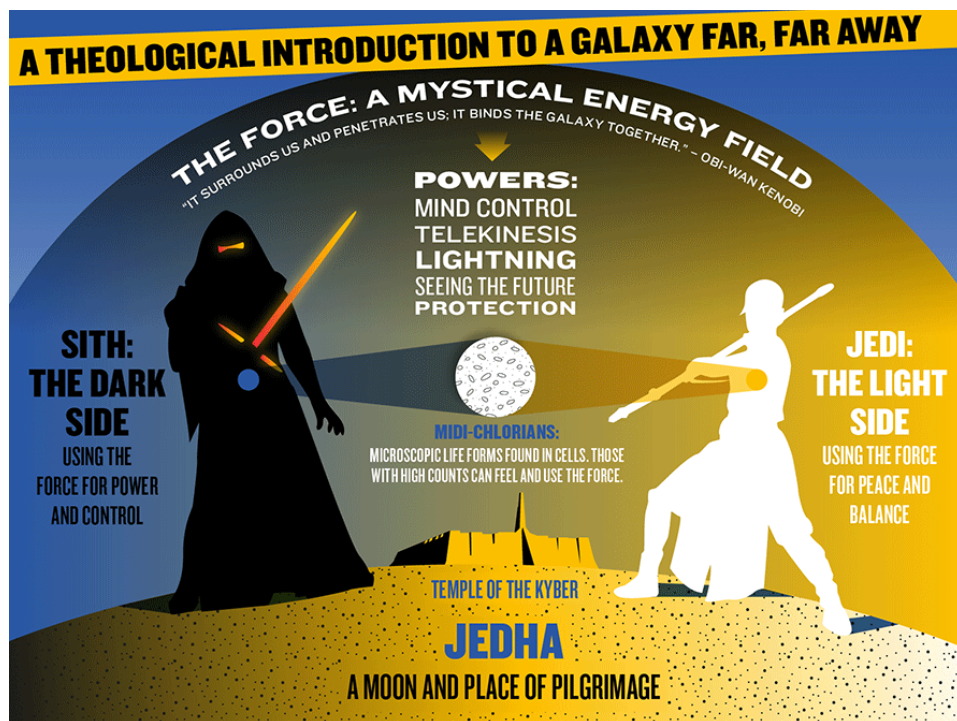


## BRIEFING

# The religion of Star Wars

What can Star Wars teach us about religion? The latest installment to the franchise is about to hit cinemas. Behind the explosions and high-speed chases, there is a fascinating mythology...



**May the Force be with you:** Star Wars has made around \$7.5 billion at the box office since 1977.

## Q: Hang on... Star Wars isn't a religion!

A: Actually, it sort of is: 176,632 people listed "Jedi" as their religion on the [2011 census](#) for England and Wales. In the USA, the "Temple of the Jedi Order" is a registered church whose followers believe "in the Force, and in the inherent worth of all life within it".

However, that is not what we are talking about today. We are talking about the fictional religion, and how it operates in the *Star Wars* movies.

## Q: Erm, why?

A: For one thing, because *Star Wars Episode VIII: The Last Jedi* is released on December 15th, and is [tipped](#) to be one of the holiday season's biggest films.

But also because *Star Wars* was partly created to explore religion. In 1999, its creator George Lucas told *Time* magazine that he wanted to "try to awaken a certain kind of spirituality in young people". This was not the same as any of the religions practiced on our home planet, but "more a belief in God... I wanted to make it so that young people would begin to ask questions about the mystery."

## Q: Is God real in Star Wars?

A: Not in the way that most people are used to thinking of God, as the creator of the universe. Instead, characters in *Star Wars* talk about "the Force", a [transcendent](#) mystical energy

which surrounds everyone and everything. The Force is neither good nor bad, but it does have a dark side and a light side.

Those who are trained to use the dark side of the Force are called Sith (think Darth Vader or Emperor Palpatine), and those who use the light side are called Jedi (think Obi-Wan Kenobi or Luke Skywalker).

## Q: Is it a bit like Buddhism?

A: There are some Buddhist elements, such as the idea that everything in the universe is [interconnected](#).

There is also the fact that people who use the Force practice a kind of meditation, in which they empty their minds of emotion in order to "become one with the force".

The belief that the Force has a dark and light side is also similar to the Chinese religion of [Taoism](#), most famous for its yin and yang symbol.

## Q: Is Jediism anything like Christianity?

A: The language of light and darkness is very Christian, as are the stories of sacrifice and [redemption](#) which permeate the *Star Wars* movies.

Then again, Jews and Muslims also identify with elements of the religion in *Star Wars*. For example, the name "Yoda" means "one who knows" in Hebrew. Meanwhile, Sufi Muslims would recognise Jediism as "futuwwat", or "the

way of the mystic warrior".

In other words — the Force is an amalgamation of many different religious ideas. According to author Chris Taylor, it is "so well suited to our times precisely because it is so bereft of detail".

## Q: How do people become a Jedi?

A: This is where *Star Wars* diverts from major religions on Earth. In *Star Wars Episode I: The Phantom Menace*, it is explained that human cells contain tiny intelligent life forms called midi-chlorians. People who have a lot of midi-chlorians are particularly sensitive to the Force, and can learn to control it. This adds a biological element to the religion.

If you can use the Force, it is up to you whether you embrace the light side and become a Jedi, or the dark side and become a Sith.

## Q: Does everyone believe in it?

A: No. In fact, those who do are often in the minority. In *Star Wars Episode IV: A New Hope*, Han Solo insists that "There's no mystical energy field that controls my destiny!"

This is because, as discovered in the prequels, the Jedi order has been wiped out and suppressed by the evil empire. And that is another way that Jediism echoes Christianity — it is a religion that is struggling to survive in an increasingly secular world.

## YOU DECIDE

Does *Star Wars* show religion and belief in a positive light?

## ACTIVITY

Imagine that the world of *Star Wars* is real, and that you live in that galaxy far, far away. Write down ten commandments that you think Jedi and those who believe in the Force should follow.

## WORD WATCH

**2011 census** – The number of Jedi in the UK was even higher in the 2001 census, when it reached 390,127 people. However, it is unclear how many of these took the “religion” seriously.

**Tipped** – In the last two years, *Star Wars* films which opened in December earned over \$1 billion worldwide.

**Transcendent** – Something beyond the normal human experience of the physical world. Or, as Yoda puts it: “Luminous beings are we, not this crude matter.”

**Interconnected** – Buddhism teaches that all life is connected, and in *Star Wars*, everything is connected by the Force. In fact, *Star Wars* goes one further: the Force is created by life, just as living things use and control it. The relationship is symbiotic.

**Taoism** –

An ancient Chinese religion and philosophy which emphasises “Tao”: a natural order of the universe.

**Redemption** – Some have noted that the core of *Star Wars* is a reversal of the Jesus-like “chosen one” narrative: as a boy Anakin had a special affinity for the Force, but instead of doing good he turns to the Dark side, and is redeemed by his son, Luke.

## BECOME AN EXPERT

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 Notes

