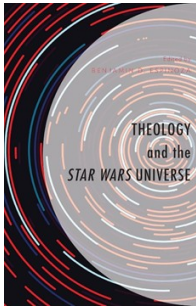


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**Benjamin D. ESPINOZA (ed.)**

## **THEOLOGY AND THE STAR WARS UNIVERSE**

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*Theology and the Star Wars Universe* is part of *Theology, Religion, and Pop Culture* edited by Matthew Brake for the purpose of illustrating theology, religion and pop culture brought together by TV, films, comics and fiction in a secularized world that needs educating and entertaining. The volume is also relevant for travel(ogue) lovers and all those seeking encounters in space in faraway galaxies between humans and different species that require intercultural communication. Other volumes in the series include *Theology and Black Mirror*, edited by Amber Bowen and John Anthony Dunne, *Theology and the Game of Thrones*, edited by Matthew Brake, *Theology and Spider-Man*, edited by George Tsakiridis, *Theology and Westworld*, edited by Juli Gittinger and Shayna Sheinfeld and *Theology and the Marvel Universe*, edited by Gregory Stevenson (ii).

The book is divided into four parts and contains fifteen chapters on the topic of theologizing Star Wars, after endeavours from other disciplines, philosophy, psychology, economics or media studies (1). Good and evil, along with reconciliation, redemption and hope are analysed in *Star Wars* and its engaging in galaxies far away. The theory that twins may not have the same age because of space travel was advanced, as well (2).

Part one contains an opening essay, "The Word of God and the W(h)ill of the Force. Canon and Authority within the *Star Wars* Universe and Franchise" in

which James F. McGrath focuses on the idea of sacred texts and the transcendence that learners acquire from them along with the ability to distinguish between good and evil, be they Jedi or Christians (8). Sacred texts in *Star Wars* have the authority granted to them by characters (11), whereas, in terms of canon, it is argued that “Officially everything in the *Star Wars* publishing universe is canon, though George Lucas retains creator privileges to override anything he wants.”<sup>1</sup> (12) From a Translation Studies viewpoint, there are allegations that should be kept in mind, especially in the era of AI: “Could the translation of a sacred text require something more than mere linguistic proficiency, something that only a living thing might possess (...)? There are parallels that can be drawn with the translation and study of the Bible. Some believe that moving word by word through a text with the assistance of a lexicon or interlinear provides access to the “real meaning” of the text, beyond what is found in an ordinary English translation. Others believe that being attuned to the Spirit can allow one to understand deeper meanings that go beyond the words and grammar. A good translation from a linguistic perspective requires both expertise in languages and a sensitivity to nuance beyond the capacity of any machine currently in existence in the real world.”<sup>2</sup> (13) It is agreed that both the Bible and *Star Wars* are suitable for all ages depending on the adaptations and they equally made efforts towards a “unified official canon” (19).

Part two, “Theologies of the Jedi” brings together six contributions from different authors. In “Use (the) Force: Jedi, Monks, and Unexpected Violence”, Zachary B. Smith claims that the use of violence by the Jedi in *Star Wars* was only legitimized because universal order needed establishing which could be paralleled to monks who, according to early Christian texts, resorted to force “to teach lessons about not following the ascetic path of self-denial, removing distractions, and elevating the soul” (25). In “And What More Shall I Say? Heroism in Hebrews 11 and *Star Wars*”, Bethany Keeley-Jonker and Robert Keeley advance the biblical quote “cloud of witnesses”, for heroes in the chapter, to foster the analogy with an important moment in *Star Wars Episode VII, The*

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<sup>1</sup> For a detailed account, see Peter Ha, “Q&A With Jedi Path Author Daniel Wallace,” *Time*, August 24, 2010. <http://techland.time.com/2010/08/24/qa-with-jedi-path-author-daniel-wallace/>. Retrieved on February 11, 2025.

<sup>2</sup> See also, James Strong, *The Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible*, Nashville: Abingdon, 1890.

*Force Awakens* in which two characters find inspiration in people, similar to the chapter in *The Scripture*, and not in “a careful argument about the force—the light and the dark side” (38). The authors draw on the ‘rational paradigm’ as coined by the communication theorist Walter Fisher in 1984 who “was concerned that argumentation scholars were too preoccupied with proposition and direct argument” (*ibidem*)<sup>3</sup> to analyse heroism as complex phenomenon related to family (travelling to a foreign land in the Old Testament and throughout the galaxy in *Star Wars*), loss, sacrifice and failure, coherence and fidelity, showing that small contributions matter. Nathan Garcia makes “*A Spiritual Analogy in Renaissance Humanism and Desert Asceticism*” for the purpose of “Rediscovering the Sith and the Jedi” (49) by inviting us to dive deeper into *Star Wars* myths as reflected in the noncinematic aspect (novels, video games, comic strips). The author proves that the Sith community shares in common with “the Renaissance Christian humanist movement, while the Jedi are analogous to the desert monastic movement in early Christianity.” (50) Here, Italian humanists like Petrarch, Ficino, and Pico have a say, along with the seminal text *Apophthegmata Patrum* for desert monasticism and Christianity (*ibidem*). It is the author’s belief that her analogy in the field of spirituality aided in seeing how presumptions in anthropology may face abuse (59). In “From Padawan to Jedi. *The Theological Premise for the Necessity of the Master-Apprentice Relationship in the Path of Spiritual Ascension*”, Abdallah Rothman stresses self-mastery as process requiring “a committed journey into the depths of the psyche, which without guidance one can get lost and stray from the path” (63). Tracing the origins of the master-apprentice relationship, the study focuses on a well-known theme in popular culture, also present in Kung-Fu movies and shows, i.e., ‘the wise old master’ vs ‘his naïve young apprentice’ (64); it demonstrates how this is a vehicle for spiritual growth where the submission of the young to the old is mandatory to overcome one’s own impulses, face the inner battle with oneself and avoid the path to the dark side. Obedience to the master who guides the apprentice on the path to perfection and quietness in the master’s presence equal obedience to the

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<sup>3</sup> According to him, “logical argument and process is *the* means of being human, the agency of all that humans can know and realize in achieving their *telos*.” See Walter R. Fisher, “Narration as a Human Communication Paradigm: The Case of Public Moral Argument,” *Communication Monographs* 51, no. 1 (1984): 4.

divine and a fall would only mean submission to the lower self. Nettie Brock and Josiah Brock's "And Also with You. *An Examination of the Demystification of the Jedi and the Clergy*" revolves around the romanticised view of Star Wars Jedi where their legacy is reduced to 'failure', 'hypocrisy' and 'hubris' once deeds are considered independent of the myth. The author states that the fallibility of their order "mirrors a societal and ecclesial movement that is questioning the compulsory purity and sacredness of the clergy and the institutional nature of the Church." (81) particularly against the background of specialized orders of clergy in the US (*ibidem*)<sup>4</sup> where anyone can lead. Religion in the series has much been discussed with reference to the Force and the Jedi, yet in *The Mandalorian*, since the characters are bewildered by it, not having experienced anything similar, magic is the label left (83); ultimately, ideologies for the Galaxy folk are the same, they only see "Men and women with too much power, squabbling over religion, while the rest of us burn!" (93) and the authors inspire us to have faith in the 21<sup>st</sup> century and talk about it via this cinematic universe that is brought together by its Force (94).

Part three is devoted to political theologies covering several topics such as "Subverting the Ancient Religion. *The Gray Ecclesiology of Ahsoka Tano and Old Man Luke*" in which Tim Posada accounts for institutional structures in modern Christianity and the far away galaxy in *Star Wars* from the perspective of 'exodus from formal religion'; here, evil is resisted without compliance to a political rigid structure (100) despite the Jedi in the latter resembling more to Buddhists than Christians in their faith (101). Moreover, instead of a single Messiah or (super)hero, the idea of a collective resistance is advanced, the saviour who deals with conflicts single handedly and the inherent individualism, thus being avoided (107-108)<sup>5</sup>. "In Defense of the Nonviolent Luke. *A Confrontation between*

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<sup>4</sup> In literature, this is referred to as post Second Great Awakening. See Christine Pohl, *Living into Community: Cultivating Practices That Sustain Us*. Grand Rapids, MI: W. B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 2012 and Bishop Grant Hagiya, *Spiritual Kaizen* Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2013.

<sup>5</sup> See also John McAteer, "The Last Jedi: A Star Wars Movie for the Era of 'the Nones.'" *CRI*, Jan. 2, 2018. <https://www.equip.org/article/last-jedi-star-wars-movie-era-nones> and Adam Possamai, "Gramsci, Jediism, the Standardization of Popular Religion and the State," in *Religion and the State: A Comparative Sociology*, ed. Jack Barbalet, Adam Possamai, and Bryan S. Turner (London: Anthem Press, 2011).

*Niebuhrian Realism and Christian Nonviolence in The Last Jedi*”, Andrew J. Kuzma expands on the immoral rebellion of the moral Jedi drawing on the American theologian Reinhold Niebuhr’s politically responsible violence who examined human nature inquiring about Christian accomplishments in society without a favourable result, unfortunately<sup>6</sup> (115). The Jedi way is also supported in theological thought by Stanley Hauerwas’s living the peaceable kingdom<sup>7</sup>, as Christians should not be determined by the world in their actions (118). Edward Dunar’s “Undoing the Memory Wipe. Metz, Droids, and the Victims of History” brings pedagogy and *Star Wars* together “through a thought experiment about how a theological engagement with popular culture can sharpen Christian practices of social criticism and solidarity.”<sup>8</sup> (127) Drawing on Johann Baptist Metz’s political theology in German Catholicism<sup>9</sup>, his subjecthood and dangerous memory, the author shows how the characters in question fall; furthermore, some of them are marginalized narrators helping readers and learners by engaging their compassionate virtues and social critique of the gospel, the galactic society and our own altogether (137). In “Mysticism and Resistance. *Theology of The Last Jedi*”, Rostislav Kúrka capitalizes on the connection of theology and activism as a must in the public sphere; drawing on liberation theology which focused on action to reach God in an unmediated way, he showed how *Star Wars* films could be understood spiritually (142). Here, retreat or flight from the world is viewed as part of the contemplative sphere, a trait also common to mysticism (148). In “Bringing Balance to the Force. *George*

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<sup>6</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, *Moral Man and Immoral Society: A Study of Ethics and Politics* Westminster John Knox Press, 2001.

<sup>7</sup> Stanley Hauerwas, *War and the American Difference: Theological Reflections on Violence and National Identity*, Baker Academic, 2011; Stanley Hauerwas, *The Peaceable Kingdom: A Primer in Christian Ethics*, Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1983.

<sup>8</sup> Course taught by Steph Puen and Miko Galvez at the Ateneo de Manila University in the Philippines. A media account of their approach: Jillian Bianca Carpio, “Seeing God in Everything—Even in *Star Wars*,” *LifeStyle.Inq*, October 15, 2016, <https://lifestyle.inquirer.net/240608/seeing-god-in-everything-even-in-star-wars/>.

Retrieved on February 12, 2025.

<sup>9</sup> Johann Baptist Metz, *Faith in History and Society: Toward a Practical Fundamental Theology*, trans. J. Matthew Ashley, New York: Crossroad, 2007.

Lucas's *Politico-Critical Refiguring of Salvation*", John C. McDowell speaks of "narcissistic religiosity and the moral cynicism of post-Vietnam America" (157) which inspired the *Star Wars* director in his choice of morality for the characters. Similarities with Nazi Germany are also found (159), Terry Eagleton's allegation that "in the so-called war against terror, 'evil' is used to foreclose the possibility of historical explanation."<sup>10</sup> is used to support the suggestion that we can be our own enemy and undergo dehumanization as we seek power (163).

Part IV, "Engaging Classical Thinkers" opens with Jonathan Lyonhart's "The Modern Manichaeans. *Binaries of Light and Dark in Contemporary Culture*" in which an ancient religion is brought to the fore to illustrate the dualism in *Star Wars*, where balance and harmony should govern all things (172-173); it is a religion that convinced St. Augustine in his time, before he turned to Christian faith (175). Another classical thinker is revisited by Shaun C. Brown in "Thomas Aquinas's Account of Hope as a Hermeneutical Lens for *Star Wars*"; passion and virtue in his *Summa Theologiae* (179), hope in Lucas's movies is associated with the young who may not be aware of their limitations and display foolishness (182). Coming from experience, it is also a habit in *Star Wars* and, its fourfold object as seen by Thomas Aquinas, namely "good, future, difficult, and possible" (187), shows primarily in the desire to bring justice and make peaceful a galaxy in which tyranny rules (*ibidem*). Ryan G. Duns's "An *Archē* Not Anarchic Enough A Spirited Critique of the Force" plans to distinguish the Force from the Holy Spirit since due to the popularity of *Star Wars*, clerics, teachers and students may have seen equivalence between the two (191). A principle of order(ing), origin (*archē*) and end (*telos*) of life (193), the Force gives unlimited power to the one mastering it, whereas in classical theology, for Thomas Aquinas, "the word 'create' (...) expresses something singular to God who is the source, the *archē*, on account of whom there is any being at all." (196); the author concludes that we still have much to learn from Luke/ Acts in the Bible, control above all. The last study, "Lifting Rocks. *Camus, Sainthood, and the Anti-Heroic in The Last Jedi*" by Russell P. Johnson brings into play existentialist philosophy in its rejection of hope, namely Camus's *Myth of Sisyphus* or *The Plague* to account for 'the human nostalgia' in *Star Wars* or the 'absurd drama' between some characters in their interactions

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<sup>10</sup> Terry Eagleton, *Holy Terror*, Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2005, p. 106.

(208) and ‘an absurd balance’ in the Force (209-210). The conclusion reached does not favour “Camus’s hopeless perseverance but a chastened hope, a hope not indexed to the virtue of its heroes” and, as Christians, we are encouraged to see saints for what they really are, not heroic in their actions, but ‘holy fools’ in an attempt to be loved by God (215-216).

We recommend this book to all those interested in popular culture and religious matters, lovers of travels and adventures in faraway galaxies and curious on how theological, philosophical or other critical insights can shape their perspectives on epic space classics.

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