The Gospel according to *Star Wars*

Faith, Hope, and the Force

Second Edition

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To my father, John D. McDowell,
and to my children, Archie, Jonathan, Joseph, Meg, and Robert
Feel the Force around you!

In memorium of my grandfather Thomas Manson

I . . . find it very interesting, especially in terms of the academic world, that they will take a work and dissect it in so many different ways. Some of the ways are very profound, and some are very accurate. A lot of it, though, is just the person using their imagination to put things in there that really weren't there, which I don't mind either. I mean, one of the things I like about *Star Wars* is that it stimulates the imagination, and that's why I don't have any qualms about the toys or about any of the things that are going on around *Star Wars*, because it does allow young people to use their imagination and think outside the box.

Star Wars creator George Lucas
to journalist Bill Moyer

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Acknowledgments

A long time ago, in a galaxy far, far away . . ."—well, thirty-nine years ago at the time of writing, and in a small town in Northern Ireland, although I suppose many would claim that that is indeed a galaxy far, far away—I was rushed after dinner to the local cinema by my father. The movie we traveled to watch I had only heard of by observing some peers in the school playground carrying a novel titled *Star Wars*. It was, after all, a time prior to internet available trailers, frequent attendance at cinema multiplexes, and movie advertisements on television or on the side of buses. What happened on that warm early summer evening is a rather unremarkable story. What is noteworthy, though, is the fact that it is one a multitude of children of my generation from across the globe have recounted in similar ways.

The queue outside the theatre was enormous, but the movie was certainly well worth the two-hour wait. From the moment the brass section boomed out the initial notes of John Williams's unforgettable opening theme, I was hooked, captivated, inspired, transported to another galaxy far, far away. *Star Wars* toys, games, clothing, mugs, bedding, posters, collectable display items, school stationery, books, model kits, film soundtracks, multiple film formats (VHS/DVDs/Blu-rays), and so on have ever since cut a huge (and I should really emphasize the word "huge") hole in my family's bank balances of an ion-canon-blast-proportion. I even purchased a data projector specifically to watch the movies on a 180-inch screen on a wall in the house. To say that I have been a "fan" of *Star Wars* is far too tame a word: "fanatic" would probably better describe my passion. I unhesitatingly confess to being one of the so-called "Jedi-generation" and to having spent ("misspent," some would claim) many of the early years of my youth—and every year since the rerelease of the 'classic trilogy' in 1997—deeply engrossed in watching, reading, and talking about the films.

As in the first edition of this book, my family deserves a sympathetic mention. My wife, someone still not imbibed with any great enthusiasm for the saga, continues to express her exasperation with me and the too-regular *Star Wars* conversations that take place at home. (To make matters worse, she enjoyed *The Force Awakens* most out of the seven episodes, which adds a whole other level to the household arguments about the franchise.) I owe her an apology. But she also deserves my gratitude, since one of my inspirational moments came during her frustrated complaint that I talk to our children more about *Star Wars* than I talk about theological matters. It was this, rather than my love of the whole *Star Wars* universe, that directly led me to undertake the project, a study that was and continues to be a labor of love. This book is largely about my wrestling with the theological-educational value of two trilogies of epic material, and it is also a self-justification to my wife that my conversations with our children really can be more theologically profound than she otherwise believes. My children are now at a stage where they can engage with substantial insight, sensitivity, knowledge, and some considerable critical understanding of the saga and the Expanded Universe materials. Last year I even managed to lose for the first time to my eldest, Archie, at *Star Wars* Trivial Pursuit. The wound still smarts. I still reign victorious at *Star Wars* Risk, *Star Wars* Monopoly, and *Star Wars* chess, however, although Archie, Jonathan, and Joseph do show me up in the various versions of *Star Wars* Battlefront. With their Yoda-like skills in wielding lightsabers, they make me look like the laboring Obi-Wan from *A New Hope*.

Those I thanked in the acknowledgments of the 2007 version of this study deserve to be thanked again. My colleagues and friends at New College in the University of Edinburgh, in particular my fellow systematic theologians, covered for me during my sabbatical in the first semester of 2005–6. I had planned to write a different book during that time. But, after watching *The Revenge of the Sith* for the first time with my brother-in-law one May evening, the *Star Wars* bug bit, and I knew I had to take my own revenge on the Sith by writing an article that quickly expanded into a book. Philip Law of Westminster John Knox Press was encouragingly supportive of the project. Most importantly, several people provided especially helpful comments on the final draft of the initial book, taking considerable time out of their own very busy schedules to do so. The exceedingly thorough observations of James Shaw and Dr. John Yates helped make much of my presentation clearer and more careful than it would otherwise have been. Rev. Graham Astles, Dr. Jason Wardley, and Mark Storslee were also instrumental in forcing me to think harder about what I was attempting to argue. Hilary Lenfesty, Brian Adair, Andrew Hayes, Robbie Leigh, and Kate Wilkie provided useful

comments at various stages of the drafting process. Dr. Bill Stevens had been kind enough to lend me his DMin thesis, which guided some of my thoughts on Jungian archetypes (*The Quest: Models for Euro-American Male Spirituality Based on the Legends of the Search for the Holy Grail*, unpublished DMin, San Francisco Theological Seminary, 2000).

In the years between 2007 and 2015 I have had published, among numerous other things, some more specialized academic works on the *Star Wars* saga. In particular I would like to thank McFarland Press for doing a fine job with *The Politics of Big Fantasy: The Ideologies of* Star Wars, The Matrix, *and* The Avengers (2014) and *Identity Politics in George Lucas'* Star Wars (2016). These studies have allowed me to engage with publications in cultural and ideological studies and have permitted a level of detail and footnoting that has not been appropriate for *The Gospel according to Star Wars*. My conversations, debates, and academic arguments with two very talented young theologians, Drs. Ashley Moyse and Scott Kirkland, have inspired me over the last few years. I am privileged to have been their doctoral supervisor. I am indebted to them for helping me refrain from compromising my theological interests and stay true to the appropriate academic rigor during, to borrow from Obi-Wan, "the dark times" of "the Empire," albeit an Empire more corporately than militarily focused. I would also like to mention Prof. Mario Minichiello and Drs. Fergus King and Chris Falzon.

I continue to miss those football clubs with which I had been involved for almost six years, Lambton Jaffas and St. Johns Football Clubs, especially the lads of the 14/1s whom I was very much blessed to coach for three unforgettable seasons. Go Invincibles! My boys and I have been able to find a new home with Croydon Ranges.

It is, however, with sorrow that two friends are now to be acknowledged *in memorium*: Drs. Mike Purcell and Jason Wardley. Jason was a source of valuable information when I first turned to writing on popular culture at Edinburgh in 2005, and Mike was instrumental in settling me into my new working environment there some five years earlier. Both are sorely missed and very warmly remembered. I must also mention in the same vein the external examiner of my doctorate, Prof. John Webster. My maternal grandfather, Thomas Manson, passed away late in 2013. He had been a tremendous inspiration to me, a man with a responsible heart, and I hope that in everything I do I will honor the legacy of this self-deprecating man.

Since moving to Melbourne to the University of Divinity early in 2015, I have been refreshed, reawakened to Force-consciousness even, and reenthused by my work in a way that has reinvigorated the theological passion of my time in Edinburgh. I am reminded on a daily basis that good and honest

theology matters. Melbourne's verdant land nourishes a sense of adventure all too undernourished by the devouring wilds of Tatooine's desert. Dr. Suman Kashyap has been a skillful and diligent administrative resource in the Research Office, and Prof. Peter Sherlock has been a truly inspiring and hospitable Vice Chancellor. It has been a pleasure to find such support and vision at a time when higher education is losing a humanitarian sense of its purpose and is becoming heavily bureaucratized for largely corporate ends. The Australian government, like so many in the contemporary West, appears to badly lack a sense of the need for a humanizing, and not merely technical, education. I am grateful to the members of the Yarra Institute for Religion and Social Policy for having appointed me to their board and now to the committee of their newest incarnation as the University of Divinity Centre of Research in Religion and Social Policy, and I thank Yarra Theological Union and Catholic Theological College both for accrediting me to teach.

My thanks are due to David Dobson and all at Westminster John Knox Press for not only having done a splendid job with the publication of the 2007 first edition of the book but also for having invited me to produce this second and revised edition.

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Abbreviations

ANH   *Star Wars Episode IV: A New Hope*
AOTC   *Star Wars Episode II: Attack of the Clones*
ESB   *Star Wars Episode V: The Empire Strikes Back*
ROTJ   *Star Wars Episode VI: Return of the Jedi*
ROTS   *Star Wars Episode III: Revenge of the Sith*
SW   *Star Wars*
TFA   *Star Wars Episode VII: The Force Awakens*
TPM   *Star Wars Episode I: The Phantom Menace*

Introduction

*I*t hardly needs to be said that *Star Wars* is the most successful franchise in cinematic history. In fact it is a phenomenon, an extraordinary pop-culture sensation of an unprecedented scale. In its ground-breaking cinematography, monstrous merchandising blitzkrieg, and sheer popularity, the films have been epoch making. According to one commentator, "It was *Star Wars* that jump-started . . . [science fiction] in the 1970s, turning it from a vigorous but fairly small-scale genre into the dominant mode of cinematic discourse."[1] "What *Star Wars* and other similar breakaway hits from 1977 onwards achieved was to bring back many people who had previously given up on the cinema, and also to generate new stories (based on long-standing traditions, of course, but never told before) that were so appealing that they have been extended and retold countless times both in films and in other media ever since."[2] In fact, it is often claimed that the *Star Wars* movies actually saved Twentieth Century Fox from extinction. Of course film-magazine polls largely reflect the general age of their readership, but frequently *ANH* or *ESB* top the lists of "favorite film," and Darth Vader tops the "best screen villain" and even "best screen character" categories. In 1977 *ANH* was voted the year's best film by the Los Angeles Critics Association, was selected as one of the best five English-language films of the year by the National Board of Review, and made it onto the annual "ten best" lists of *Time* and the *New York Times*. It received ten Academy Award nominations (including best picture and screenplay), winning seven (all in the technical and craft categories). This was considerable critical as well as popular acclaim for a supposedly infantile "blockbuster" science-fiction movie.

In fact, the impact of *SW* has famously been felt even in political life (Reagan's Star Wars defense policy of the 1980s). *SW* creator George Lucas made some self-effacing comments in 1983 when claiming that the saga has "given people a certain amount of joy in a certain time of history . . . [and

that ultimately] it will be nothing more than a minor footnote in the pop culture of the 1970s and 1980s."[3] This impression now seems to have been too unrealistically modest. Instead, as Garry Jenkins more accurately observes, "*Star Wars* had, in many ways, been the central story of its era." And with the release of the cinematic special editions of the classic trilogy in 1997, *TPM* in 1999, the classic trilogy DVDs in 2004 and *ROTS* in 2005, and the first of Disney's saga outputs in 2015, that cultural legacy has continued and been considerably deepened. "Twenty years after it began re-writing the record books," Jenkins observed at the time of the release of the Special Editions, "it seemed suddenly as if *Star Wars* had never been away."[4] Of course, with the (albeit controversial) prequel trilogy, the six seasons of the *Clone War* animations, the *Star Wars Rebels* animations, and the much-hyped *Star Wars Episode VII: The Force Awakens*, the cultural impact of the franchise continues to grow.

This phenomenal success has been something of a double-edged sword, however. After *ANH* Martin Scorsese apparently complained: "*Star Wars* was in. Spielberg was in. We [the makers of intelligent films] were finished."[5] Apparently in 1997 Lucas's ex-wife confessed: "Right now, I'm disgusted by the American film industry. There are so few good films, and part of me thinks *Star Wars* is partly responsible for the direction the industry has gone in, and I feel badly about that." There may be truth in the claim that *SW* contributed to the "infantilizing" of the cinema, exaggerating movie-makers' interest in the money that can be made from producing "children's films conceived and marketed largely for adults."[6] Yet there is also a serious danger that the saga's ethical richness may be forgotten if we see *SW* simply as a set of "Hollywood" movies. While Lucas was particularly dependent on the Hollywood machine for financing *ANH,* we should not forget that *SW,* from *ESB* until *ROTS,* can perhaps better be described as the most expensive *independent movies* ever made. Now that the Disney Corporation has purchased the rights to the franchise and has embarked on a new cinematic trilogy, the relationship between the stories and the mainstream corporate culture has shifted markedly.

I am concerned about the common claim that Lucas's *SW* movies are little more than fantasy "popcorn" fare, "heady, escapist stuff," and purely astonishing entertainment.[7] Lucas's creation undoubtedly is all of these, and originally he had hoped to return to the excitement of early adventure serials.

> I didn't want to make 2001. . . . I wanted to make a space fantasy that was more in the genre of Edgar Rice Burroughs; that whole other end of space fantasy that was there before science took it over in the Fifties. Once the

atomic bomb came, they forgot the fairy-tales and the dragons and Tolkien and all the real heroes.[8]

The roots of *SW* lie largely in the narrative traditions of folklore, fairy story, and even romantic chivalric tales. There are the magical Force, Jedi Knights with shining swords sworn to defend the good, an archetypal black knight, and so on. Each of the movies even opens with the text "A long time ago in a galaxy far, far away," which provides a clear nod back to the "Once upon a time . . ." of fairy tales. An interesting game is also to try to spot how many different materials Lucas has eclectically drawn together in his vision of the swashbuckling "classic trilogy" (or perhaps "classic thrillology")—the *Flash Gordon* serials, Westerns, Akira Kurosawa's *Hidden Fortress* (1958), the King Arthur and Robin Hood legends, J. R. R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*, *The Wizard of Oz*, and Joseph Campbell's reflections on mythology, to name but a few.[9] Samuel L. Jackson, who plays the great Jedi Master Mace Windu, sums up the feel of these films: "I look at these as the swashbuckling adventures of the modern era."[10] And this is why Gary Kurtz (producer of *ANH* and *ESB*) reveals that "We decided [with *ANH*] that we were making a *Flash Gordon*–type action adventure, and that we were coming in on Episode Four; at that time there was no thought of a series or prequels."[11] In this sense it is fascinating to observe the carefully created complexity of the backstories of the various characters, the conditions and natural habitats of these characters, and the engineering details imagined for each and every vehicle.

On the other hand, *SW* is much more than mere entertainment. Many critics and fans alike miss this, perhaps because they do not know how to approach the complex relation of these movies and popular culture. "Because popularity is commonly equated with escapism and triviality, blockbusters have either been shunned or dismissed by most academic film scholars as calculated exercises in profit-making. . . . It is perhaps time to stop condemning the New Hollywood blockbuster and to start, instead, to understand it."[12] We should remember too that, as with any generalization, popular culture should not be spoken of as a monolith and the many differences among pop culture works need to be respected. Even folklore and fairy-story narrative traditions are socially and ethically important and not merely entertaining. *SW* is not an escapist fantasy that encourages us to forget (even if for a moment) our moral responsibilities in our "real" world. In fact, if we read it well, it possesses rich resources to change or transform us as moral subjects by helping us in some measure to encounter the deep mystery of what it means to be truly human.

But is this not to take the films "too seriously" and approach them in a way that distorts their proper meaning? One critic of *ANH* writes: "This picture

was made for those (particularly males) who carry a portable shrine with them of their adolescence, a chalice of a self that was better then, before the world's affairs or—in any complex way—sex intruded."[13]

It is crucial to recognize that there is no ethically neutral narrative, no story we tell that does not say something about how we understand and value the world. "A society's mass fantasies," Archbishop of Canterbury Rowan Williams wisely warns, "are anything but trivial."[14] In fact, movies not only can tell us something of how the cultures from which they arise understand themselves, but they can equally and creatively engage with the way their audiences come to understand themselves. Bryan Stone puts it like this: "The cinema may function both as a *mirror* and as a *window*, but primarily as a *lens*. . . . Movies do not merely portray a world; they propagate a worldview. . . . [Cinema] helps us see what we might not otherwise have seen, but it also shapes what and how we see."[15] Lucas, of course, specifically designed *SW* to be broadly educational, so as to remind a morally cynical generation in the mid-1970s of the importance of being morally responsible.

> I wanted it to be a traditional moral study, to have some sort of palpable precepts in it that children could understand. There is always a lesson to be learned. Where do these lessons come from? Traditionally, we get them from church, the family, art, and in the modern world we get them from media— from movies.[16]

This is revealing and indicates that there is something distinctly misleading in the claim too often heard that movies are fun, nothing more. The entertainment-only approach is problematically naive about the formative effects of culture. After all, one should remember that the etymology of the very term *culture* comes from the Latin agricultural term *cultura* and refers to the soil that cultivates, nourishes, and supports the growth of plants. The multitalented Cicero (106–43 BCE) spoke of the "cultivation of the soul." Consequently, understanding people from their cultural expressions, the cultural artefacts that provide the conditions or soil for their self-understanding, becomes a crucial and unavoidable part of appreciating who that people is, how their views are formed, and how they understand themselves in their environment and in the world.[17] Here I would refer the reader elsewhere, particularly to my 2014 volume *The Politics of Big Fantasy*, especially the introduction, and to the ideological critiques of the saga that have emerged in recent years.

Furthermore, this fun-only approach simply distorts or violates some of Lucas's own stated intentions.[18] Lucas acknowledged, in an interview published the month following the theatrical release of *ROTJ* in 1983, that "film

and [other] visual entertainment are a pervasively important part of our culture, an extremely significant influence on the way our society operates. . . . But, for better or worse, the influence of the church, which used to be all-powerful, has been usurped by film."[19] He continued by indicating a keen awareness of not only the teaching possibilities available through contemporary forms of media, of having what he later calls "a very large megaphone," but also of the moral responsibilities of filmmakers.[20] This is a notion he mentions on a number of occasions, and he does so particularly by appealing to the possibility of myth-making, something I shall take up in more detail in chapter 1. So, as early as an interview published in April 1977, prior to the release of *SW* (from 1979 known more fully as *Star Wars Episode IV: A New Hope*), Lucas was lamenting that "there was not a lot of mythology in our society—the kind of stories we tell ourselves and our children, which is the way our heritage is passed down. Westerns used to provide that, but there weren't Westerns anymore."[21] He continued by offering the claim cited above concerning his desire to provide a "traditional moral study." On a number of occasions Lucas has connected *SW*, morality tales for children, and mythology. At some point prior to October 1982, he admitted to Dale Pollock, an early biographer, that "I wanted to make a kids' film that would strengthen contemporary mythology and introduce a basic morality."[22] Just prior to the general theatrical release of *TPM* he declared that "somebody has to tell young people what we think is a good person. I mean, we should be doing it all the time. That's what the Iliad and the Odyssey are about—'This is what a good person is; this is who we aspire to be.' You need that in a society. It's the basic job of mythology."[23] So Pollock announces that, for better or worse, "Lucas offers more than just escapist entertainment; he gives us a vision of what should be."[24]

Of course, the notion of "mythology" is not a straightforward one, as will be seen especially in chapter 1, and Lucas has tended to employ it as a reference to Joseph Campbell's work in depicting a decontextualized understanding of the "monomyth" of the heroic journey that underlies and shapes mythic tales. *SW*, he claims, is designed to be "mythological," and through this observed "mythic" template Lucas consciously attempts to provide a form of moral instruction. (Michael Kaminski's challenge to the connection between Lucas and Campbell will be discussed in a major endnote in chapter 1.)

Rohan Gowland recognizes that the classic trilogy "was not just 'entertainment'; like many biblical tales, *Star Wars* was full of lessons about life."[25] Because I am exploring the ethically interesting material of the movies, this book is not particularly interested in the typical cinematographic questions

that many voice or the worries many have about "wooden acting" and "stilted dialogue," and so on (although I do realize that bad performances in these areas can affect attitudes to the films that will consequently distract from the more thought-provoking questions about their narrative content).

But is a "theological" reading an appropriate one? This could be asked by someone who engages with these movies precisely at the level of entertainment-value alone. The *effect* of the movies on their audiences can be studied by the academic disciplines of psychology and sociology, perhaps in the guise of cultural studies, but not by theology. Yet as we will see, the mythological structure of *SW* (chapter 1) addresses in relatively profound ways many issues that theology is concerned with, and these we will explore in the following chapters: for instance, questions about God (chapter 2), good and evil (chapter 3), moral decision making, the shape of the organization of public life (chapters 4 and 5), the shape of being human (chapters 6 and 7), and hope and redemption (chapter 8).

But whether a "theological" reading is an appropriate one could be asked differently from a second perspective—that of a Christian worried that *SW* is occultic, perhaps we could say *sin*ematic. From this perspective, the saga is apparently unable, even in some small way, to point helpfully to God. Two examples of this concern were posted on a Web site message board. "A concerned mother" confessed: "We had thrown all of our Star Wars films out after I began a study of gnosticism along with my study of the freemasons. I realized that Star Wars was indeed a gnostic fairy tale—something which sounded just like the philosophy of gnostic Trevor Ravenscroft in his book about Longinus' spear—*The Spear of Destiny*—and Hitler's obsession with it. Well, the devil is the 'god of forces.'"[26] Another "concerned mother" explained what apparently happens when someone comes under the influence of *Star Wars*:

> They may be tempted to fall back into the old, sinful, godless way of thinking that man is his own god, determines the course of his life, and can save himself. . . . When non-Christians see *Star Wars*, they may renew goals which lead away from God. Their denials of God will be strengthened.

This is a damning indictment on the very project of reading *SW* theologically. Or is it? There are several possible ways of responding. For instance, because *SW* expresses something of the consciousness, hopes, and dreams of the culture from which it arose, it is important to know what it can reveal about what is happening in popular culture. Ian Maher sensibly recognizes that "Christians cannot afford to be *out of touch* with popular films if they are to remain *in touch* with the swirling currents of contemporary society" and

the ideologies that sustain it.[27] After all, a great many fans even speak of their experiences of these movies with almost religious reverence. For instance, Matt Bielby, editor of *Total Film*, comments: "For anyone whose formative years took place in the late seventies, *Star Wars* is a religious experience";[28] and Ian Nathan, editor of *Empire* magazine, admits, "It changed my life for the better. And I knew millions of others were feeling exactly the same thing at exactly the same moment. *Star Wars* became part of us."[29] Religiosity and spirituality have begun in recent years to take a new shape, and the way that many fans have responded to *SW* illustrates much of what has been happening.[30] According to Peter Krämer, *SW* helped move "spirituality and religion back to the center of American film culture."[31] Moreover, the fact that the saga is aimed "at a particularly impressionable audience" demands that its assumed and portrayed values be carefully scrutinized.[32]

Some Christians have taken another approach to the movies. Even though it is clear from various statements of Lucas that *SW* is not 'Christian' as such (see chapter 2), many have argued that there are a number of 'moments' and even a perspective within *SW* that are broadly compatible with Christianity. Consequently, "Part of my fascination with *Star Wars,*" David Wilkinson writes, "has been the way that it resonates with my Christian belief."[33] Of course, such resonances should hardly be surprising since the saga is a creation of a Western imagination—even if it does eclectically draw on non-Western resources—and the West is still colored by its Christian heritage. *SW* has in this way been used for apologetic or proclamatory purposes. Any quick internet search that combines *SW* and *God* or *church* will throw out numerous *SW-* themed or inspired sermon series, bible studies, and so on. Lucas himself announced some years ago that "Quite a number of churches have used *Star Wars* as a way of getting young people into the church. They use it as an example of certain religious ideas, which I think is good. It gives young people something entertaining to relate to and at the same time it can be used as a tool to explain certain religious concepts, more general good and evil concepts."[34] Themes of loving others, resisting evil, having faith in other people, encouraging friendship, the need for community, the importance of moral responsibility for the community, and so on are all illustrated with material from the films. Dick Staub, for instance, likens Luke's Jedi development to Christian discipleship and claims that a proclamatory use of the saga follows Paul's use of "the cultural icons of Greek culture to build a bridge to Christian truth" in his speech on Mars Hill in Athens (Acts 17).[35]

My theological use of the saga, however, is more radical than this strategy. Notice for a moment what is going on in this second possibility: non-Christian culture can provide moments of *illustration* and is helpful *only* as it furnishes

images to show *what Christians already know* on the basis of divine revelation. It cannot theologically teach or remind Christians of anything. But we should consider at least two things that justify seeing *SW*—and indeed any non-Christian text—as potentially illuminating and instructive theologically: (1) the range of God's speaking and (2) the partiality of Christian witness to the truth. Theologian Douglas John Hall expresses this first point well:

> To be a Christian theologian is, surely, to open oneself—or more accurately, to find oneself being opened—to everything: every testimony to transcendence, every thought and experience of the species, every wonder of the natural order, every reminiscence of the history of the planet, every work of art or literature, every motion picture, every object of beauty and pathos—everything under the sun, and the sun too! Nothing is excluded a priori, nothing forbidden, nothing foreign.[36]

Timothy Gorringe rightly makes the point that "culture . . . is concerned with the spiritual, ethical and intellectual significance of the material world. It is, therefore, of fundamental theological concern."[37]

The Scriptures themselves provide some examples of what I have in mind here, and two in particular stand out. First, in the New Testament, the faith of the Roman centurion Cornelius enabled the apostle Peter to hear God saying that Gentiles should not be excluded from God's coming kingdom by early Jewish Christians (Acts 10). Second, from the Old Testament, the Assyrian invasion of Israel and the Babylonian annexation of Judah came to be understood as acts of Yahweh's (God's) judgment on the chosen covenant people. On both of these occasions the "cultural resources" (the Gentile Cornelius and the Israelites' pagan neighbors) had an important teaching function to play. But it is a *negative* function as such, in that these instances can remind God's people of things they have forgotten and reveal the bad practices and teachings that have gone under the name of "God's people." After all, Peter had obviously not understood Jesus to be speaking about the universality of the gospel (Jonah's relation to the Ninevites is an Old Testament example of this theme); and the Israelites had not been adequately prepared to properly engage their neighbors. The fact that even Joseph and Daniel could work reasonably well with the non-Israelite governments of their day suggests that all was not dark outside the communities of God's people. In fact, the imperative of Paul to the church at Corinth to "flee from the worship of idols" suggests that all was not well within the life of the Christian communities (1 Cor. 10:14).

It is incumbent on Christians, then, to listen carefully to an opponent's arguments, to understand these articulated perspectives as well as they can,

and perhaps even humbly to admit that their conversation partner can identify problems affecting Christianity. This, however, is *not* the same as taking the further step of admitting that the *worldview* of the conversation partner is necessarily legitimate. Nonetheless, Christians have good biblical reason to expect that God can and will speak, even if only faintly discernible, in and through what they might otherwise consider to be strange places.[38]

The second theological layer to my appeal here has to do with the place of sin in Christian thinking. It is strange that a considerable number of Christians speak and act as if sin affects only what they *do* and even how they think about what they should do but not the *very process and content* of their believing itself. And so they imagine that Christian creeds and confessions are handed down in such a way that those who confess them today know what they mean just as clearly as their original framers did, and in this way they become deposits of faith to be protected (at all costs!). Yet Christian believing is intrinsically a complex affair, and what we think are good readings of the Bible are often influenced by many factors and not merely the presence of God's illuminating Holy Spirit. The fact that Paul cautions the Corinthian church against being too sure of itself should be a continual warning to us not prematurely to overstep our limitations: we do not yet see face-to-face but rather see through a glass darkly (1 Cor. 13:12). The real problem with Christian believing arises less from the fact that we know ourselves to be sinful than from our forgetfulness of it. The Christian claim is that Jesus Christ *is* the Truth and Truthfulness themselves enfleshed (John 14:6), and Christians are being led into the Truth that he is (John 16:13). That means that Christian communities have decisive theological reasons to resist any nation, group, church, or people claiming *absoluteness* or *finality* for anything they say or do. Our communities and nations are tempted to identify themselves *unqualifiedly* with God and God's way only when they forget that all perspectives may be flawed, and this mistake then leads them unhesitatingly to oppose all who are not like us in their self-assertion. A little knowledge of church history indicates where this process leads, and it certainly does not make comforting reading. Recognizing this is not to import a political problem into a properly apolitical theology. Rather, it is to call the way we live in absolute finality what it is: idolatry.

This may all seem a long way away from evaluating the *SW* movies, but it is important to indicate what features should guide our reflections and to encourage those who might otherwise reject this book outright to find ways of getting theological insight from these movies as much as is possible. An uncharitable reading of cultural artifacts—and here this means Lucas's creations—is not a legitimate option for Christians. Truthfulness and truth-telling

are vital marks of the call to witness to God's healing and hospitable embrace of God's creatures. Albert Mohler complains that "in trying to evoke 'spirituality,' George Lucas turns to myth instead of the Bible." I hope to help the reader understand that the assumptions underlying his view are *theologically* mistaken and not merely *practically* so.[39] Only when the morality of non-Christian materials *clearly contradicts* Christian virtue should the question of the vice of those particular materials even arise. In order to identify the light and darkness within our world, we have to become morally intelligent. In the words of Martin Luther King Jr. (1929–68), we have "a moral responsibility to be intelligent," for only in learning to "read" or understand the so-called world and the gospel together do we learn to become wise or become people who can discern God's presence.[40] Tolkien once admitted that, at its best, fantasy serves as "a far-off gleam or echo of *evangelium* [i.e., gospel] in the real world."[41] While Lucas does not share the Oxford don's particular Christian commitments, and his material should certainly not be squeezed into a Christian framework at the points where it is most resistant, nonetheless his films are rich resources for theological reflection that can encourage some of the unlearning and relearning necessary in Christian life. To miss that is to miss the kind of life-stories that they tell. To miss it is also to fail to develop an appropriately honest and diligent form of media literacy or cultural discernment. We need to be more aware of how cultures are born and how their values are reinforced beyond simply looking for whether there is bad language, realistic violence, sexual references, and so on.

The editors of *Star Wars and Philosophy* observe that "in *Star Wars*, conflict is a constant, but it's not the fighting in the 'wars' of the title that spurs the development of the main characters' personalities. . . . Instead, it's the struggle to understand and overcome deep problems of identity, truth, freedom, and the tragic side of life that defines the rise, fall, and rise again of the Skywalker family and the impact they have on allies and enemies alike. Essentially, the *Star Wars* movies tell a simple story of tragedy, courage, and redemption."[42] The following chapters will turn to these themes once we have asked more fully about how *SW* can be "truthful" (chapter 1).

What Is New to the Revised Edition?

Not only has this introduction been revised, but some new material has been added to the first chapter in order to make it clear what an appeal to *SW* as modern myth properly involves and to contest, in a very long endnote, a recently published but weak reading of the matter by Michael Kaminski. An

occasional tweak appears in chapters 2–8 and new material supplements the afterword. This tinkering is itself very Lucas-like. I have added the lengthy chapter 9 in order to critically reflect on *Star Wars: The Force Awakens*. It provokes a series of questions that have arisen in earlier chapters, especially in relation to matters of violence and the good life, and does so in a way that have dissatisfied many commentators about the original 1977 movie. I have also updated the bibliography to include a number of volumes that I have worked with since 2007.

In order to go deeper into many of the issues raised in this book with regard to film and cultural theories as they address matters of ideology, politics, and identity, I would encourage readers to use my recent studies *The Politics of Big Fantasy: The Ideologies of* Star Wars, The Matrix, *and* The Avengers (Jackson: McFarland Press, 2014) and *Identity Politics in George Lucas'* Star Wars (Jackson: McFarland Press, 2016) as companions to this book. They do a number of things differently than *The Gospel according to Star Wars*, including delving into greater critical depth, and they also operate on the assumption that it is ethically important to analyze such a culturally pervasive set of movies.

Over the next few years I plan to revisit and develop the argument of the final chapter once *Episodes VIII* and *IX* are released. I also intend, at some future point, to critically engage with George Lucas's early dystopian movie *THX 1138*.

Notes for Reading

Finally, let me share some of my parameters for this book, which should help the reader anticipate the ethos of what will appear in the various chapters.

I have deliberately written the book as jargon-free as possible, without assuming much or any theological knowledge on the part of the readership. It has been humbling to discover that my general readership academic text has been the subject of numerous discussion forums and blogs, as well as church study groups and nonreligious SW fan groups. I have learned, for instance, that reference to the book has been made in numerous sermons/homilies and in popular culture talks and that American troops in the Middle East have been reading it in groups. I would love to hear what they have made of it.

While I do not assume familiarity of theological matters among my readership, I do anticipate that readers will have at least a basic familiarity with the movies. It might be fair to say that the level of detailed reference to the movies actually requires readers to have more than a passing acquaintance

with the movies. A few reviews of the first edition of the book noted the "geek-ishness" of the references. This is, I would argue, necessary in order to try and lay bare the rationale for my reasoning, the attempted validation for my arguments and perspective on the movies. Anything less would treat the movies with little respect and succumb to a practice of me simply asserting my opinion rather than laying out my claim through justified argument. There already is too much weakly researched and quickly written commentary on *SW*.

There is one little detail that I need to explain in case knowledgeable fans of the franchise think I am anachronistically importing a later category into my use of material. The first movie made in the saga was simply entitled *SW*, and at one stage it was slated to be called "The Star Wars." I will, for the sake of ease, refer to it by the title *ANH*. In July 1978, in order to coincide with the impending release of a sequel, *SW* was retroactively retitled *Star Wars Episode IV: A New Hope*. The next movie in the franchise was *ESB,* and it came with the subtitle "Episode V."

I attempt to respect the particularities of the movies themselves and the conditions of their production and distribution. It concerns me when the materials are used in order to justify something that is actually foreign to them. For instance, and I need to make this clear, there is a real problem with studies that make the movies Christian movies, or that try to read them as Taoist or as Buddhist, and so on. This is to impose a Procrustean framework on the movies that is not always illuminating, and it is to operate with a lack of integrity. Hopefully chapter 2 will make it clear that Lucas's own portrayal of the Force is considerably more eclectic. Therefore spiritual readings of the movies are in real danger of flattening out the material and of expressing a considerable naiveté on the part of the writer. They all too rarely do the hard work of familiarizing themselves with matters of the movies' contexts or engaging with different and conflicting readings of the material. As a consequence, they seriously fail to listen carefully to these film texts. Whether intentionally or not, this shows a profound disrespect for this particular body of cinematic work. That is not to say that the writer and reader cannot come to the movies with a particular set of questions or assumptions. It is important to continue to ask whether and how far movies like those in the *SW* series can be appropriated by Christians, Muslims, Buddhists, Jews, political liberals, political neoliberals, and others. One of the dangers with the way these questions are asked in practice, however, is that often the questioners have an insufficiently informed understanding even of their own theological, philosophical, and political traditions.

The study will on occasion engage in some theological argument, and the reader otherwise unfamiliar with this approach will thereby be inducted into

traditions of argument and disagreement among Christian theologians. For those who balk at the thought of a theological politics or of Christian non-violence, for instance, I can only direct them to do more theological research in order to appreciate the long and difficult history of theological claims and perspectives.

Similarly, I will often engage in presenting the material in conversation and/or argument with other relevant readings, perspectives, and scholarly discussions. With the increasing ill-tempered style of self-assertion that pervades the blogosphere, in which personal opinion seems to have become a virtue, this too will be something of a novelty to many readers. I make no apology for my discussions of others' studies for a number of reasons. First, even our opinions do not arise in a vacuum but are shaped by the environments we come from and the engagements or relations we have had with others. It would be naive as well as disrespectful to those who have written on the topics addressed in this book not to consider their work. Second, I hope to demonstrate where my claims are new by offering critical observation and reasoning about the claims made by others. Third, my critical engagement aims to reason out my arguments rather than simply assert my opinions or fan theories about the matters at hand. It remains to be seen, of course, whether my attempt to enhance the quality of reasoning, conversation, and argument about *SW* and theological matters is at all successful.

Another matter that is important to indicate at the outset is that I am focusing the book's attention on Christianity. Every study needs to focus on something, but there are numerous reasons for this particular concentration. After all, apart from a handful of Christian devotional texts that attempt to force intersections between *SW* and their understanding of Christianity, there are very few in-depth discussions of the overlaps. Of course, there is good reason for this, as chapter 2 will endeavor to make clear. The influence of a variety of Eastern traditions is particularly evident in Lucas's movies. He himself admits that Yoda "is kind of like a little Dalai Lama."[43] However, it is important to recognize that *SW* was largely a product of a modern Western pluralist perspective on these non-Western traditions. Not only is this a point that chapter 2 specifically hopes to highlight, but it is something that the book as a whole engages with. Moreover, my critical methodological aim is to engage with *SW* from a Christian theological angle, just as Matthew Bortolin's deals with it from a Buddhist perspective and John Porter's tackles it from a Taoist outlook.[44]

Before I move on to the next point, it is worth indicating that because this is a study of *SW* from a theological perspective, I do not explicitly spell out my own theological views. This is a study not a theological autobiography.

On the other hand, the theological angle very much reveals what my particular perspective is, from the theological sources I select to the types of claims that I make to the positions I raise distinctive questions about.

Despite occasionally glancing at the Expanded Universe series when this sheds light on Lucas's movies, my discussion will largely avoid it for three reasons: the materials are not exactly an expression of his own controlled vision; the *ROTJ*'s ethos and end celebration have an apocalyptic ambience or mood of climactic resolution that makes the post-*ROTJ* New Jedi Order material interesting but problematic; and the appearance of *TFA* has rendered this material covering the post-*ROTJ* events redundant.

This last observation, of course, then raises the question of the Disney Corporation's artistic control of *Episodes VII–IX*. Technically these movies have to be counted as canon, but it remains important to recognize the possibility of a significant difference in vision (political, religious, and so on) between Lucas's stories and the more recent ones. Chapter 9 attempts to lay bare certain instances where that becomes morally important.

This book spends little time exploring the culture of *SW*'s fan-base, noting it only when it affects the way these movies are understood. It is of no interest to this study that a number of fans might emotionally react against my use of *Episodes I–III*, or that others might have an emotional investment in some part of the Expanded Universe materials and others not, or that some feel *TFA* is a strong movie while others stridently disagree.

Finally, although Lucas's six movies are all episodes of *SW*, these six films have different emphases and perspectives. This might seem to contrast with the movie maker's own admission: "I see it all as one movie; I don't pay much attention to whether people like individual chapters or not."[45] Of course, he could be referring here instead to the thread underlying the various narratives. Throw in J. J. Abrams's *TFA* (and the more recent *Rogue One*) and the canon of the *SW* franchise becomes more disparate again, albeit not as much as the *Alien* franchise, or at least not yet.

Chapter One

A New Myth

The Truthfulness of *Star Wars*

> *What you get out of it is what you bring to the cinema, and you read*
> *into the thing the things you want to read into it.*
> —Gary Kurtz, cited in John Baxter, *George Lucas:*
> *A Biography* (London: Harper Collins, 1999), 166.

*O*ne of the many reasons for watching SW is the way it relates to and reveals currents in contemporary culture (from 1977 to the present), reflecting that culture's understanding of itself and its inherent value system. Conversely the saga's success reflects a deep cultural resonance with its story that is manifested in a zealous fan base and has further enabled several of the characters to take on a life of their own (Darth Vader advertises a throat lozenge and Mark Hamill plays himself acting the Luke Skywalker character in an episode of *The Simpsons*, for instance).

However, not only does the saga distill something of the ethos of popular culture; it is also significantly culturally generative. Put another way, it can shape and reshape the ways in which many think and feel about themselves and their world. Because of its massive appeal worldwide—particularly at a time characterized by fragmented and professionalized knowledge—*SW* is enviably well positioned for mass communication. It is well placed to appeal to, generate, and reinforce a certain collective consciousness with a shared stock of images, narratives, and categories. As Orson Scott Card observes, "Hardly anybody can answer the easy Bible questions on Jeopardy anymore, but almost everybody can tell you about Obi-Wan Kenobi, Darth Vader, Yoda, and The Force."[1] James Ford suggests it even carries "more influence among young adults than the traditional religious myths of our culture."[2] In this way the saga seems to fit Conrad Kottak and Kathryn Kozaitis's criteria for "myth": expressing "fundamental cultural values," being "widely and recurrently told among, and . . .

[having] special meaning to, people who grow up in a particular culture," and also "at least partly fictionalized."[3] Yet critics such as John Baxter see Lucas's control over the saga as somewhat subverting this sense of *ANH* as popular mythology:

> Although Lucas claimed he had created *Star Wars* to endow mankind with the mythology it lacked, his behaviour became less and less philanthropic with the film's success. Over the next decade, he became obsessively proprietorial of his characters and ideas, ruthlessly pursuing anyone using them without permission and payment. . . . Real mythology, by its very nature, is communal, and open to interpretation by all. But Lucas . . . hadn't given us a mythology; we could only rent it.[4]

Lucas himself is profoundly aware of the teaching possibilities available through the medium of film. He claims to have been presented with "a very large megaphone" in making his films, and he consciously uses this to provide a kind of instruction in moral matters.[5] "Somebody has to tell young people what we think is a good person. . . . You need that in a society."[6]

It is this supposed mythic quality that makes *SW* as myth such rich material for theological and moral reflection. Steven Spielberg claims, "George [has] . . . created a mythology of characters—he touched something that needed touching in everybody."[7] *SW* draws on certain mythic archetypes, a practice that enables it to become a hybrid of *Flash Gordon,* Japanese samurai epics, Carlos Castaneda's *Tales of Power*, and the theologically profound fantasy fiction of Tolkien and C. S. Lewis. *SW* is Lucas's myth, exploring possibilities of struggle, journeying, discovery (particularly self-discovery), good and evil, and so on. In order to understand the performance of these works, we need to turn to the well-known work of Joseph Campbell (1903–87), which attempted to identify and describe the general pattern that mythologies have taken, especially the hero mythologies. In fact, when we speak further about "myth and popular culture," the prominence of Joseph Campbell's PBS interviews,[8] and the popularity of the 1997 Smithsonian Institution's National Air and Space Museum exhibition "*SW* and the Magic of Myth" are the main reasons why "in the public's imagination, the terms 'myth' and '*SW*' are very closely linked."[9] As Liam Neeson, the actor portraying Qui-Gon Jinn in *TPM* declares,

> George's tales, the *Star Wars* tales, have really tapped into the psyche and mood that popular modern culture has never done before. For me that says yes, these films are incredibly well made, but also it's tapping into a void

which we have as human beings that we have kind of lost something. And George provides . . . the great storytelling sense of myth.[10]

It is through acquaintance with Campbell's *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* that *ANH* in particular is shaped, although, as we will see, Lucas goes much further in providing a vision of society that questions the dominant values of modern Western liberal individualism.[11]

Campbell's *Hero* compares the myths of various cultures and concludes, echoing the work of the Swiss psychologist Carl Gustav Jung (1875–1961), that they are all the same "monomyth." In other words, each myth broadly depicts the same hero, even if that is under different culturally specific guises. Consequently, the characters driving every mythic narrative are ancient or "primordial" archetypes. A cardinal problem with this approach, of course, is the fact that it "is interested less in analyzing myths than in using myths to analyze human nature."[12] Campbell unfortunately "cites hundreds of myths and extricates from them hundreds of archetypes . . . [but] he analyzes few whole myths," and deals with even those in insufficient critical depth.[13] Also, his assertion that all mythologies are broadly the same seems too strained, although we will not develop this observation for the moment.

"A Long Time Ago . . ." *Star Wars*, Genre Pastiche, and the Fairy Tale

An early draft summary (May 1973) of what was then tentatively titled *The Star Wars* was set in the thirty-third century. Lucas had in mind a Buck Rogers/ Flash Gordon type action/adventure story, but he failed to procure the rights to remake *Flash Gordon*. So he began to develop an original hero-in-space adventure story. The story gradually was removed from a future-of-this-world setting, and early in 1976 the script for *The Adventure of Luke Starkiller as Taken from the Journal of the Whills: Star Wars* opened with a longer version of the now famous scene-setting line: "A long, long time ago in a galaxy far, far away . . ." Possibly a result of Lucas's familiarity with Bruno Bettelheim's *The Uses of Enchantment*, this introduction provided a distinct conceptual link to fairy tales and legends; in other words, to the stories of our past.

Like Tolkien's *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*, Lucas had conceived of *SW* as being part of a grand narrative being recounted many years

later, something picked up by Peter Jackson's setting of his Hobbit trilogy. To that end, Lucas developed the idea of the *Journal of the Whills*, echoing the function of Tolkien's ancestral mythology of Middle-Earth in *The Silmarillion*. This, Lucas claims, "was meant to emphasize that whatever story followed came from a book," an inspirational legend of chivalry, heroism, and adventure passed down through the ages in the form of a book, a "holy book."[14] "Originally, I was trying to have the story be told by somebody else," Lucas explains. "[T]here was somebody watching this whole story and recording it, somebody probably wiser than the mortal players in the actual events."[15]

In the opening crawl there is a reference to a princess, but this is an echo not merely of fairy stories but of another influence. Initially, when searching for a story to tie a few visual ideas together (principally, the cantina scene and the space battle), the story became shaped around Akira Kurosawa's sixteenth-century adventure *The Hidden Fortress* (1958). While the narrative developed through subsequent drafts, the influence of this movie remains in several places in the final version: in the perspective on the story offered through the two squabbling peasants, Tahei and Matashichi (in *SW*, C3PO and R2D2); in General Rokurota Makabe (in *SW*, General Obi-Wan Kenobi), who rescues the young Princess Yuki (in *SW*, Princess Leia Organa) to return her to her own people (in *SW*, Leia's family on Alderaan, and then the Rebel Alliance on Yavin IV). Lucas also named his religious order the Jedi after the Japanese term *jidai geki*, meaning period film; and the Jedi were dressed in Buddhist-like monastic robes with kimonos underneath. At one stage Lucas even toyed with the idea of making *SW* a wholly Japanese affair.

The director from Modesto was keen, too, on the swashbuckler movies of old, such as those starring Errol Flynn, and from this comes the notion of the Jedi as knights and of their weapons as sabres (albeit a technologically sophisticated version, lightsabers). The eminently popular Westerns of Lucas's youth had enough of an impact upon him for *SW* to raid that particular genre, with its frontier hero mythology, for some of its inspiration. The saloon scene in John Ford's *The Searchers* (1956) "partially inspired the [Mos Eisley] cantina sequence";[16] Tatooine was a frontier environment, with settlers under constant threat from nomadic indigenous peoples (Tusken Raiders or Sand People); Han Solo is an old-fashioned gunslinger, kitted out in waistcoat, boots, and low-hanging gun belt; Luke's uncle Owen and aunt Beru are farmers living at the edge of civilization; and the gun and the gangs (the Hutts, with their hired hands and bounty hunters) are the "law."

There are also references to, among other things, Isaac Asimov's *Foundation* stories in the term "The Empire"; to the histories of imperial Rome,

Britain, and Nazi Germany; to Fritz Lang's 1926 masterpiece *Metropolis* (Lucas's C3PO); and Carlos Castaneda's *Tales of Power*.

But while *SW* involves something of a pastiche of genres, its eclecticism is not a simple homage. Instead, its referential diversity suggests that here we have something that sums up all others in a single instance. This would consequently entail that it becomes a representative narrative. This, in turn, has much to do with its appeal to myth, and specifically the kind of understanding of myth it is largely predicated on.

According to Lucas, "being a student in the Sixties, I wanted to make socially relevant films. . . . But then I got this great idea for a rock & roll movie, with cars and all the stuff I knew about as a kid."[17] As he was completing *American Graffiti* (1973), he began to slowly design his space adventure. His first foray into theatrical moviemaking with *THX 1138* (1971) had been a financial disaster two years before, and he was having problems selling the idea of Apocalypse Now, which he had spent some of the past four years developing—Vietnam movies were too controversial for film studios and audiences at that stage.

SW was conceived against a backdrop of cultural turmoil in America—the Vietnam War limped to its ignominious end, and many in the nation suffered from traumatic introspection; President Richard Nixon was implicated in the Watergate scandal (1974); and economic misery loomed on the horizon. Francis Ford Coppola had challenged his friend Lucas to make "a happier kind of film" than *THX 1138*.[18] In response, *SW* was supposedly created to encourage wonder, an enjoyment of stories, and a fantasy imagination among the youth in a post-Vietnam era. More specifically, Lucas hoped to reeducate young people.

To many critics, *SW*, and the director's claims concerning it, look like a return to the older American hero myths, and thus view the film as a simple product of escapism that both emotionally comforts the traumatized American psyche and politically mitigates the possibility of learning from the mistakes that resulted in Vietnam in the first place. So Dan Rubey, in a sharply written paper, claims that Lucas's "ingenuous statements about fantasy and kids and the irrational serve to disguise Lucas's conservative ideological bias."[19] For instance, the Empire's Nazi look resonates for American audiences, with its clear reference to less morally complex wars, and thus reromanticizes American involvement in conflict. Influential film critic Pauline Kael even describes *SW* (and Spielberg's *Jaws* [1975]) as infantilizing the cinema, reconstituting the spectator as a child and then overwhelming him with sound and spectacle, obliterating irony, aesthetic self-consciousness, and critical reflection.[20] Andrew Gordon, among others, consequently claims

that *SW* responds to the need for Americans to renew faith in themselves as the "good guys" on the world scene.

That reading, however, can and should be contested. First, Lucas's political/cultural dystopian film *THX 1138*, adapted from his Samuel Warner Memorial Scholarship–winning student film *THX 1138.4EB/Electronic Labyrinth* (1967), is a critical observation on the United States of the late 1960s and early 70s. The film accuses U.S. society of promoting a dehumanizing capitalism that makes its citizens into conformists in the same way their Communist enemies did.

Second, when Lucas's significant involvement in originally conceiving of the politically subversive *Apocalypse Now* ended, he admitted to migrating several of its broad themes into SW.[21] In particular, America, he claims, is acting in ways similar to the "evil Empire"; the Emperor Palpatine is supposedly like Richard Nixon, and Lucas speaks of Palpatine both as Nixon-like and "the classic devil character";[22] and the Rebel Alliance's guerrilla fighters are like the Vietcong (even if they were represented by an all-American cast).[23] So in an early draft of *SW* in 1973, Lucas envisaged "a large technological empire going after a small group of freedom fighters."[24] In pouring his political observations into his notes for his planned space opera, Lucas wrote that the planet of Aquilae is "a small independent country like North Vietnam." Consequently, "The Empire is like America ten years from now after gangsters assassinated the Emperor and were elevated to power in a rigged election. . . . We are at a turning point: fascism or revolution."[25] *ROTJ* takes up this idea again.

> Originally I started writing *Star Wars* because I couldn't get *Apocalypse Now* off the ground. When I was doing *Apocalypse Now* it was about this totally insane giant technological society that was fighting these poor little people. They have little sticks and things, and they completely cow this technological power, because the technological power didn't believe they were any threat. They were just a bunch of peasants. The original draft of *Star Wars* was written during the Vietnam War where a small group of ill-equipped people overcame a mighty power. It was not a new idea. Attila the Hun had overrun the Roman Empire; the American colonies had been able to defeat the British Empire. So the main theme of the film was that the Imperial Empire would be overrun by humanity in the form of these cute little teddy bears.[26]

Third, it is important to observe that *American Graffiti* produced the kind of fan-mail that convinced Lucas that an upbeat mood movie could be more transformative of young people's increasingly fractured lives. "Traditionally we get . . . [moral values] from the church, the family, and in the modern world we get them from the media—from movies."[27] In response, among

other things, he lightened the serious tone by introducing more humor into *SW*'s third script draft (Aug. 1, 1975). It consequently makes sense to understand Lucas's claims concerning challenging the post-Vietnam mood as an attempt to encourage a new hope: not a wallowing in self-pity or pacifying introspection but a learning to be moral agents giving of themselves and taking responsibility for one another's well-being.

Archetypally Mythical

As early as 1977 (the month *before SW*'s theatrical release) Lucas declares: "I wanted to do a modern fairy tale, a myth."[28] What does he mean by "myth" and by *SW* as updating "ancient mythological motifs"?[29] What has been discussed above provides several clues.

The first is the connection between moral truths and myths. Most commonly the journalistic use of the term "myth" operates in contrast to the terms "truth" or "fact." This is largely a hangover from late nineteenth-century studies. So for E. B. Tylor (1832–1917), myths are primitive prescientific explorations of the world that have to be read as literal, and accordingly scientifically redundant, explanations of states of affairs. In contrast, Lucas attempts to provide what he considers to be truthful insight into the nature of things and persons and thereby provide a context for moral reflection and education through a particular visual narrative form. In this he builds more on twentieth-century scholarly developments.

The second is Lucas's reference to the updating of "*ancient* mythological motifs."[30] The idea is not to generate a 'new myth', since such a thing is, by the very *cultural* nature of myths, not possible anyway. Myths are stories that *cultures* tell about themselves and expressions of what cultures deem to be valuable and meaningful (morally and spiritually)—not narratives that flow from a single visionary. Accordingly, the young director from Modesto attempts to discern something in myths that he feels has been unfortunately lost in the culture of its time.

The third is Lucas's reference to "ancient mythological *motifs*, suggesting that myths are largely alike and are not embedded within the values and vision of the specific cultures that have generated them. In this approach he had learned from the likes of Joseph Campbell. Even though it was not until after *ROTJ* that Lucas and Campbell became friends, it had largely been through discovering Campbell's *Hero* that the script for *ANH* had been edited, and Lucas could later call him a mentor.[31] Lucas studied anthropology in college for a couple of years, and there he encountered Campbell's

Hero of a Thousand Faces.[32] Campbell's book had provided a much-needed source of inspiration and direction when both *ANH*'s narrative structure and its character forms were being composed. "It's possible that if I had not run across him I would still be writing *Star Wars* today."[33] When writing *SW* "I was going along on my own story, I was trying to write whatever I felt. And then I would go back once I'd written a script . . . and check it against the classic model of the hero's journey . . . to see if I had gone off the deep end, and simply by following my own inspiration . . . it was very close to the model."[34] Here Lucas explicitly admits using the hero myth as a touchstone for *SW*, checking his writing against the "classical model" (or, rather, Campbell's version), and discovering that he was already working in these terms. In fact, when Lucas came to show Campbell the movies at his home, the myth critic positively and generously remarked, "I thought real art stopped with Picasso, Joyce, and Mann. Now I know it hasn't."[35] If nothing else, this debt to the Campbellian hero enables *SW* to resist to some degree the most virulent of complaints that modern Hollywood has shifted movies away from character and plot to exhilarating spectacle (however, the complaints that *TPM* has fallen into this trap are legion). It is simply a mistake to lament that *SW* "displaced narrative and moved cinema into a revived realm of spectacular excess."[36] Lucas is able to draw from a well-stocked store of ancient possibilities for the general structure of his plot and personnel, and even for the general ethical framework in the identification and cultivation of human wisdom. Nonetheless, as we will discuss in chapter 2, *ANH*'s indebtedness to Campbell potentially weakens its construal of the Force.

As mentioned earlier, for E. B. Tylor myths are primitive prescientific explorations of the world that have to be read literally, as primitive explanations of states of affairs. Modern science, however, has rendered myth, and the myth-making stage of culture, redundant. This primitive explanatory account of myth *reduces* the mythic forms to a single type, and a very modern one at that. But this is not what either Campbell or Lucas use mythic forms for. Campbell sees things differently, and here he builds on the foundations laid in 1876 by Austrian scholar Johann Georg von Hahn regarding the Aryan hero tales and Lord Raglan's 1936 linking of the myth of the hero (the god) with ritual (following J. G. Frazer) with his patterning of mythic narrative. The shape of Raglan's treatment of mythic narrative considerably overlaps with Campbell's account of the hero's journey, as well as many elements of Lucas's plot: The hero's mother is a royal virgin, the father a king. The circumstances of conception are unusual. The hero is reputed to be the son of a god. At birth there is an attempt to kill him, but the hero is spirited away. The hero is reared by foster parents in a far country and is told nothing

of this as he grows up. On reaching adulthood, the hero returns or goes after his future kingdom. He achieves a victory over the king and/or a wild beast/dragon/giant. He marries a princess, often the daughter of his predecessor. He becomes king, and for a time he reigns uneventfully. Later he loses favor with the gods or his subjects. He is driven from his throne and city. The hero comes to a mysterious death, often on the top of a hill. His children, if any, do not succeed him. His body is not buried, but nevertheless he has one or more holy sepulchres.

Most controversially, however, Campbell compares the myths of various cultures and argues, following Carl Jung's theory of archetypes, that they are all the same monomyth. Ignoring cultural specificities, he claims that there is broadly the same hero in each one, only with this essence being displayed under different, and culturally specific, guises.[37] Yet while Campbell "cites hundreds of myths and extricates from them hundreds of archetypes . . . he analyzes few whole myths," and in insufficient critical depth.[38] In fact, "He is interested less in analyzing myths than in using myths to analyze human nature." Hence John Lyden is right to argue that "one of the most striking things one finds in reading Campbell's works is his amazing ability to ignore the points of the individual tales he is telling; all are made to fit the mold of the one 'true' story of the 'Hero with a thousand faces' mapped out in the book of that title."[39] What emerges is not interest in the many creation, fertility, or deliverance myths but rather a fascination with the myth of the hero's journey, particularly the psychological one from childhood to adulthood—a journey of self-discovery.

It is this conspicuously Campbellian motif of the *hero's* journey that dominates the structure of the classic trilogy. These are the adventures of Luke Skywalker. Even so, crucially, the shape of this noticeably fits the spirit of the prequels less well. These present instead "the tragedy of Anakin Skywalker," and thus the *tragic* hero's journey. This shift in focus and mood in the prequel trilogy forces a considerable reevaluation of *Episodes IV–VI*. We can now see that the saga is essentially concerned with Anakin Skywalker/Darth Vader more than with Luke Skywalker. In fact, it becomes even more obvious that in the classic trilogy itself the characterization of Darth Vader is in dynamic and not in static archetypal terms (such as with Darths Sidious and Maul). In *ANH* Vader simply plays the space-serial part of the archetypal "baddie," dressed up for the occasion in armor and a cape of nobility while wielding a sword, evoking memories of sinister medieval black knights crossed with Japanese samurai warriors and Nazi SS troopers. But by *ESB* he is stunningly revealed as Luke's father. He is the one whom Obi-Wan had spoken of in such glowingly heroic terms earlier in *ANH*. And by *ROTJ*

Vader himself becomes instrumental in both defeating the Sith and saving his son from death. Noticeably—and this is important, as chapters 5 and 6 will demonstrate—Lucas comes to critique and reconceive the popular notion of the hero, particularly with respect to issues of heroic violence and the place of the heroic ego. The hero's journey is one into sainthood rather than into warrior heroism, and here Lucas distinctly echoes Campbell, according to whom "the hero is still striving, but for oneness with the cosmos, not for control over it. . . . He is, moreover, acting on behalf of others, not for just himself. He is still heroic, for he must still undertake a daring journey to an unknown land, but his heroism is peaceful rather than hostile."[40]

Despite the theme of solidarity with his fellows expressed in the hero's return "from this mysterious adventure with the power to bestow boons on his fellow man," the hero's journey also evokes images of the Western celebration of the individual and his or her self-made success.[41] Campbell's own work in *Hero* is plagued by a tension at just this point. On the one hand, he claims that the journey is both metaphysical (concerning the nature of the reality of all things) and psychological (concerning the individual's psyche), and that both of these are needed. Yet, on the other hand, he tends to exalt the individual and his or her role in society because of the way he draws on Jung's psychological reading of mythic archetypes. The essence of mythology for Campbell is predominantly the journey of the hero *from childhood to adulthood*. According to him, all myth and religion are little more than metaphors for this interior journey of self-discovery. This encourages in the audience or reader, through identification with the hero's story, the idea that "that old man up there has been blown away. You've got to find the Force inside you."[42] According to John Lyden, Campbell has imposed something of Western liberal philosophy, so that "the individual realizes he himself is the absolute, the creator, the center of his own universe . . . and so is responsible for all that happens in it."[43] Consequently, Campbell summarizes his findings in *The Power of Myth* as "follow your bliss." Several critics have complained that this is, at its worst, a justification for selfishness, and at best, something that will find it difficult to resist rampant self-concern (what we might call "Western *egolatry*"). Moreover, the consequences for matters of justice are pronounced:

> Campbell cannot take the problem of undeserved suffering seriously; we deserve everything that happens to us, for we make our own universe. . . . The only "mystery" is what lurks in my own unconscious, which can be plumbed via depth psychology and interpretation of my myths and dreams.[44]

Crucially Lucas emphasizes more the importance of social relations such as friendship and responsibility for the common good (see chapter 7). In fact the whole spirit of the saga works *against* the individualism that dominates the imagination of the modern Western world. Therefore, Campbell's analysis of mythology is echoed in the saga only very broadly and only up to a point. It is more the detailed dynamic of *ANH*'s writing in particular and not its originally prepared plan that resonates with *Hero*. As Lucas himself admits, "There is a Joseph Campbell connection, but it's just one of many."[45]

As I mentioned above, where *Hero* does make sense of the saga is in several of *ANH*'s characterizations, in particular its "hero," Luke Skywalker. This youth is introduced as a stereotypical teenager—whiny, petulant, self-absorbed, a daydreamer with little taste for mundane chores, and so on. He initially complains about having to clean up the newly purchased droids when requested to do so by his uncle, expressing instead his desire to "play" (by going "into Tosche station [at Anchorhead] to pick up some power-converters"). The portrayal of the desert world of Tatooine is symbolically important in this regard too. According to Campbell, the hero eventually breaks free from the secure everyday world in which he is tempted to stay. But in *ANH* Tatooine represents something a little different. It is "a big hunk of nothing" (Biggs Darklighter to Luke, *ANH* deleted scene) that prompts C3PO to complain, "What a desolate place this is." It represents a drying up of Luke's dreams, the barren setting for the emptiness of his life and the frustration of his longings, the representation of all that he needs to separate himself from in order to gain an independent life. He is, Roy Anker argues, "quite literally, 'down on the farm.'"[46] The youth finds life in this setting stifling and burdensome, which is why he yearns for, in Palpatine's words to Anakin in *ROTS*, "a life of significance." Stimulation comes merely momentarily through the escapist thrills of recklessly racing his T-16 Skyhopper and using it to "bulls-eye wamp-rats." In fact, after an incident in which the youth "busted up the Skyhopper pretty bad," he was "grounded" by a furious Uncle Owen "for the rest of the season" (*ANH* deleted scene). Biggs feels prompted to warn: "You ought to take it a little easy, Luke. You may be the hottest bush pilot this side of Mos Eisley, but those little Skyhoppers are dangerous. Keep it up and one day, whammo! You can end up a dark spot on the damp side of a canyon wall."

So while he dreams of adventure and excitement, this "everyman" character is an unlikely kind of hero. Even his "friends" on Tatooine insult him; Camie, for instance, sneering, "I think Wormie's caught too much sun" (*ANH*, deleted scene), and the novelization revealing that Fixer and Camie chuckle

"over Luke's ineptitude."[47] According to Aunt Beru, in Brian Daley's radio play of the period, "Even to the young people over at Anchorhead Luke is an outsider. He's not had a close friend since Biggs went to the Academy." Lucas's hero here has the qualities needed to capture the spirit of Campbell's Jungian mythical psychology, for as he admits, heroes come in all shapes and sizes, which means that a hero is not measured by being "a giant hero" or victorious in battle.

> It's just as important to understand that accepting self-responsibility for the things you do, . . . caring about other people—these are heroic acts. Everybody has the choice of being a hero or not being a hero every day of their lives.[48]

We can also recognize Campbell's so-called "call to adventure" when Luke stumbles on Princess Leia Organa's holographic message. This marks the beginning of his personal and emotional "growing up." Yet the teenager on Tatooine accepts the call only after having refused it initially, and this reluctance is significant. He is duty-bound to stay and help his uncle, Owen Lars, with the harvest: "I can't get involved. I've got work to do. It's not that I like the Empire; I hate it, but there's nothing I can do about it right now." Campbell's individualistic analysis of the hero is unhelpful here. Heroes can either, he claims blandly, voluntarily or involuntarily "accomplish the adventure."[49] The difference, however, is crucial. The fact that Luke refuses "the call to adventure" and the "crossing [of] the threshold" out of a grudging responsibility to his uncle's farm, *adds significant moral depth to his character*. (On saying that, however, perhaps the claim about hating the Empire needs to be handled carefully, since Luke was desperate, by his own admission, to enroll in the Imperial Academy.) There would be considerable moral repercussions should he volunteer himself in obedience to "the call" initially. In the context of *ANH*, Luke's eventual answer, while still flooded with ambiguity (he selfishly desires to gratify his longing for *adventure* as much as help another in trouble), *eventually leads to* what is in effect a weeding out of this lingering egoism and self-interest in the very notion of the "hero" itself. He has to "unlearn" his rather tasteless and self-indulgent longing for excitement and adventure in his encounter with Yoda (*ESB*). The *morality* of the movies is instead rooted in the sense of responsibility, despite one's own desires for self-gratification. At the very least, his very daydreaming does make him dissatisfied with thinking that "this is all there is" and in this way sets him apart from his friends and uncle on Tatooine, who (apart from Biggs) are unreflectively content with "how things are."

In the end, however, Luke's hand is forced—his only tie to Tatooine and

his familial responsibilities have been obliterated by the brutal imperial exe-
cution of Aunt Beru and Uncle Owen. Subsequently, in his journey along
with his droid sidekicks Luke is guided by the supernatural aid of the "magi-
cal" and "wise old man" Obi-Wan Kenobi; develops a "love interest" with
Princess Leia, whom he helps rescue from his shadow nemesis Darth Vader;
escapes from "the belly of the whale" (the Death Star); and brings "boon" to
his Rebel friends—and indeed the galaxy itself—against all odds by destroy-
ing the Death Star. When the parallels between Campbell's *Hero* and Lucas's
SW are construed in this fashion, the classic trilogy as a whole, and *ANH*
in particular, are mainly studies in the character-development of Luke Sky-
walker "from hick to hero." He is "schooled" in the kind of death and rebirth
that is involved in the transformation of ego.

This is his journey of self-discovery, quite literally in that he comes to
discover his true identity through the fact that his ancestry is radically unlike
everything he has been raised to believe. First, his father had not been a
navigator on a spice freighter, as Uncle Owen had encouraged him to think,
but had been a Jedi Knight and hero in the Clone Wars, murdered and
betrayed by Darth Vader (*ANH*). Even more destabilizing for Luke's self-
consciousness later is the terrible fact that his father is revealed, in *ESB*,
not only to be still alive but to be none other than Darth Vader himself. The
young man has to mature through this painful test that trains him in coping
with the evil (the dark side) he finds in the world around him. But he does
pass all the (moral) tests he encounters in *ANH*, which enables him to become
a positive force within society. The fact that this all takes place in the "every-
man" kind of character of *Episode IV* draws the audience into the possibili-
ties for its own ethical growth and self-discovery. Luke becomes our moral
traveling companion and exemplar. He symbolizes all human beings—or
better, what we *ought to become*—in and through his own maturation. In
this respect *SW* explores dramatically some of the pathologies plaguing the
"ego," those things that can distort our relationships with others and our
selves. It thereby can become a kind of ethical "therapy of self" that enables
us to purge and transform our desires. In and through it we are able to tran-
scend our ego-centeredness.

This point about the ethics of mythologies, though, hints at an important
problem dogging Campbell's construal of the hero myth. Because his hero
is the primary and almost exclusive focus in his reading of mythologies,
other characters in the stories are made at worst incidental and at best mere
instruments for exploring the psychological growth or maturation of the pro-
tagonist. His account of the hero myth can sound as if it trivializes the con-
flicts, troubles, struggles, and problems faced by *all* the characters. Others'

sufferings are only important in the context of one's own self-realization. In contrast, the public ethics or "politics" of *SW* can resist Campbell's interiorization of the mythic experience for the individual's psyche. *SW* obviously traces Luke's voyage of self-discovery, but the fate of the *galaxy* is at stake in the conflict, a conflict that is bigger than this adolescent himself. A pantheon of characters is vital to the proceedings and the flourishing of galactic life. Leia and Obi-Wan are instumental in issuing the "call to adventure"; and, as we will see later, Han Solo helps save Luke from destruction by his pursuers at the Battle of Yavin. In other words, it is in the very relationships conceived by Lucas that the "redemptive" moments occur and contribute substantively to the development of the so-called "hero." These movies are permeated by the ways in which social and political change, even personal illumination and transformation, require the existence of personal relationships. In the saga, it is the Sith who are the individualists, or at least individualists with regard to their own personal development, since they treat all others as a herd to serve themselves in a hegemonic and totalitarian fashion. Campbell, according to Segal, "winds up at the end of his life, singling out [for approval] myths of American individualism, American self-reliance, in contrast to the more collectivist myths of other people."[50] This would reorder myths for personal transformation rather than social well-being. Here Lucas's creation, as the coming chapters will make clear, is much more ethically liberating.

The Truthfulness of *Star Wars*

Scholars have for some time hotly debated just what myth is. The Greek word *mythos* originally simply had to do with "word" or "story," and in early Greek literature its meaning ranged from "a true story," "an account of facts," and so "fact" itself, to an invented story, such as legend, fairy story, fable, or poetic creation. It was only in later Greek thought that it became contrasted with both *logos* (rational thought) and *historia*, and began to denote "what cannot really exist." This broad type of understanding came to dominate the nineteenth century's fascination with mythology. Myth was understood to be anything that is opposed to reality. Accordingly a popular modern journalistic tendency has been to treat "myth" and "falsity" as somehow synonymous, which is why there is the unashamed titling of books with either-or designations, like *The Bible: Myth or Message?* for instance. "Story" becomes frequently reduced to a vehicle for transmitting truths that are developed and known independently from the story, or increasingly to something private (for example, something *entertaining*).

SW, of course, is *fantasy* and therefore makes no historical claims about "what really happened." Its setting "a long time ago, in a galaxy far, far away . . ." sees to that. But this does not mean that it is purely escapist entertainment for private satisfaction. Jeffrey Grupp, for instance, detects a gritty, "everyday" quality in the saga, and this reflects Lucas's own direction to his production staff to make the vehicles and equipment look dirty and used.[51] Something more substantial than the mere desire to update the old Saturday matinee adventure serials directs *SW*'s spirit. "In fantasy literature, the world is not simply left behind for pleasing visions of wonder. . . . The promise of *Faërie* for Tolkien [for instance] is a return to the world from which we have become estranged."[52] Tolkien's stories are not pure escapisms through which the reader enters another world momentarily and then emerges largely unchanged—at least, not if the reader has read the story well. Consequently, Jonathan Rosenbaum's comment on *ANH*, "Whenever this giddy space opera is taking place, it can't possibly be anywhere quite so disagreeable as the present," misses this insight.[53] Instead, *SW* uses the sci-fi/fantasy genre in such a way that even though its universe is alien to ours, it is not so remote from it as to be purely fantastic, and the genre frees us from having to worry about fidelity to distracting questions of how accurate its depiction is of historical events. But it is also important to notice that the saga's basic shape "was based essentially on the Richard Nixon, Adolf Hitler idea."[54] Like many other science fiction stories, *SW* has something of a parabolic function in that it encourages us to reflect on contemporary moral issues through a fantasy setting and therefore enables us to think in a way we might not otherwise do. As Claude Levi-Strauss observes, "What gives myth an operative value is that the specific pattern it describes is everlasting; it explains the present as well as the future."[55] The following chapters will explore what this means.

Were mythologies ever meant to function as "explanations"? At this point it is worth taking a moment to consider the implications of the epochal work of German New Testament scholars D. F. Strauss (1808–74) and Rudolf Bultmann (1884–1976). While Strauss has a tendency to speak of the truths that myths tell in unhistorical terms—they are eternally true ideas—he nonetheless encourages readers of myths to focus on the story, respect its author's purpose(s), and worry less about the historical events lying behind the narratives. Bultmann himself comes close to psychologizing myths and he occasionally also seems to present them as the primitive expressions of prescientific communities. In this he largely follows the work of late nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century anthropologists (for example, Edward B. Tylor, James G. Frazer, and Campbell later), who imagine that mythologies were primitive attempts to *explain*, and thus tame fears about,

the heavens, the annual cycle of nature and fertility, and death. And Bult-mann also importantly realized that texts should be read according to their subject matter (*die Sache*). The message or truth is expressed *through* myth and not alongside it or inside it, and so the purpose of myths is "not to present an objective picture of the world as it is, but to express man's understanding of himself in the world in which he lives."[56] For all Bultmann's particular faults, he at least indicated on occasions that the mythological covering can-not be easily stripped away and disposed of so that their bare essentials and teaching of a few basic facts can be seen. Where he was particularly weak, however, was in paying too little attention to the contexts of, and the differ-ences between, mythological stories. He therefore did too little to subvert the commonly held understanding that myths depict and express timeless spiritual truths.[57] Likewise, Dan Rubey complains that "Lucas ignores the ideological character of these views by claiming that he is working inside an eternal tradition of fairy tales and myths stretching from Homer's *Odyssey* to John Ford's Westerns."[58] Therefore, Rubey continues, "Lucas's picture of an unbroken tradition of adventure mythology stretching from Homer to John Ford ignores both the specific meanings these stories had for the societies that created them and the important differences between them." Instead, one has to recognize in a way Lucas, through Campbell, did not that "myths and fantasies are not eternal: they are historical."

Reading mythic texts historically or scientifically treats the texts as inert matter that yields up treasures to the well-armed archaeologist digging through the dirt that covers their "meaning," or as cadavers to be explored by trained anatomists. But complex living human beings are not well understood by the dissection of their corpses, the dead body being unable to challenge us or speak up for itself. To expect myths to mean the same thing as other types of literature (e.g., history or science) is a terrible mistake and damages the "truth" of mythologies and our reading of them (since we are never truly "encountered" by the text). Quite simply, the narrative form of stories (the relations that the characters have, the problems they encounter, and the situ-ations they find themselves in) is integral to their potential "truthfulness." To imagine that their "truth" can be stripped out from them is to make these stories less than human. Instead, the whole performance, the story and its tell-ing, is essential to the ability of myth to be truthful. This very *storied* form possesses something that rings more true than abstract theory, for instance.

The fact is that we always live in specific times and places and are caught up in the complex webs of stories that people, communities, and nations tell of the world and their place in it. Out of these stories, we and our identities are formed. All in all, as Mark Allan Powell claims, "Strictly speaking, the

dichotomy between 'history' and 'fiction' in literature is a false one. It is better to speak of referential and poetic functions that can be attributed to all literature."[59] The poet, for instance, can help to make the world significant, displaying aspects of it in imaginative ways that would be otherwise missed or obscured by dominant scientific modes of "reading." Accordingly, for Tolkien for instance, myths can be so true that they shed light on people's lives and situations more effectively than a simple recital of facts can. Some lessons cannot easily be taught; they must be lived and felt. Consequently myths' "truthfulness" is less about prescriptive *didactic* instruction and more about recreating the ethical and psychological imagination, thereby providing new ways of dreaming of possibilities for our own (or our world's) action. They are "paradigms of possibility," and reducing them to the level of pure entertainment is a mistake that prescientific communities would never have made about their identity-generating stories.[60]

But what kind of truthfulness do myths exhibit? What do myths do? Another common definition sees myths as stories that express the senses of the sacred, or the sense of what life is and how it is to be valued, of those communities that created and retell them. In that respect, *SW* can perhaps suggest something of the way in which the culture that formed Lucas's imagination—and (because of its popularity) the way *SW* fans worldwide—understands life, the world, and what is to be valued. But myths do more than express the values of their author and that author's culture; according to Lucas, they also help create and shape the way their retellers and listeners respond to their "truth telling," and they do so in a psychologically beneficial way: "Sometimes the truths are so painful that stories are the only way you can get through to them psychologically."[61] They are told in ways that continue meaningfully to shape the way their retellers and listeners themselves encounter the world, provide a horizon for their moral and psychological imaginations, and determine and regulate possibilities for responsibility to the world, to others, or to oneself. This is particularly done through telling and retelling them in an almost ritualized form. Of course, the very act of retelling the mythic stories is no guarantee that this retelling is continuous with their original meaningful telling, since different generations can hear and interpret the stories in ways subtly (or radically) different from those who originally "performed" them. Nonetheless, through repetition the readers or hearers of the story are drawn imaginatively into the "fictional" drama, so to speak (a "participative reading"). This demands that they be more than mere readers or spectators. Instead, they are to become imaginatively and emotionally involved so that the story told becomes their story and the narrated world becomes their world. This is not so that they can escape from

their world and lose themselves in another one but rather so that they learn to identify possibilities for thinking and feeling differently about and in their own. Campbell argues that "the ubiquitous myth of the hero's passage . . . shall serve as a general pattern for men and women."[62] "What myths revealed to Lucas, among other things," one of Lucas's biographers claims, "was the capacity of the human imagination to conceive alternate realities to cope with reality: figures and places and events that were before now or beyond now but were rich with meaning to our present."[63] There is, as Tolkien believed, a kind of "sacramental quality" in myth in that the narrated world becomes to us a means of transformation by enabling us creatively to reimagine our ways in our own world.

This is true not merely of mythic stories but of all good or complex fiction. Indeed, the richer the text, the more complex the relationship to the culture that reads and remembers it and the more varied the cultures that can find "life" meaning in and through that narrated world. So Clarence Walhout argues, "In this way fiction illuminates life and life illuminates fiction."[64] Mythological stories, though, largely because of their own relationship to their cultures, have a particularly rich symbolic expressiveness or signification—they express something about the "truth" of the world, or what its original host culture understands that to be, without being carbon copies or mirrors of it.

Of course that is not an easy process, since many stories are too thin helpfully to encourage the skills of living in a complex world (as I feel is the case with, for instance, a considerable amount of Christian devotional literature); or are ideologically skewed (as, for instance, Hitler's *Mein Kampf*). Opening oneself to the truth of any story is a risk, and yet the gamble is worth making. Moreover, identifying the nature of the particular mythic form in any mythic text is far from being the end of the process of myth study. Yet "much myth criticism ignores the complicity of myth in establishing and maintaining social dominance and power structures," or how myths can "explain why those in power are in power and why those who are oppressed or dominated are (and should be) oppressed and dominated."[65] There are morally significant questions about the largely hidden and otherwise unquestioned cultural assumptions/myths that shape *SW* as well as provide it with an audience. These need to be exposed in order to be morally tested and possibly contested. So, for instance, does it express, assume, and reinforce 1970s' American patriarchalism, racism, homophobia, individualism, consumerism, or American supremacism? "To dismiss the *Star Wars* films out of hand as lowbrow adventure-romance films that cannot support any meaningful analysis . . . is erroneous and perhaps irresponsible. Given the saga's immense

popularity, its potential cultural and psychological impact upon millions of viewers . . . should not be underestimated."[66]

Carl Silvio and Tony M. Vinci claim that Lucas's cinematic "textual universe serves as one of our society's richest repositories of contemporary myth and social meaning, a galaxy where collective hopes and anxieties are both revealed and imaginarily resolved."[67] The fact that so many imagine *SW* to be pure escapist entertainment reveals that Lucas has obviously not always succeeded in making known his myth-making intentions, despite his feeling that he has clearly spelled out his message.[68] Many would see the substance of *SW* as too thin for the kind of theological work I am suggesting it can do in illuminating the human condition. They claim that it expresses a pop spirituality, an eclectic mishmash of largely American virtues and values. In particular, the saga apparently presents a morally unambiguous and childish approach to themes of good and evil that also resonates with strong pragmatic and patriotic sentiments and exudes a nostalgia that climaxes in a typically glib and quite utopian happy ending. Its fairy tale provides a bland, pop spirituality that makes only the briefest of demands on its audience. After all, Bruno Bettelheim notes, "the fairy-tale simplifies all situations. Its figures are clearly drawn and its details, unless very important, are eliminated. All characters are typical rather than unique," and all moral dilemmas are clichés.[69] If these claims are true, *SW* would belong to a class of movies that "will not 'free' us from . . . structures of control. But it is not so important for mass culture to show us how to attain liberation, release, and the rest of it. . . . Science fiction films, simulators, and unframed cinemas are not revolutionary; they are *playful*."[70]

We now turn to some of its life-illuminating potential, to the characterization of "the Force" (chapter 2), to the destructive identity of evil (chapters 3–5), and to the making of good relations (chapters 6–7) and hope for our world (chapter 8).