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## The Gospel According to Star Wars: Faith, Hope, and the Force

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for Haughey to characterize Jesus's life as "an open narrative that kept developing new insights" (though Jesus did "increase in wisdom"; p. 33) and his "humanity" as something "other than God" (though there is a distinction between his human and divine natures; p. 72).

Haughey's book illustrates that maybe the issue facing Catholic colleges and universities in this country today is not whether they should embrace their "catholicity," but what we mean by that term. Perhaps the difference between "intellectual charity" and "hospitality" also depends on how we define that term. If by "catholicity" we mean a fullness that can never be possessed and a wholeness that can never be materialized (at least in this world), then adhering to a body of doctrine and a moral code will stymie an institution's ability to reach out to the world, and "hospitality" is the most we can hope for. If, on the other hand, we mean new life through a liberating truth and a redeeming wholeness—namely, Jesus Christ—then it is precisely the institution's "Catholicity" which will enable it to embrace the world in genuine "intellectual charity."

### References

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## The Gospel According to *Star Wars*: Faith, Hope, and the Force

John C. McDowell  
Westminster John Knox Press, 2007  
\$14.95, 204 pages

Reviewed by Michael Zelenka

For many people in their mid-20s to early 40s, the original *Star Wars Trilogy* gave them cause to hope in the ultimate triumph of good over evil, along with a drawer full of Stormtroopers, Ewoks, X-Wing Fighters, and Jedi. The

character Darth Vader took on an iconic life, and the epitome of the “bad guy” was used in everything from commercials to political commentaries. Luke, the original trilogy’s hero, inspired every seemingly normal adolescent boy to assume that he, too, had something special inside himself and a bigger part to play in the grand scheme of the world (and hopefully a light saber too!). Leia, likewise, was the embodiment of all that was good about feminism; she reminded us all that the “damsel in distress” was not just to be rescued from the battle but to be an integral part of fighting the battle itself. The release of the prequels introduced these same ideals and hopes to a new generation, and put an interesting twist on the stories as a whole with the focus shifting from the maturation of Luke to the rise, fall, and eventual redemption of Anakin Skywalker (Vader). Dismissed by some as childish entertainment, the saga taps into something much deeper: salvation.

McDowell, in the book *The Gospel According to Star Wars: Faith, Hope, and the Force*, takes the reader through not only the origins of the entire *Star Wars* epic, but also into the minds of Anakin, Palapatine (Darth Sidious), and Luke. McDowell’s argument seems to take aim at some critics’ belief that *Star Wars* is nothing more than a popcorn movie, a childish, morally black-and-white tale with big special effects and lots of cathartic violence. The author expounds on the mythological origin of the story and the characters, showing the care director George Lucas took in telling “young people what we think is a good person” (p. 2) through his movies. Once the connotative lens is established, McDowell traces the Force through the myriad religions it seemingly resembles.

Chapters 3 through 5 focus on evil and the dark side of the Force. It is not until chapter 6 that the reader finally gets what the title has promised, namely, the connection between the movies and the Gospel message. McDowell hints at messianic symbols and other connections to a distinctly Christian message up to this point, but it is chapter 6, entitled “Rebelling against Evil: The Violence of *Star Wars*,” that the author delves into not only Christ-like characters, but elements of redemption and salvation. This is not to say that the groundwork performed in the first five chapters is excessive or irrelevant. As stated before, McDowell’s web of arguments and sources convince the reader, and probably some *Star Wars* experts that do not give the movies as much credence as McDowell, that the story is capable of such a noble endeavor.

The last three chapters of the book also use many more references to sacred Scripture than the first five, with some solid literary and theological connections conveyed. One of the strongest and most compelling is as follows: “The way *Star Wars* presents Luke’s redemptive relation to Anakin is particularly interesting theologically. The quite deliberate and elaborate

*parallelism* between Anakin and Luke resonates with Paul's Adam/Christ typology (Rom. 5: 12-21; 1 Cor. 15:21-22, 45)" (p. 113). McDowell then goes on to trace through the many parallels between the father and son from the movies and how they relate to both Adam and Christ, respectively. Another noteworthy argument that McDowell successfully delivers is the distinctly Christian message of nonviolence that permeates not only the original trilogy but the prequels as well. McDowell challenges readers and viewers to see the violence in the movies not as merely retributive, but instead McDowell avers that Luke, in refusing to fight Darth Vader in *Return of the Jedi*, "so stirs the conscience of the opponent that reconciliation becomes a reality" (King as cited in McDowell, p. 131). In all, McDowell does a more than adequate job in convincing the reader that there is more, much more, to *Star Wars* than meets the eye.

McDowell's work, however, may lose some credibility when the author states in the introduction that "non-Christian culture can provide moments of *illustration* and is helpful *only* in that it furnishes images to show *what Christians already know* on the basis of divine revelation" (p. xix). In a sense, McDowell's argument is circular. We can find Christian allusions in secular works of art because there are Christian allusions in secular works all because we should not limit the "range of God's speaking" (p. xix). Including this logic partially takes away from what is already a strong and convincing proof. Furthermore, such a backdrop was probably not needed as McDowell shows Lucas's aim when Lucas himself says, "All I was trying to say in a very simple and straightforward way is that there is a God and there is a good and bad side" (as cited in McDowell p. 36). While this may oversimplify the ultimate effect McDowell claims the movies can have, Lucas does not shy away from the fact that the movies have a religious tone, and so McDowell should not either.

Furthermore, while it is clear the author has done extensive research in compiling this work, the overall focus of the book gets lost in McDowell's string of sources and support. The message of a chapter or even the main point of an argument gets clouded by many citations and references to other works and thinkers. While McDowell tries to combat *Star Wars*' many critics, the author may spend too much time trying to defend against what others claim that the author's own focus, that *Star Wars* has a particularly Christian message, gets pushed to the final stages of the book. Again, McDowell is courageous and even gracious in not only defending *Star Wars* from those that see it as theologically flat but also acknowledging that their claims are worthy enough to be argued; however, less time should have been spent disproving others' ideas and more proving McDowell's own.

Overall, *Star Wars* fans, particularly those who are Christian, will experience many new insights to their beloved films. McDowell's knowledge of the films and the many expanded and historical universes that accompany them will not only educate the reader-fan, but also inspire the movies to be revisited, this time most likely with a considerably more Christian eye.

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