

# Watchman Fellowship Profile

## Star Wars

By Robert M. Bowman, Jr.

**Brief Summary:** A series of six films produced by George Lucas and released from 1977 to 2005. Laced with religious and moral themes, the films meld the genres of fairy tale, myth, and science fiction to tell the story of a man who falls into evil and his son who seeks to bring him back to the good. The first three films (the “original trilogy”) are numbered IV, V, and VI in the series, with the “prequel” trilogy (I, II, and III) produced years later.

### Titles and Dates:

Episode	Sub-Title	Year	Story
I	<i>The Phantom Menace</i>	1999	Anakin Skywalker becomes a Jedi pupil
II	<i>Attack of the Clones</i>	2002	Anakin falls in love; the Clone Wars begin
III	<i>Revenge of the Sith</i>	2005	Anakin becomes the evil Darth Vader
IV	<i>A New Hope</i>	1977	Luke Skywalker becomes a Jedi pupil
V	<i>The Empire Strikes Back</i>	1981	Luke learns that Darth Vader is his father
VI	<i>Return of the Jedi</i>	1983	Luke tries to turn his father back to good

## HISTORY

The real-world story behind *Star Wars* is the story of George Lucas, the creator and producer of the films.<sup>1</sup> Lucas was born in 1944 in Modesto, California, and grew up reading comic books and watching television, especially science fiction serials and Westerns. As a teenager, his obsessions included cruising and racing cars. George drove a small Fiat to which he had made many modifications, including replacing its car roof with a roll bar.

In 1962, Lucas flipped his Fiat several times and crashed it into a tree. His seat belt inexplicably tore loose and he was thrown from the car, saving him from otherwise certain death. Years later, Lucas would comment, “When you go through something like that, it puts a little more perspective on things, like maybe you’re here for a reason.”<sup>2</sup> Although George had grown up in a Methodist home, he did not look to the Christian faith to supply that reason.

After junior college, Lucas went to film school at the University of Southern California, where he distinguished himself with his student films. In 1971, Lucas wrote and directed *American Graffiti*, a film about high school boys cruising at night, loosely based on his own teen experiences. Made for about 750,000 dollars, *American Graffiti* took in over \$100 million—the most successful film, in terms of profit to investment ratio, of any film in history.

After *American Graffiti*, Lucas began work on *Star Wars*. Lucas invested everything in the project, and 20th Century Fox groaned as Lucas went way over budget and behind schedule, but the movie was finally made. *Star Wars* opened in only 32 theaters on May 25, 1977. By the time its first theatrical run ended, it had become the biggest box-office hit of all time, maintaining that distinction for twenty years until *Titanic*.

Lucas was now independently wealthy and could finance his movies entirely with his own money, which he did. The first sequel to *Star Wars*, entitled *Star Wars, Episode V: The Empire Strikes Back* (1980), established the original film as the fourth in a series of stories that together formed a sweeping, epic saga. *Return of the Jedi* (1983) wrapped up the trilogy while raising expectations that Lucas would go back and produce films to complete the whole saga (at the time projected to nine episodes). Lucas eventually produced episodes I, II, and III (released in 1999, 2002, and 2005). He has said that there will be no more *Star Wars* movies, although two *Star Wars* television series are in the works.

## DOCTRINES

*Star Wars* is not a religion and does not teach a specific set of doctrines in the conventional sense. Yet everyone agrees that George Lucas intended to convey certain ideas or beliefs of relevance to religion. Lucas is adamant about the films having a message. On the other hand, to those fans who take the movies far *too* seriously, Lucas has also protested, “Come on, they’re only movies.”<sup>3</sup>

**The Genres of *Star Wars*:** The *Star Wars* films fuse together several rather different genres of storytelling: science fiction, fairy tale, and myth, with other genres (notably Westerns and comic-books) adding additional elements to the total picture.<sup>4</sup> The science fiction elements are obvious: faster-than-light space ships, a galactic Empire at war, and the common science fiction theme of man versus machine. However, Lucas prefers to describe *Star Wars* as a fairy tale—a moralistic tale involving a make-believe world of enchantment, usually set in imaginary, far-away lands and often in an unspecified past: “Once upon a time, in a distant land....” Lucas makes the fairy-tale setting of *Star Wars* explicit with the opening crawl, “A long time ago in a galaxy far, far away....” For Lucas, the fairy-tale elements—the exotic locations and magical happenings—are window dressing for stories designed to teach children right from wrong: “Fairy tales are how people learn about good and evil, about how to conduct themselves in society.”<sup>5</sup>

***Star Wars* and Myth:** By his own account, in *Star Wars* Lucas “consciously set about to re-create myths and the classic mythological motifs.”<sup>6</sup> For Lucas, “myths” are fictional stories that teach life lessons. The most important figure shaping Lucas’s views on myth and religion was Joseph Campbell (1904-87). Campbell argued that a *monomyth* can be discerned in all religions—a myth of the hero’s adventurous journey to obtain a prize. On the basis of this view of the world’s religions, Lucas felt as comfortable mixing and matching elements of different religions and mythologies in the *Star Wars* movies as he did ransacking fairy tales, literature, and movies for thematic elements.

**God, Religion, and “the Force”:** The central religious element in *Star Wars* is “the Force.” Lucas explains, “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.”<sup>7</sup> Lucas stresses that he is not advocating the religion of the Force as the answer to these questions. “That’s why I would hesitate to call the Force God. It’s designed primarily to make young people think about the mystery. Not to say, ‘Here’s the answer.’”<sup>8</sup>

Although Lucas denies that the Force represents any particular religion’s take on God, it is clear that the Force is explained in the movies along lines quite similar to Taoism (pronounced DOW-ism), a Chinese religion with some affinities to Buddhism. In Taoism, “the Tao” has a light and a dark side, but neither side is pure: there is always a little light in the darkness and a little darkness in the light (as represented by the famous circular symbol of the Tao). This belief that ultimate reality has two sides is called *dualism*.



“The Force”	“The Tao”
The Force “flows” through the Jedi	The Tao often compared to flowing water
The Force is an energy created by life	The Tao is an energy that produced all life
The Force empowers a Jedi but also obeys his commands	The Tao empowers all life but “does not demand to be Lord”
Calmness, nonaggression as the “good side;” anger, aggression, hatred as the “dark side”	Calmness, nonaggression as <i>yang</i> (the “light” side); anger, aggression as <i>yin</i>
Good to be found even in the evil Vader; some anger even in the good Luke	Good found within all so-called evil, and some evil within all so-called good
“Letting go” in order to feel the Force move through you	“Letting go” to allow the Tao (or <i>ch’i</i> ) to flow
Possibility of longevity (Yoda lives to be 900 years old)	Possibility of longevity (some Taoists reported to live for centuries)
The Empire seeks control, order; the Rebellion seeks freedom, bringing “balance to the Force”	Confucianism emphasized order, structure; Taoism emphasized balance, simplicity

Lucas has admitted a connection to Eastern religions but insists that the Force represents a broader, more universal approach: "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."<sup>9</sup> His desire to create a religion for his characters that connected with all of the different religions of the real world was based on his own personal belief, as he plainly says, "that all the religions are true." According to Lucas, this is the conclusion he has reached in answer to the question of why there are so many religions if there is only one God.<sup>10</sup>

As we have seen, the concept of the Force in *Star Wars* has much in common with dualism. Another concept of God in Eastern religions is *pantheism*, the doctrine that God is all, or that God is the divine reality underlying everything that we see and experience. There is a very thin line between a dualism that views God as the ultimate reality manifest in both good and evil and a pantheism that views God as the ultimate reality in everything.

Although *Star Wars* is dominated by Eastern religious motifs, some of its religious elements derive from Christianity. The oft-repeated statement, "May the Force be with you," is an adaptation of the Christian liturgical prayer, "May the Lord be with you." In *Phantom Menace*, Qui-Gon speaks of "the will of the Force," an expression that parallels the phrase "the will of God." Such language implies some sort of personal nature for the Force, in tension with the impersonal implications of the very term "Force." For himself, Lucas says that he is sure that there is a God but unsure as to what God is.<sup>11</sup>

**Obi-Wan and Christ:** In the original *Star Wars*, Obi-Wan Kenobi allows himself to be killed by Darth Vader so that the others can escape the Death Star, a sacrifice that seems to allude to Jesus' death on the cross. "If you strike me down," Obi-Wan warns Darth Vader, "I shall become more powerful than you can possibly imagine." During the rest of the story, Obi-Wan is able to speak to Luke, encouraging and guiding him, in a way that reminded many Christians of the inner guidance of the Holy Spirit. In other respects however, Obi-Wan's death is quite unlike Jesus' death. Obi-Wan does not rise from the dead; in subsequent episodes (*Empire* and *Jedi*) he returns as a luminous spirit, more in the tradition of Greek mythology than biblical theology. He functions more like the spirit-guides of Native American and New Age belief than the Holy Spirit.

**Anakin and Christ:** The most controversial allusion to Christianity in the *Star Wars* saga comes in *Phantom Menace*. Qui-Gon has Anakin's blood tested and discovers that he has a higher concentration of 'midi-chlorians'—microscopic conveyors of the Force—than anyone else. Curious, Qui-Gon asks Anakin's mother Shmi who the boy's father was. "There is no father," she answers. Later, Qui-Gon tells the Jedi Council that Anakin may have been "conceived by midi-chlorians."

This comes very close to identifying Anakin as the son of the Force. The allusion to the Virgin Birth of Christ is obvious. No doubt Lucas introduced this element into the story under the influence of Joseph Campbell, who argued that the story of a virgin who miraculously bore a child was part of the monomyth of the hero.<sup>12</sup> The "virgin birth" of Anakin is part of a larger picture of this particular hero: Qui-Gon thinks that Anakin is "the Chosen One" who was "prophesied" ages ago and who "will bring balance to the Force." Clearly, the religious figure on whom these descriptions are based is the biblical Christ.

**Redemption:** On the other hand, Anakin is a flawed hero, one who will fall prey to the dark side of the Force and become an agent of evil. Anakin will eventually "bring balance to the Force" when his son wins him back to the good side and Anakin destroys the evil Emperor. As Lucas has said, the series of films as a complete series are "about how young Anakin Skywalker became evil and then was redeemed by his son."<sup>13</sup> As Lucas uses the term, children "redeem" their parents by bringing the best out of them and forcing parents to become responsible, loving people—something Lucas sees his own children as having done for him.

## CHRISTIAN/BIBLICAL RESPONSE

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*Star Wars* blends elements of science fiction, fairy tale, myth, and religion to produce a romantic adventure story with a moral and spiritual challenge. How should Christians view the *Star Wars* movies?

***Star Wars* as a religion:** Although *Star Wars* was created to function as a modern myth, Lucas himself has criticized the extremes to which some fans have gone in making *Star Wars* their actual religion. There are whole Web sites devoted to proclaiming the message of the Force, taking the fictional religion of the Jedi in an extremely literalistic way.<sup>14</sup> Not only have these

people misunderstood the meaning of the films, their belief is false. There is no literal "Force"; there is, however, a real God, who has revealed himself in the Bible.

**God:** The personal God of the Bible (Ex. 3:14; Heb. 1:1-2) is quite different from the impersonal Force of *Star Wars*. An impersonal Force can be *used*; a personal God must be *trusted*. Rather than teaching our children to trust their own feelings, as *Star Wars* does, the Bible would have us teach our children to trust in God (Prov. 3:5-6). The God of the Bible is the Creator of all things (Gen. 1:1; Rom. 11:36). As such, he is our absolute Lord and Judge (Gen. 18:25; Matt. 11:25; James 4:12). Whereas most of the characters in *Star Wars* can live without a knowledge of the Force and be fine, the Bible makes clear that every human being is accountable to God (Rom. 3:19-20).

**Redemption:** People are redeemed by God's grace, not by their own effort. An impersonal Force cannot change the heart; a personal God can. The heroes of *Star Wars* must somehow change themselves, overcoming their own fear, anger, and greed by their own resources. That is indeed what most religions teach. But Christianity is different: the Bible summons us to admit humbly that we cannot redeem ourselves and to turn to God in Christ to redeem us (Rom. 3:19-26; Eph. 2:8-10).

**Myth:** Lucas's major error as reflected in *Star Wars* is his belief that Christianity shares with all other religions the same fundamental myth. Christianity is based on fact and actually rejects myth (2 Tim. 4:3-4; 2 Pet. 1:16). A myth is a non-historical story with religious significance, like the Hindu stories about Krishna. The primary stories of religious significance in the Bible are not myths, but sacred history. Unlike myths, which teach moral lessons that don't assume the truth of the stories, the sacred history of the Bible is a revelation of what God has actually done for us.

If Jesus did not really rise from the dead, then the New Testament's claim that in Jesus we have the hope of resurrection and eternal life in a reconciled relationship with God is utterly without foundation (1 Cor. 15:12-19). Myths make no pretense to have taken place in actual space-time history. That is why *Star Wars* begins with the words, "A long time ago in a galaxy far, far away." Contrast those words with texts in the Gospels like this: "Now in the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar, when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea" (Luke 3:1). These words serve to place the story of Jesus in a real time and place.

As young people thrill to the mythic story of the hero who overcomes evil and saves the galaxy, we should enthusiastically tell them the Greatest Story Ever Told, about a Man who really did overcome evil and gave his life to save the world from sin and death. And this story, as amazing as it is, actually is *true*.

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#### Notes

- 1 On Lucas's life, see Dale Pollock, *Skywalking: The Life and Films of George Lucas*, updated ed. (New York: Da Capo Press, 1999).
- 2 Jean Valley, "The Empire Strikes Back and So Does Filmmaker George Lucas with His Sequel to *Star Wars*," in *George Lucas: Interviews*, ed. Sally Kline; Conversations with Filmmakers (Jackson: University of Mississippi, 1999), 95-96.
- 3 Pollock, *Skywalking*, 271-72; cf. "Of Myth and Men: A conversation between Bill Moyers and George Lucas on the meaning of the Force and the true theology of *Star Wars*," *Time*, 26 April 1999, 92.
- 4 I discuss the different genres of *Star Wars* at much greater length in an earlier article, "The Gospel according to Lucas, Part I: Fantasy Movies or Phantom Menace?" *Vantage Point*, Fall 1999; [http://www.wfial.org/index.cfm?fuseaction=artNewAge.article\\_4](http://www.wfial.org/index.cfm?fuseaction=artNewAge.article_4).
- 5 Quoted in Aljean Harmetz, "Burden of Dreams: George Lucas," in *George Lucas: Interviews*, 143.
- 6 "Of Myth and Men," 90.
- 7 *Ibid.*, 92.
- 8 *Ibid.*, 93.
- 9 *Ibid.*, 92.
- 10 *Ibid.*
- 11 *Ibid.*
- 12 Joseph Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, Bollingen Series 17, 2d ed. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1968), 297-314.
- 13 "Of Myth and Men," 94.
- 14 E.g., the Yahoo Group called "Jediism," <http://groups.yahoo.com/group/Jediism/> (accessed May 2005).



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