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The Faith vs. the Force: The Mythology of 'Star Wars'

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That new world of myth has been a topic of debate and interest ever since 1977, when Star Wars first warped itself into our national consciousness. The release of the blockbuster Star Wars trilogy on DVD will introduce a new generation to this myth cycle that once dominated the big screen—but will these new viewers understand the worldview issues at stake?

Producer George Lucas has offered different and contradictory messages about his own agenda in the making of the Star Wars series. Explaining the blockbusting success of the first movie, Lucas insisted that his only purpose was to make a "fun" escapist movie, "whose only purpose was to give pleasure."

Nevertheless, the mythological elements in these movies are hard to deny, and Lucas has more recently claimed a higher purpose than entertainment in his movie making. "I see Star Wars as taking all the issues that religion represents and trying to distill them down into a more modern and easily accessible construct—that there is a greater mystery out there," he told a fascinated Bill Moyers, who interviewed Lucas for TIME.

The Moyers interview reveals a great deal about himself as well as his subject, for both Moyers and Lucas seem absolutely agog over the power of myth and convinced that modern secular Americans need new myths to replace the tired old "myths" of religion, including Christianity. "Religion is basically a container for faith. And faith in our culture . . . what one might describe as a supernatural, or the things we can't explain—is a very important part of what allows us to remain stable, remain balanced."

Lucas reveals that he believes that "all religions are true," though we cannot know who or what God is. In writing Star Wars, Lucas "had to come up with a whole cosmology," and chose to imitate an existing belief system rather than to invent a new religion. In the process he borrowed freely from ancient Gnosticism, Buddhism, and certain elements of Christianity. "I wanted to express it all," he explained.

The mythological structure of Star Wars is primarily indebted to the Eastern religions, though Americans are more likely to recognize that now than they were in 1977. Zen Buddhism and other Eastern philosophies are now staples of America's polytheistic popular culture. Bookstore sections on "Spirituality" feature hundreds of books in the "Buddhism for the Masses" genre, and the even less serious "New Age" materials.

In the years since 1977 Americans have become primary consumers of Eastern philosophies and ancient mythologies—dumbed down for popular consumption and dressed up for a media age. Interest in pagan mythologies may have peaked in the 1980s with the late Joseph Campbell's television series (hosted by—guess who—Bill Moyers). Through books and television series, Campbell introduced a generation of secularized and confused Americans to the world of ancient and modern myths.

Campbell and Lucas had a mutual admiration society for several years. At a tribute for Campbell, Lucas described him

as “my Yoda,” recalling a spiritual guide from Star Wars. Campbell offered that he was “proud that something I did helped him define his own truth.”

The mythological elements in the Star Wars series became, in fact, the justifying purpose behind a mammoth exhibition at the National Air and Space Museum of the Smithsonian Institution, beginning in 1997. “Star Wars: The Magic of Myth” celebrated the movie and its story of intergalactic conflict. The museum also sponsored a major book project with the same title, written by the project’s curator, Mary Henderson.

Identifying Star Wars as “one of the great myths of our time,” Henderson explained the power of the movies: “When the first film in the Star Wars trilogy appeared in 1977, the ancient myths no longer seemed relevant for many people in this culture; pressing problems absorbed our attention, and hope itself was in short supply.” Evidently, the movie came just in time. The title of the first film—“A New Hope.” It sounds like more than a little escapism.

The book and the exhibit detailed the mythological elements in the Star Wars movies, from the influence of Zoroastrian dualism of good and evil to the Zen elements of “The Force.” Lucas borrowed from several different mythological traditions to create his “whole cosmology” and pseudo-religion.

Conspicuously absent from Lucas’s cosmology is anything connected to biblical Christianity. Though oblique references to faith abound in the film, the central religious motif is “the Force,” explained by the Smithsonian guide as a combination of “the basic principles of several different major religions.” Further, “it most embodies what all of them have in common: an unerring faith in a spiritual power.” Lucas explained “the Force” as “a nothingness that can accomplish miracles.” This is, the Smithsonian’s Henderson asserts, “reminiscent of Zen Buddhism.”

“The Force” is not analogous to Christian faith, but is a form of personal enlightenment and empowerment. Faith in “the Force” is simply faith in mystery and some higher power—mostly within. As Lucas instructs: “Ultimately the Force is the larger mystery of the universe. And to trust your feelings is your way into that.” The last thing Americans need to be told is to trust their own feelings.

The mythology of Star Wars is perfectly adapted to the spiritual confusion of postmodern America. “Go with the Force” is about all many citizens can muster as spirituality. When Christianity ceases to be the dominant worldview of a culture, paganism is quick to fill the void.

Some theologians have welcomed the mythological message of Star Wars as a relief from arid secularism. Theologian Robert Jewett of Garrett-Evangelical Theological Seminary went so far as to claim “a compelling gospel in this film, one that deserves to be compared with Paul’s words in Romans.” Lutheran Robert E. A. Lee claimed that “the Force” combines “the mysticism of ESP and the New Testament doctrine of the Holy Spirit.” These folks have been sitting in the cinema too long.

Luke Skywalker and company are a form of simple escapism for many moviegoers, and a source of spiritual “insight” for others. Christians will be amazed at the special effects, but should be wary of any spiritual effect. As Carl F. H. Henry reminded us all, “Judeo-Christian revelation has nothing in common with the category of myth.” We must not confuse Christian faith with “the Force.”

