a "spirituality," "philosophy," "path," or "way," and these terms are all used in opposition to "religion" understood as a collective and institutionalized (and therefore inhibited and alienated) engagement with the divine. As one Jediist formulates it in a post on the Jedi Sanctuary's forum, Jediism is a spirituality and not a religion because Jediism is not "the unthinking

following of dogma."[33] Later in the same thread, one of the leaders of the group adds, "I don't consider the Jedi Path a religion, as far as traditional religions are viewed. When I think of religion, I think of an organized set of rituals, public worship conducted according to certain rules, incense burning, religious symbols, group prayers, etc. . . . I think Jedi believe in a more intimate connection to the Force than what organized religion offers."[34] These groups understand Jediism as an essentially individualistic, free, authentic, and mystical spirituality.

Teachings about the Force

Whether Jediist groups define Jediism as religion or spirituality, they do so with reference to their belief in the Force—even though different groups understand the Force differently. These dynamological differences stem partly from the fact that the individual groups typically stress one of the two Force conceptions in *Star Wars*, the dynamistic or the animistic, and partly from their inspiration from other religions.

The four self-identified "spiritual" groups, the Ashla Knights, the Force Academy, the Jedi Sanctuary, and the Jedi Foundation, are inspired by Eastern religions and holistic spirituality ("New Age") in addition to *Star Wars*. These groups all tend to view the Force in dynamistic terms. For them the Force is thus a vitalistic power or life energy. The Force Academy, the Ashla Knights, and the Jedi Sanctuary compare the Force to Eastern concepts like *qi* and *prana* and observe similarities between their own practice and taiji, aikido, and zen.[35] The Jedi Foundation believes the Force to be "essentially a 'by-product' of life—a side effect, if you will, yet symbiotic,"[36] and considers "the study of science and other beliefs and practices on energy" as different paths to knowledge of the Force.[37]

The three self-identified "religious" groups view the Force in *animistic* terms as an independent agent, sometimes interpreting the Force through a more or less Christian lens as a kind of Holy Spirit. The Jediism Way declares, "We believe the guidance of the Force will bring us to a course of right action," but still stresses that the Force is no person.[38] The Temple of the Jedi Order has a similar vision and refers to the Force as an active "living Force."[39] The Jedi Church is open to both dynamistic and animistic understandings of the Force.[40]

The Relation to Star Wars

As we have seen, the groups' self-identification as religion or spirituality corresponds with their conception of the Force as either a semi-personified agent or an impersonal energy. Along another axis, the seven Jediists groups can be divided into two groups depending on whether they seek to explicitly affirm that their spirituality is based on *Star Wars* or whether they dissociate themselves from *Star Wars* as a means of legitimation.

Three groups—the Jedi Sanctuary, the Jediism Way, and the Jedi Foundation—all stress that their ideas and practices come from *Star Wars*. The Jediism Way simply understands "the community of Jediism" as "those who connected with the stories in Star Wars, share the belief in an open concept of divine power known as 'the Force' . . . [and aspire to live their] lives similarly to that which they connected with in these tales."[41] The Jedi Foundation joins in with the following statement:

> Jedi [Jediists] strive to emulate those [Jedi Knights] seen in the movies, but we are aware of the differences from fiction to reality. This site takes a lot of [its] views from three main sources, *The Star Wars Power of the Jedi Sourcebook* [a source book for the *Star Wars* role-playing game], The *Jedi Apprentice* series [three novels that tell of Luke Skywalker's reinstigation of the Jedi Order after the movie storyline], and the Movies. We use these as guides, to explore, learn from and more importantly expand from. As *Star Wars* Jedi are what inspired us, it is what we chose to look towards.[42]

The members of the Jediism Way and the Jedi Foundation feel no need to legitimate and defend the fact that Jediism is based on the fictional *Star Wars* movies, but the Jedi Sanctuary refers to Joseph Campbell, who has supposedly said, "I've heard youngsters use some of George Lucas's terms—'The Force' and 'The dark side.' So it must be hitting somewhere. It's a good sound teaching, I would say."[43] The quote is regarded as Campbell's acknowledgment of *Star Wars*' status as a myth and thus by implication as his recognition of Jediism as a religion/spirituality.

In all seven groups, but strongest in the Temple of the Jedi Order, the Jedi Church, the Ashla Knights, and the Force Academy, one encounters a contrasting strategy, namely, disassociation from *Star Wars* and the claim that the *real* source of inspiration for Jediism is not *Star Wars* itself but the religions that inspired George Lucas to make it. The Ashla Knights and the Force Academy claim to build on "real world philosophies and influences" or "life force philosophies,"[44] namely, different forms of Eastern philosophy, religion, and martial arts. The Jedi Church and the Temple of the Jedi Order claim to base themselves not only on Eastern religion but on universal truths shared by all religions:

> The Jedi Church makes no denial that its name and terminology originate from a fictitious past, but the concepts and ideals that are identified by Jedi followers are known for their innate truth. . . . The Jedi religion . . . existed before a popular movie gave it a name, and now that it has a name, people all over the world can share their experiences of the Jedi religion, here in the Jedi Church.[45]

> Jediism is a syncretistic religion—a faith involving elements from two or more religions including Taoism, Shintoism, Buddhism, Christianity, Mysticism, and many other Religions' universal truths and a combination of martial arts and the Code of

Chivalry. These philosophies [the different religions] are the heart of Jediism; not the wonderful Star Wars movies themselves except to serve as parables.[46]

Because the Temple of the Jedi Order equates Jediism with the true essence of all religion as such, Jediism can be seen as ancient, and the line of "Masters of Jediism" can count "Buddha, Jesus, LaoTsu, St. Francis of Assisi, Gandhi, Martin Luther King, and so many others."[47]

In Table 1, I have plotted the seven groups into a matrix with self-identification/dynamology on one axis and the place of *Star Wars* in their legitimation strategy on the other. Groups that are no longer active in September 2012 are marked by italics. It would seem that the combination of dissociation from *Star Wars* and "religious" Jediism makes for the "fittest" form of Jediism, or at least for the most stable Jediist communities.

	"Spiritual"/dynamistic	*"Religious"/animist*
affirmative toward *Star Wars*	Jedi Foundation *Jedi Sanctuary*	Jediism Way
dissociative from *Star Wars*	Ashla Knights *Force Academy*	Jedi Church Temple of the Jedi Order

Practice and Ethics

All Jediist groups emphasize physical and spiritual self-development, but this aspect is particularly dominant in the Jediism Way, the Jedi Sanctuary, the Jedi Foundation, and the Ashla Knights. As the leader of the Jediism Way formulates it, "I don't pray to the Force or worship it every day in the traditional sense, but I meditate and do other things [to] strengthen my connection to it every day!!"[48] Similarly, the Jedi Sanctuary emphasizes that the group does not have rituals, but instead aims to "discuss all aspects of being a Jedi, fitness, meditation, conflict resolution, negotiation, staying positive, making good decisions, having healthy relationships, trusting in the Force, and personal growth."[49]

The Ashla Knights has a comparable vision,[50] and the Jedi Foundation focuses on:

Physical Well-Being (diet, exercise, and practical self-defense), Mental Well-Being (stress-relief, conflict resolution, and learning new subjects such as different philosophies that exist), and Spiritual Well-Being (meditation, self-awareness and self-honesty, learning about the Force). The Jedi work towards self-betterment.[51]

The homepage for the Jedi Church gives no information about the practice of the group, and in the Force Academy the practice depends on which "path" the member belongs to—whether he or she is a "Light Jedi," "Dark Jedi," or "Shadow Jedi."

While some groups deny that social ethics founded on the idea of charity should have anything to do with Jediism (e.g., the Jedi Foundation),[52] others see no contradiction between the ideals of self-development and charity (e.g., the Jedi Sanctuary).[53] In the Temple of the Jedi Order, which downplays the self-development aspect, it is emphasized that "love and compassion are central to our lives. We must love each other as we love ourselves."[54]

A social ethics formulated in terms of charity is not the **only loa**n from Christianity in the Temple of the Jedi Order. We are also told that Jediists "**believe** in the eternal life,"[55] and the homepage contains a modified version of one of Francis of Assisi's prayers under the title "Jedi Creed."[56] One of the functions of the forum is that members can present personal problems and ask other members **to pray fo**r them. Such calls for intercessory prayer get answers like "I will keep you in my **thoughts** and meditations."[57] The group also has a clergy and a "Clergy Ceremonies and Rituals Committee" that is responsible for the development of "the Temple of the Jedi Order Clergy Handbook," with rituals for "baptisms, naming, weddings, and funerals."[58] The Temple of the Jedi Order is thus clearly the Jediist group that to the largest extent models itself on a conventional religion (denominational Christianity), which entails institutionalization, public recognition, and the development of collective rituals.

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We have seen that *Star Wars* includes a fictional religion, the Force religion of the Jedi Knights, and that both *Star Wars* fans and Jediists are interested in the dynamology, practice, and ethics of this fictional religion and see parallels between the *Star Wars* universe and the empirical world. On these grounds, and using a broad, functionalistic definition of religion, John Lyden has argued that both *Star Wars* itself (as a film conveying values) and *Star Wars* fandom (as a community sharing a "canonical" myth) constitute religious phenomena.[59] Such a conclusion is confusing and misleading, however, for it obscures real differences between *Star Wars* fandom and Jediism, differences that justify labeling the latter, but not the former, as religion according to a substantive definition.

For fans the *Star Wars* universe is first and foremost a fascinating place that one can playfully enter and leave again. Many fans see such visits to the *Star Wars* universe as inspiring and edifying because *Star Wars* confirms basic values in their own world. Jediists differ from mainstream fans by claiming that not only the ethics of the Jedi Knights, but also their dynamology and religious practice, are valid models for real world religious activity. Despite disagreements over self-identification, dynamology, and legitimization strategies, Jediists agree on two things: first, that a divine power guarantees the order of existence and that this power is the Force; and second, that being a Jediist is defined by belief in and ritual interaction with this Force through meditation and sometimes additional ritual techniques. The fictional religion of the Jedi Knights, which is merely an object

for play within fan culture, is here transformed into a real religion, Jediism. Despite the facts that some groups distance themselves from *Star Wars* in an attempt to legitimate Jediism as a "real" religion and that all Jediist groups to a smaller or larger extent integrate ideas and practices from other religions, the Force religion from *Star Wars* remains the main source of inspiration and terminology for Jediism. Because its main authoritative text is a fictional narrative, Jediism can therefore be categorized as a fiction-based religion.

Jediism and other fiction-based religions constitute the institutionalized tip of a much larger iceberg of religious ideas and practices created and maintained by popular culture.[60] Popular cultural narratives with religious themes or embedded fictional religions—narratives such as *Star Wars, The Lord of the Rings, Battlestar Galactica, Buffy the Vampire Slayer, The X-Files,* and *Discworld*—are today very important sources of religious knowledge and edification for many (especially young) people. Just as *Star Wars* mixes material from the religious past—from Christianity and Eastern religions—other popular cultural narratives recombine and revitalize elements from both organized religion and folk belief. By influencing the religious beliefs and practices of their readers and viewers, these narratives contribute to the transmission and transformation of the religious past into a fiction-mediated religious future.

1695), 2–3; compare Locke, *A Paraphrase and Notes on the Epistles of St. Paul*, ed. A. W. Wainwright (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987), 103–16.

23. John Toland, *Christianity Not Mysterious* (London: Buckley, 1696), 115.

24. Martin Luther, *Werke* (Weimar: Bohiau, 1883–1980), 16:69.

25. Susan Brigden, *London and the Reformation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), 91–92, 307–8.

26. Perkin Walker, *The Decline of Hell* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1964).

27. Jean Delumeau, *Une histoire de paradis* (Paris: Fayard, 1992), esp. 181–227.

28. Guido Morpurgo-Tagliabue, *I processi di Galileo e l'epistemologia* (Milan: Comunità, 1963); Richard J. Blackwell, *Galileo, Bellarmine, and the Bible* (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1991).

29. Hooker, *Laws*, 3.10.7, 3.10.9 (1:331, 355).

30. David Freeberg, *The Power of Images* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989); Serge Gruzinski, *La guerre des images* (Paris: Fayard, 1989).

31. Giovanni Andrea Gilio, *Due dialoghi* (Camerino: Gioioso, 1564), 30–33.

32. José de Siguenza, *La fundación del monasterio de el Escorial* (1605; Madrid: Turner, 1988), 262; trans. in Jonathan Brown, *The Golden Age of Painting in Spain* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1991), 63.

33. Terisio Pignatti, *Paolo Veronese: Convito in casa di Lévi* (Venice: Arsenale, 1986), 9–13.

34. Victor Baroni, *La Contre-Réforme devant la Bible* (1943; Geneva: Siatkin, 1986).

35. Jacques Bossuet, *Histoire des variations des églises Protestantes* (Paris: Veuve Cramoisy, 1688); Pierre Jurieu, *Accomplissement des prophéties* (Rotterdam: Archer, 1686).

36. Claude de Vert, "Lettre," in his *Explication des cérémonies de la Messe* (1703–13; Farnborough: Gregg, 1970), 4:347–82.

37. Ibid., 1:303, 2:xlvii.

38. Ibid., 2:xxviiff.

39. Ibid., 4:50.

40. Ibid., 1:287, 294.

41. De Vert, "Lettre," 1:213n.

42. Henry Phillips, *The Theatre and Its Critics in Seventeenth-Century France* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980), esp. 72–86.

43. Pierre Lebrun, *Discours*, new ed. (Paris: Veuve de Laulne, 1731), 189.

44. Pierre Lebrun, *Explication littérale, historique et dogmatique des prières et des cérémonies de la Messe* (1726; Farnborough: Gregg, 1970); l:xv, xviii–xix.

45. See J. Lebrun, "Sens et portée du retour aux origines dans l'oeuvre de Richard Simon," *17e siècle* 33 (1981): 185–98.

46. Ibid., 1:xxii–xxiii, xxxvii.

47. Lebrun, *Explication littérale*, 1:xxii–xxiii.

48. Ibid., 1:xxiii–xxvii.

49. Paul Ricoeur, "Structure et herméneutique," *Esprit* 31 (1963): 596–627, with reply by Lévi-Strauss.

19. From *Star Wars* to Jediism: The Emergence of Fiction-based Religion

Markus Altena Davidsen

1. Jediism has received some scholarly attention, but earlier studies have focused on the "Jedi Census Phenomenon" of 2001 (see the section "'Jedi' as Religious Self-identification" in this essay) rather than on organized Jediism; see Adam Possamai, "Alternative Spiritualities, New Religious Movements and Jediism in Australia," *Australian Religion Studies Review* 16, no. 2 (2003): 69–86; Possamai, *Religion and Popular Culture: A Hyper-real Testament* (Brussels: P.I.E.–Peter Lang, 2005), 72–76; Jennifer Porter, "'I Am a Jedi': *Star Wars* Fandom, Religious Belief and the 2001 Census," in *Finding the Force of the "Star Wars" Franchise: Fans, Merchandise and Critics*, ed. Matthew Wilhelm Kapell and John Shelton Lawrence (New York: Peter Lang, 2006), 95–112. Readers might want to compare the present essay with Debra McCormick's treatment of Jediism in "The Sanctification of *Star Wars*: From Fans to Followers," in *Handbook of Hyper-real Religions*, ed. Adam Possamai (Leiden: Brill, 2012), 165–84; see also Markus Davidsen, "Jediism: A Convergence of *Star Wars* Fan Culture and Salad Bar Spirituality," *De Filosoof* 51 (2011): 24.

2. Bruce defines religion as "beliefs, actions and institutions which assume the existence of supernatural entities with powers of action, or impersonal powers or processes possessed of moral purpose"; see Steve Bruce, "Defining Religion: A Practical Response," *International Review of Sociology: Revue Internationale de Sociologie* 21, no. 1 (2011): 112.

3. Adam Possamai speaks about "hyper-real religions," with reference to Jean Baudrillard's concept of the hyper-real. For Possamai, new religions based on fiction are "hyper-real" because they attribute the status of reality to a virtual that usurps the empirically real. So far as I can see, hyper-reality in this sense is a common feature of all religions. I therefore prefer the more descriptive term *fiction-based religion*; cf. Possamai, *Religion and Popular Culture*, and Adam Possamai, "Yoda Goes to Glastonbury: An Introduction to Hyper-real Religions," in *Handbook of Hyper-real Religions*, ed. Adam Possamai (Leiden: Brill, 2012), 1–21.

4. This understanding of fiction as being dependent on the author's intention of (partial) nonreference follows Dorrit Cohn, *The Distinction of Fiction* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999), 12.

5. See Carole M. Cusack, *Invented Religions: Imagination, Fiction and Faith* (Farnham, UK: Ashgate, 2010), 53–82.

6. Anton Szandor LaVey, *The Satanic Rituals: Companion to The Satanic Bible* (New York: Avon, 1972), 173–201. On chaos magicians and Lovecraft, see Wouter Hanegraaff, "Fiction in the Desert of the Real: Lovecraft's Cthulhu Mythos," *Aries* 7 (2007): 105.

7. See Markus Altena Davidsen, "The Spiritual Milieu Based on J. R. R. Tolkien's Literary Mythology," in *Handbook of Hyper-real Religions*, ed. Adam Possamai (Leiden: Brill, 2012), 185–204.

8. See Danielle Kirby, "From Pulp Fiction to Revealed Text: A Study of the Role of the Text in the Otherkin Community," in *Exploring Religion and the Sacred in the Media Age*, ed. Christopher Deacy and Elisabeth Arweck (Farnham, UK: Ashgate, 2009), 141–54; Kirby, "Alternative Worlds: Metaphysical Questing and Virtual Community Amongst the Otherkin," in *Handbook of Hyper-real Religions*, ed. Adam Possamai (Leiden: Brill, 2012), 129–40; Joseph Laycock, "'We Are Spirits of Another Sort': Ontological Rebellion and Religious Dimensions," *Nova Religio: The Journal of Alternative and Emergent Religions* 15, no. 3 (2012): 65–90. Many new religious movements that are not, strictly speaking, fiction-based are still inspired by trends in fictional literature. This is especially clear in the well-documented influence of fantasy literature on all strands of the neo-pagan movement (witchcraft, heathenry, the goddess movement, etc.); see, e.g., Graham Harvey, "Discworld and Otherworld: The Imaginative Use of Fantasy Literature among Pagans," in *Popular Spiritualities: The Politics of Contemporary Enchantment*, ed. Lynne Hume and Kathleen McPhillips (Aldershot: Ashgate 2006), 41–52. For more examples of new religions inspired by or based on fiction, see Adam Possamai, ed., *Handbook of Hyper-real Religions* (Leiden: Brill, 2012).

9. The corpus of *Star Wars* texts (films, novels, computer games, etc.) is enormous, but the core is the six "canonical" movies, which were all written and produced (but not all directed) by George Lucas. The six movies comprise two relatively independent trilogies. The storyline in the second, "prequel" trilogy takes place before the events in the "original" trilogy. In order of production, the canonical movies are: *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).

10. George Lucas, *Star Wars Episode IV: A New Hope*, Lucasfilm, Ltd., 1977.

11. Dust, personal e-mail, May 22, 2008; translated from Danish.

12. The active, "poaching" character of fandom, as opposed to earlier stereotypes of fans as passive consumers, has been acknowledged since Henry Jenkins, *Textual Poachers: Television Fans and Participatory Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1992). The playful aspect of fan cultures in general is emphasized in fan research, especially by scholars who are themselves fans; see, e.g., Matt Hills, *Fan Cultures* (London: Routledge, 2002), chap. 4.

13. Will Brooker, *Using the Force: Creativity, Community and "Star Wars" Fans* (New York: Continuum, 2002), 6.

14. The ten most common self-identifications were Christian, Islam, Atheist, Agnostic, Buddhist, Hindu, Jewish, Spiritual, Sikh, and Jedi. In the category "Christian" were included the following self-identifications: Catholic, Protestant, Episcopalian, Presbyterian, Methodist, LDS, and Mormon; William Wan, "Soul-searching on Facebook," *Washington Post*, August 30, 2009, available at http://www.washingtonpost.com; accessed September 2, 2012.

15. Porter, "I Am a Jedi," 96–98.

16. Jedi Church: Census, http://www.jedichurch.org. In the menu "Learn," choose "News/Videos." Choose the news item "NZ Census Capitulates—Jedi Stats for New Zealand 2006 Census"; accessed September 2, 2012.

17. Agence France-Presse, "Jedi Census Ploy a Success," *The Australian IT*, August 28, 2002, cited in Possamai, *Religion and Popular Culture*, 72–73.

18. George Lucas's inspiration by Joseph Campbell, especially *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, is an issue unto itself; see John Shelton Lawrence, "Joseph Campbell, George Lucas, and the Monomyth," in *Finding the Force of the "Star Wars" Franchise: Fans, Merchandise and Critics*, ed. Matthew Wilhelm Kapell and John Shelton Lawrence (New York: Peter Lang, 2006), 21–33.

19. Steven Hart, *A Galactic Gasbag*, 2002, http://www.salon.com/2002/04/10/lucas_5/; accessed September 2, 2012.

20. Bill Moyers, "Of Myth and Men: A Conversation Between Bill Moyers and George Lucas about the Meaning of the Force and the True Theology of *Star Wars*," *Time*, April 26, 1999.

21. Ibid.

22. Ibid.

23. This section draws on the articles "Force," "The Light Side," "The Dark Side," "Jedi Code," and "Jedi Order" from *Wookieepedia*, the *Star Wars* wikia. *Wookieepedia*, http://www.starwars.wikia.com; accessed March 5, 2009.

24. *Wookieepedia*, "Jedi Code"; accessed March 5, 2009.

25. I follow the standard practice in the study of social groups on the Internet of quoting anonymously from discussion forums, though with full reference to homepages; see, e.g., Storm A. King, "Researching Internet Communities: Proposed Ethical Guidelines for Reporting of the Results," *Information Society* 12, no. 2 (1996): 119–27. However, I do quote with full reference to sections of forums with an official character, such as the group's FAQ.

26. Temple of the Jedi Order: Doctrine, http://www.templeofthejediorder.org/home/doctrine; accessed September 2, 2012.

27. Jedi Sanctuary: Fan club, http://www.jedisanctuary.org/articles/index.php?page=not-a-fan-club; accessed May 2008; no longer available.

28. Jedi Church: Doctrine, http://www.jedichurch.org/jedi-doctrine.html; accessed September 2, 2012.

29. Temple of the Jedi Order: Main, http://www.templeofthejediorder.org; accessed February 3, 2010; the quote is no longer available.

30. Ibid.; accessed September 2, 2012.

31. Jedi Church: Doctrine.

32. Jediism Way: Welcome, http://www.thejediismway.org/index.php/topic,1.0.html; accessed February 3, 2010; no longer available.

33. The forum was located at Jedi Sanctuary, http://www.jedisanctuary.org; accessed April 2008; no longer available.

34. Ibid.

35. Force Academy: Force, http://www.forceacademy.com/theforce_menu.htm; accessed February 3, 2010; no longer available; Ashla Knights: Force, http://www.ashlaknights.net, subpage "So you want to be a Jedi"; accessed June 9, 2009; no longer available; and Jedi Sanctuary: Force, http://www.jedisanctuary.org/pages/force/origin-of-force.htm; accessed February 3, 2010; no longer available.

36. Jedi Foundation: FAQ, http://www.jediacademyonline.com/faq.html; accessed September 3, 2012.

37. Jedi Foundation: Main, http://www.jediacademyonline.com; accessed June 9, 2009; the quote is no longer available.

38. Jediism Way: About, http://www.thejediismway.org/index.php/topic,35.0.html; accessed February 3, 2010; no longer available.

39. Temple of the Jedi Order: Main; accessed February 3, 2010; quote no longer available.

40. Jedi Church: Doctrine.

41. Jediism Way: Welcome.

42. Jedi Foundation: FAQ.

43. Jedi Sanctuary: Campbell, http://www.jedisanctuary.org/pages/philo/joseph-campbell.htm; accessed February 3, 2010; no longer available.

44. Ashla Knights: Force; Force Academy: Force.

45. Jedi Church: Doctrine.

46. Temple of the Jedi Order: Doctrine.

47. Ibid.

48. Jediism Way: About.

49. Jedi Sanctuary: Welcome, http://www.jedisanctuary.org/pages/about/welcome.htm; accessed February 3, 2010; no longer available.

50. Ashla Knights: Practice, http://www.ashlaknights.net. Choose "Academy" in the top menu and then "Practice of Ashla" in the right menu; accessed February 3, 2010.

51. Jedi Foundation: Main; accessed June 9, 2009; the quote is no longer available.

52. Jedi Foundation: Circle, http://www.jediacademyonline.com/jcircle.html; accessed September 3, 2012.

53. Jedi Sanctuary: Teachings, http://www.jedisanctuary.org/pages/teachings/teachings-from-starwars-p2.htm; accessed February 3, 2010; no longer available.

54. Temple of the Jedi Order: Doctrine.

55. Ibid.

56. Ibid.

57. The forum is located at Temple of the Jedi Order, http://www.templeofthejediorder.org; accessed April 2008.

58. Temple of the Jedi Order: Clergy, http://www.templeofthejediorder.org. In the forum section "Committees," choose the section "Ceremonies and Rituals" and then the thread "Clergy Ceremonies and Rituals Committee"; accessed February 3, 2010.

59. On *Star Wars* as religion, see John C. Lyden, *Film as Religion: Myths, Morals, and Rituals* (New York: New York University Press, 2003), 216–25. On *Star Wars* fandom as religion, see John C. Lyden, "Whose Film Is It, Anyway? Canonicity and Authority in *Star Wars* Fandom," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 80, no. 3 (2012): 775–86. Lyden's identification of *Star Wars* fandom as religion continues a tradition initiated by Michael Jindra; see Jindra, "Star Trek Fandom as a Religious Phenomenon," *Sociology of Religion* 55, no. 1 (1994): 27–51.

60. See, e.g., Christopher Partridge, *The Re-enchantment of the West: Alternative Spiritualities, Sacralization, Popular Culture and Occulture*, vol. 1 (London: T. & T. Clark, 2004), chap. 6.

20. The Words of the Martyr: Media, Martyrdom, and the Construction of a Community

Pieter Nanninga

1. Some of the websites announcing the release of the video and offering links to online storage sites included: http://www.alboraq.info/showthread.php?t=51850; www.al-faloja.info/vb/showthread.php?t=25136; http://www.al-yemen.org/vb/showthread.php?t=266588; www.clearinghouse.infovlad.net/showthread.php?t=14976; http://hafsallah.multiply.com/journal/item/199; http://www.mu7ahideen.wordpress.com/2008/07/11/as-sahab-media-jihad-dan-kesyahidan/; and http://www.unitethemuslims.com/?p=2467. Since July 2008 some of these websites have shut down entirely, and by now probably all video files have been removed from the storage sites. I own a copy of the video *Jihad and Martyrdom*.

2. Cf. Ariel Merari, "Social, Organizational and Psychological Factors in Suicide Terrorism," in *Root Causes of Terrorism: Myths, Reality and Ways Forward*, ed. Tore Bjørgo (London: Routledge, 2005), 80; Assaf Moghadam, "Palestinian Suicide Terrorism in the Second Intifada: Motivations and Organizational Aspects," *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 26 (2003): 85; Ami Pedahzur, *Suicide Terrorism* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2005), 178–79.

3. Cf. Robert A. Pape, *Dying to Win: The Strategic Logic of Suicide Terrorism* (New York: Random House, 2005), 81–82; Pedahzur, *Suicide Terrorism*, 179.

4. Probably, his attack took place on June 28, 2007; see CBS News, "New Al Sahab video in Honor of Slain Al Qaeda Commander," July 9, 2008, at http://www.cbsnews.com/blogs/2008/07/08/monitor/entry4240518.shtml; ISAF News Release, "Suicide Bomber Kills 1 Afghan Civilian in Paktika," June 28, 2007, at http://www.nato.int/isaf/docu/pressreleases/2007/06-june/pr070628-487.html.

5. Martha Crenshaw, "The Logic of Terrorism: Terrorist Behavior as a Product of Strategic Choice," in *Origins of Terrorism: Psychologies, Ideologies, Theologies, State of Mind*, ed. Walter Reich (Washington, D.C.: Woodrow Wilson Center Press, 1998), 7–24.

6. Pedahzur, *Suicide Terrorism*, 27.