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Jediism: a convergence of Star Wars fan culture and salad bar spirituality

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In the 2001 census in the United Kingdom, Canada, Australia and New Zealand more than 500,000 individuals answered the question about religious affiliation by ticking the 'other' box and writing 'Jedi'. That is, they professed to belong to the religion of the Jedi Knights, the warrior-monks from George Lucas' *Star Wars* film saga who fight for the freedom of the galaxy aided by the Force. According to the census, Jediism was the fourth largest religion in the UK. In New Zealand a massive 1,3% of the population identified as Jediists – in certain campus areas more than 10%. These amazing figures did not come out of thin air. The most immediate cause for the 'Jedi census phenomenon' was a chain email urging people to report their religious affiliation as 'Jedi'. The email was probably thought of as a combination of a practical joke, a test of the power of the email medium, and a political protest against the religious affiliation tick box (even though reporting one's religion was not mandatory). The massive success certainly demonstrated the potency of email communication. But it also reflected three other things, namely a timeless, juvenile tendency to subversion (here both church and the state could humorously be challenged), the fact that *Star Wars* was a really well-known cultural resource, and the fact that the role of the Jedi was recognisably and positively religious.

Especially the Jedi as a religious role model is crucial – and not only to explain the census phenomenon. For while most of the census Jedi and the many self-identified Jedi on Facebook (where Jedi is the 10th most common religious self-identification) are simply young *Star Wars* fans, a hard core of people are much more serious about the Jedi religion. A number of groups in the English-speaking world and mostly in the United States have organised themselves in religious groups on the internet which identify as Jedi. Significantly, many of these are not young students, but people in their 30s, 40s and 50s. These people would say that they believe in the existence of the Force. Just like in the movies, they view the Force at the same time as an almost scientific energy which can be measured, channelled and used, and as a semi-personal divine power with its own will, purpose and essential goodness. The Jediists also meditate (like the *Star Wars* Jedis) to get into contact with the Force. They do not believe in the real existence of Master Yoda or Luke Skywalker, but they nevertheless quote these and other Jedi Masters as authorities on their homepages. For these reasons I have called Jediism a 'fiction-based religion'.

Jediism is not exclusively based on *Star Wars* though. The Jediists are also interested in other religions, ranging from Christianity over Buddhism to New Age. What is more, they believe that all the world's religions share a common core. For instance, they believe that all the different gods in the various religions are really just different names for the same one real divine power which they identify as the Force. This type of religiosity, where elements from different religions are combined and synonymised, has been called a la carte religion or salad bar spirituality. It is certainly but unique to Jediism, but rather quite common today. The special Jediist twist to salad bar spirituality is that they use fiction to bring order in their spiritual combination. More concretely, they use *Star Wars* and the religious identity of the Jedi Knight as framing devices. For Jediists, the Christian concept of God and the Hindu concept of prana can be combined because both really refer to the Force. And when theologies can be conflated like this, so can practices. Jediists therefore see no problem in combining Christian prayer with Buddhist meditation and so on. We can say that Jediists use the *Star Wars* narrative and the Jedi role to interpret and domesticate ideas from other traditions. Extending the salad bar metaphor, we could even say that the Jediists use *Star Wars* as the plate on which they serve their spiritual salad.

Religious groups normally use one religious tradition (rather than fiction) to interpret other religions through. A Christian can for instance acknowledge that the gods of all religions ultimately refers to the same entity, but will continue to refer to that entity as God. Why do the Jediists prefer *Star Wars* as hermeneutic key? The answer is not surprising. Most Jediists are not only into salad bar spirituality, but also long time *Star Wars* fans. Many were young children when the first *Star Wars* trilogy hit the cinemas. Religious Jediism can (for many Jediists at least) be seen as a convergence of *Star Wars* fandom and salad bar spirituality. It has the double advantage of being a more serious and legitimate form of *Star Wars* fandom for adults and of bringing some sense of order and identity into the chaos and vagueness of salad bar spirituality.

Markus Davidsen promoveert aan de Universiteit Leiden. Zijn promotieonderzoek gaat over fictieve godsdiensten.