

## How the Goddess Returned to America in 1977: *Star Wars, Lo Spaccio* and the Rise of the Religious “Nones”

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*“I don’t care that you’re a Christian. I don’t care what the Bible says. I feel like it’s a clown show, sitting here, trying to decipher what your little mythical book has to say about these very real political issues.”~ Ana Kasparian, American journalist, 2018*

In the last few paragraphs of Bruno’s heretical *The Expulsion of the Triumphant Beast* (*Lo spaccio della besta trionfante*) (1584) the gods are celebrating their success (the project which has been the subject of the whole book) to replace bad constellations with good constellations in the sky. Only one task is left, to remove the Southern Fish:

The great Thunderer (Jove) rose to his feet and extended his right hand toward the Southern Fish, the only one remaining to be decided upon, and said: “Let the Fish quickly be taken away from there, and let nothing remain but its image. And let it be in substance taken by our cook, and right now, good and fresh, let it be set forth for the completion of our supper, partly from the gridiron, partly in stew, partly in verjuice, partly seasoned as he otherwise sees fit and likes, and prepared with Roman sauce. And let it all be done quickly, for on account of all this negotiation I am dying of hunger, and I believe you are too. Furthermore it seems fitting to me that this purgation should not be without some benefit to ourselves.” (Bruno 272)

In “What dost thou mean by this?: Why does Hamlet call Polonius a ‘fishmonger’?”<sup>1</sup> I show how the Southern Fish is here a symbol of Christianity, and when Bruno portrays the pagan gods taking it down and eating it, he appears to be describing the end of Christianity in a symbolic way.

Did he mean to actually predict the end of Christianity in our real world too? By referring to something he calls “the Eye of Eternal Truth” at the beginning of this book Bruno does appear to do just that. At the beginning of *The Expulsion of the Triumphant Beast* Bruno says that he undertakes his literary efforts despite the fact that he does not expect positive rewards for himself:

And since the number of fools and the perverse is incomparably larger than that of the wise and the just, it follows that if I want to consider glory or other fruits, to which the multitude of voices gives birth, so far removed am I from the expectation of a happy outcome from my study and work that rather I must expect a source of discontent and must esteem silence to be much better than speech. But if I take into account the eye of Eternal Truth, to which things are the more precious and renowned, the more they are, sometimes, not only known, sought after, and possessed by the fewest but also, besides, considered worthless, blamed, and attacked, it happens that the more I strive to cut the course of the impetuous torrent, the more vigor I see added to it by the turbid, deep, and steep channel. (Bruno 70) (my emphasis)

For writing his books, Bruno was stripped naked, his tongue pierced with an iron tool, and then he was hung upside down and burned alive by the Catholic Inquisition. Therefore, I think the least I can do, considering that he was proven to be correct about so many other things (for example, the sun is indeed a star and the universe is acentric and infinite, among many of his correct ideas), is to see whether this “eye of Eternal Truth” (which is us) now finds his prediction about the Southern Fish (i.e. the end of Christianity) to be correct as well. As I write this in 2022—438 years later — we could note the

marked rise in the 'nones' in the USA<sup>2</sup> and Europe<sup>3</sup>, the closures of thousands of Christian churches<sup>4</sup>, and the massive rise in the number of people who are atheists or who openly follow paganism or witchcraft<sup>5</sup>.

But though *The Expulsion of the Triumphant Beast* ends with the Southern Fish being removed and consumed, there is much more to the book than this last paragraph. And it would be interesting to see how our "Eye of Eternal Truth", the circumspection and objectivity won through centuries of secularization and distance from 1584 until now, views some of the other major parts of his book, not just the meal of the Southern Fish at the end.

At the start of the book, Bruno brings out Jove, the Greek god, but Bruno's Jove is not the robust Casanova of the Greek myths. Bruno's Jove is elderly, frail and on the verge of death, and cries out:

Indeed, we know from experience that the world is exactly like a spirited horse, who knows very well when he is mounted by one who cannot firmly manage him, and spurns the rider and attempts to remove him from his back; and once he has succeeded in throwing him to the ground, comes to pay him in kicks. Behold! My body is drying up, and my brain is moistening; I am scabbing, and my teeth are falling out; my flesh is becoming gilded, and my hair, silver; my eyelids are distending, my sight, contracting; my breathing is becoming short, my cough, stronger; when I am seated, I feel steady, but shaky when I walk; my pulse is irregular; my ribs are tightening; my limbs are becoming thin; my joints are swelling. (Bruno 100)

It becomes clear that the other gods are facing the same aging issues: "Does [Vulcan] perhaps still have some vigor left necessary to lift his heavy hammer?", while Venus has wrinkles (Bruno 101). "You see then, dear sister, how treacherous time subdues us, how we are all subject to mutation", is the message (Bruno 102).

What to do about this? The answer is to conduct cosmological reform,

which basically means (in Bruno-speak) changing the religious outlook.

So, first, the gods recall Momus, the exiled God of Satire, “who had spoken against the gods, and had argued, as it seemed to them, too severely against their errors” (Bruno 95). Momus has been banished to the “star which is at the tip of Callisto’s tail” (Bruno 95). (Callisto is another term for the Big Dipper constellation; Callisto.) Momus is a buffoon deity who therefore knows the power and skills of a buffoon: “each one of whom is wont to impart more truths to the ears of a prince about his affairs than all the rest of the court put together” (Bruno 101). Moreover, Momus and his ilk: “do speak in a kind of jest, and cause to be moved and do move proposals” (Bruno 102). Bruno means to explain that court jesters, that is professionals who have the ability to speak truth to power through their carefully crafted ‘nonsense’, can more effectively tell hard, unpopular and unthinkable truths to the power centers (“the ears of a prince” who need the truth for strategic reasons) than more conventional analysts, courtiers and advisers, who must fear losing their jobs.

Momus, a relatively “obscure and uncelebrated Greek god” (McClure vii), whose name comes from the Greek noun μῶμος meaning ‘blame’ or ‘censure’<sup>6</sup>, first appeared in the writings of Hesiod in the eighth century BCE. By the 1580s, Momus had become “a medium for dangerous challenges to religious belief and a literary trope for challenges to literary and intellectual authority” as well as the “intersection” of “these two roles” (McClure vii). George McClure writes that

in his reincarnations in the early modern period...Momus simultaneously signaled the emergence of the Agnostic in the theological realm while reifying the Critic in the literary realm. (vii)

Bruno’s Momus can therefore generally be thought of as representing books

and ideas which spread disbelief in Christianity or agnosticism about it, just as Bruno's *Lo Spaccio della besta trionfante*, was implicitly accused of doing when it was banned by the Catholic Church. Beyond Bruno's works, of course, many books, scientific ideas, films and artworks have come along and been criticized by Christians or even banned by governments indirectly expressing Christian ideas. And each of these ideas or artistic works has no doubt moved the needle further along toward a secular society.

However, despite the many works out there, I think it is possible to find, through Bruno's carefully articulated clues in *The Expulsion of the Triumphant Beast*, one special artwork which might have been, in a sense, 'predicted' or anticipated by Bruno because it seems to respond exactly to the environmental conditions he initially describes. Looking closely again at the situation Jove is facing:

Indeed, we know from experience that the world is exactly like a spirited horse, who knows very well when he is mounted by one who cannot firmly manage him, and spurns the rider and attempts to remove him from his back; and once he has succeeded in throwing him to the ground, comes to pay him in kicks.

Reading in between the lines of the metaphor of the rider and the horse, what human society is facing at the point where Bruno's book opens (which is some real future point in actual time) is in danger of being thrown off the planet, of going extinct and utterly failing as a species. Climate change, ocean pollution, the fragility and possible failure of the vital oxygen-producing plankton, and other related ecological issues seem to portend a world which actively, though implicitly, seeks our extinction, exactly like a horse throwing us off its back.

Thus we need to probably look at artworks post-1960, since it was the 1960s

which gave birth to the environmental movement, the first Earth Day and the Club of Rome and its famous paradigm-altering report *The Limits to Growth*:

Most influential organizations begin with the meeting of a few like minds. In 1965, Aurelio Peccei, an Italian industrialist, made a speech that proved inspirational to Alexander King, the Scottish Head of Science at the OECD. The two found that they shared a profound concern for the long-term future of humanity and the planet, what they termed the modern 'predicament of mankind'.

Three years later, King and Peccei convened a meeting of European scientists in Rome. Although this first attempt failed to achieve unity, a core group of like-minded thinkers emerged. Their goal: to advance three core ideas that still define the Club of Rome today: a global and a long-term perspective, and the concept of "problematique", a cluster of intertwined global problems, be they economic, environmental, political or social.

At the group's first major gathering in 1970, Jay Forrester, a systems professor at MIT, offered to use computer models he had developed to study the complex problems which concerned the group more rigorously. An international team of researchers at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology began a study of the implications of unbridled exponential growth. They examined the five basic factors that determine and, in their interactions, ultimately limit growth on this planet – population, agricultural production, non-renewable resource depletion, industrial output and pollution. In 1972, the Club's first major Report, *The Limits to Growth* was published. It sold millions of copies worldwide, creating media controversy and also impetus for the global sustainability movement. This call for objective, scientific assessment of the impact of humanity's behavior and use of resources, still defines the Club of Rome today. While *Limits* had many messages, it fundamentally confronted the unchallenged paradigm of continuous material growth and the pursuit of endless economic expansion. Fifty years later, there is no doubt that the ecological footprint of humanity substantially exceeds its natural limits every year. The concerns of the Club of Rome have not lost their relevance.<sup>7</sup>

*The Limits to Growth* shocked the science, economics and public policy communities of that time and:

....projected that by about the second decade in the 21st century, human population would have exceeded Earth's carrying capacity and would be "burning the furniture" to find energy, food and nonrenewable natural resources, while the exponentially growing volume of pollutants such as greenhouse gases and toxic chemicals would be heating the planet, fouling human habitat, decimating ocean life, felling ancient forests and forcing mass migrations. Two of the *Limits* scenarios forecast "overshoot and collapse" by the mid-to latter-part of the 21st century while a third (the path not taken) resulted in a "stabilized world."<sup>8</sup>

Bruno made projections not unlike those made in *The Limits to Growth*, but using only his creative mind and intellect, back in 1583. He had observed human-centric Christian European society and he was living in London, where coal was already being burned, in the early 1580s. Though made without using a computer or even electricity, Bruno's projections can be said to be early forms of those made 389 years later by *The Limits to Growth* team of MIT scientists. Bruno was able to come up with the correct trajectory— a rise and a fall—but his scenario obviously lacked any specific time frame as Bruno had no specific numerical quantitative data; he had only observations about human behavior under the widespread influence of Christianity.

People say "Christianity is a religion", but it might be more accurate to think of it, using game theory, as an emergent moralizing mind-conditioning collective social tool, and Bruno predicted that it would be popular and relevant only as long as it continued to deliver material benefits to its members through its entanglement with power through its deep connections to politicians and governments.

The frightening Brunian moment when the “rider realizes the horse will kick him off its back” (humanity realizing its precarious environmental position) almost definitely corresponds to the 1960s and we are therefore definitely looking for an artwork created in the 1970s or possibly 1980s. It also has to be successful and influential, because Momus eventually succeeds. (The allegory starts out describing a situation with the material world—Jove—in a terrible and desperate state. And it ends, as I said, with a healthy Jove and other gods, robustly eating the fish. So these decrepit gods manage to pull themselves out of their hardships, and they do seem to jettison Christianity when they take down the fish and eat it.)

It must be popular art, because it must touch people in many countries and of many educational levels.

When I look for this revolutionary artwork in history, I don't mean that Bruno used magic, tea leaves or tarot cards when he forecasted its emergence. He used science—his conviction that there would come an inflection point in the future, when the earth's natural environment would become so materially degraded (ironically through the very influence and emergent power of Christianity)—that someone somehow somewhere would necessarily evoke a “Momus figure from exile” to conduct a renovation, to start the process of removing Christianity from the world in order to save future human beings from the current and previous ones.

First, how to philosophically link environmental degradation, climate change and pollution to Christianity? As Grace Jantzen explains:

(T)he ontological distinction between God and creation does not merely separate the two terms; rather, it establishes the absolute supremacy of the former over the latter. In turn, this logic of mastery secures the rule of everything associated with this God over everything associated with the



material world. Again, then, spirit, masculinity, reason, light, and humanity become unconditionally privileged over matter, femininity, passion, darkness, and animal-vegetal-minerality. (Rubenstein 10)

In *The Expulsion of the Triumphant Beast*, Bruno also has scathing criticism of Christianity along the same lines: "[Christianity teaches] that Nature is a whorish prostitute, that natural law is ribaldry, that Nature and Divinity cannot concur in one and the same good end" (Bruno 255). In Christian theology, Nature is not sacred as there is no Divine Feminine (Goddess). Obviously, since people are also made from material (and we consequently need food, water, air, etc.), eventually such a contemptuous, disrespectful and hateful attitudes toward material and nature brings about the effects where people's own material existence gets called into question.

*The Expulsion of the Triumphant Beast* makes it clear from its first line that matter and material are significant. Bruno starts off the first lines of the First Part of the First Dialogue with this exchange between Sophia, the goddess of wisdom (also "Sophia" was used as representation of the Divine Feminine), and a character named Saul:

Sophia: So that if in bodies, matter, and entity there were not mutation, variety and vicissitude, there would be nothing agreeable, nothing good, nothing pleasurable.

Saul: You have demonstrated it very well, Sophia. (Bruno 89)

I have some particular reasons to choose the film *Star Wars*, released in 1977, as the cultural moment corresponding to the prediction made in *The Expulsion of the Triumphant Beast*. *Star Wars* impacted popular culture profoundly, and as I will show subsequent blockbusters (not necessarily only those in the *Star Wars* franchise but also many outside it) have followed its

basic patterns and formula for success ever since. This means that a trend was established in 1977, when *Star Wars*<sup>9</sup> was released, and this trend is still ongoing. Furthermore, 1977 follows shortly upon the heels of the 1960s, the decade of the environmental awakening of America.

Environmental awakening is a special challenge for a society. Not a simple enemy from outside threatens the group, but their own water, air and soil become toxic and deadly due entirely to their own collective behavior. The awakening occurs when people in a society realize that matter and material, the things they and their children breathe, drink, eat and live near are much more important than they had realized. As the old saying goes, “death focuses the mind wonderfully”.

The basic plot element of *Star Wars* is amazingly the rescue and restoration of a banished princess, seemingly portraying in metaphor the return of the Divine Feminine to the west. And the film contains cultural content, a worldview and assumptions that can be thought of as having been, like Momus, implicitly banished, at least in America, which has historically been one of the more Christian countries in the world, a legacy of its settlement by Puritans.

To me, anyway, it is a ghostly yet pleasing coincidence that a film with the cosmic title *Star Wars* can be productively analyzed as a work anticipated by Giordano Bruno, who spent so much of his life writing about the stars and the heavens, and whose *The Expulsion of the Triumphant* beast is in fact about constellations. As Jove exclaims:

“Come now, come now, oh gods! Let there be expelled from the heaven these ghosts, statues, figures, images, portraits, recitations, and histories of our avarice, lusts, thefts, disdains, spites and shames. May there pass, may there pass this black and gloomy night of our errors....” (Bruno 115) (my emphasis)

In fact, *Star Wars* is considered by some Christians risky material for members of their religion to watch, with current debates on YouTube and various websites on how heretical it is and how the pious had better avoid it.

But, to return to the theme of the Goddess, the ghostliest thing of all, when you consider that Bruno was predicting the return of the Divine Feminine, is the way the movie's theme echoes this idea: it is about the *heroic release of a princess*, a royal female figure named Princess Leia, from her unjust imprisonment. The young and inexperienced warriors who help free her, part of the Rebel Alliance, are just a 'rag-tag band of outsiders' yet they overcome, with their pure hearts, great odds. Their foe, the dastardly Galactic Empire, has wealth, experience and power, but it loses. And Princess Leia has the schematic plans necessary for the destruction of the Galactic Empire, just as the Divine Feminine has the schematic plans (focus scientifically on preserving the health and biological diversity of our material world, and coming to a political understanding of humanity as just one of many aspects of a material world, not the supreme ruler) that promote ecological harmony between people and the planet.

*Star Wars* was released when I was twelve, in 1977. I went to see it with my sister in the local movie theater in our suburban town in Connecticut. I enjoyed it, though, except for Princess Leia and her intriguing dress, I thought it had too few female characters and interesting feminine fashions, and I wondered why one of the robots, or "droids", had an improbable British accent.

But I have one more memory, at school, of one boy calling across the classroom to his friend "how many times did you see it?" The second boy proudly called out "eight" and the first boy, triumphantly yelled out "ten!"

I had liked it well enough, but not enough to wait in the famously long lines, buy ten tickets and sit through it ten times. However, looking back, I realize now that watching *Star Wars*, as a cultural moment, was, for Americans, like

coming up for great gulps of refreshing air after swimming underwater a long time. And no movie before or since, as far as I am aware, had such lines around the block. Adjusted for inflation, *Star Wars* is the fourth highest-grossing movie of all time, trailing only *Gone with the Wind*, *Avatar*, and *Titanic*.<sup>10</sup>

So we need to understand what made *Star Wars* so trend-setting, so unusual for its time, so novel and so successful, and then see if any of these things could possibly be construed as post-Christian, or revealing religious transition away from Christianity.

And, speaking of trends, we also need to find out exactly which film trends *Star Wars* started. Writing in *The Hollywood Reporter* in 2016, Graeme McMillan describes how *Star Wars* “should be considered one of the most important pieces of art in the last half century” because it single-handedly caused “a mass change in focus for the western movie industry”.<sup>11</sup> Please note the little critical word “western”, squaring with Bruno’s focus in *Lo Spaccio*, on provocatively “challenging the cultural and philosophical premises of the European cultures, both Catholic and Protestant” (Gatti 157) (my emphasis). *Star Wars*, in its own way, was just as artistically ‘provocative’ as Bruno’s idea that Christianity would have its own denouement one day.

But first, what does the term ‘post-Christian’ mean, exactly, and how do the plot and features of *Star Wars* relate to Giordano Bruno’s prediction of the fish being taken down under the influence of Momus?

There are definitely a few factors that made *Star Wars* so *popular*, and these can safely be selected as the elements which also make it so *post-Christian*.

Here I must cite the plaintive wail of one Christian blogger: “Whenever something becomes extremely popular in our society, the probability of it not being something a believer should partake in is likely.”<sup>12</sup>

Bruno, lamenting from the other side, also addressed the topic of the

relationship between popularity (“good” in the sense that good things are often also popular) and Christianity, in *The Expulsion of the Triumphant Beast*:

[Christianity] gives us to understand....that the human intellect, through which [people] seem to see best, is blindness, and that that which according to reason seems excellent, good, and very good [is actually] vile, criminal, and extremely bad. (Bruno 255)

First, let’s give credit to the fantastical characters: the droids, Chewbacca and the others, which gave such a novel flair to the atmosphere. Second, the iconic setting—“a long time ago in a galaxy far, far away”—removed the whole movie from the workaday world and solar system we know. In this new and different space, George Lucas included a sort of radically new and vaguely religious atmosphere (summed up by the iconic saying “may the Force be with you”), one without any gods, clerics or churches. Third, the 1977 movie often focuses on two lowly characters, the droids C3PO and R2D2, and tells the story from their point of view. And fourth, the movie featured a very active and spunky heroine who is often called a hero of female empowerment.

I will show that all four of these points do disrupt, violate or challenge Christian theology in one way or another.

Centering the movie on the lowly droids was a decision inspired by Akira Kurosawa’s 1958 movie *The Hidden Fortress* (in Japanese 隠し砦の三悪人 (*Kakushi Toride no San Akunin*)), which focuses on two peasants, Tahei and Matashichi, during the “Warring States” era in Japan. Like *The Hidden Fortress*, *Star Wars* also has a fearless princess who must escape from enemy lines, powerful lords, swords and fighting. Apparently, Darth Vader’s helmet was even inspired by samurai armor. George Lucas was interviewed about *The Hidden Fortress* and described his interest in the peasants:

As I was beginning to write the screenplay and put it together I remembered *The Hidden Fortress* and I remembered one thing that really struck me about *The Hidden Fortress* was the fact that the story was told from the two lowest characters. I decided that that would be a nice way to tell the *Star Wars* story, which is take the two lowest characters and tell the story from their point of view and that was the strongest influence actually.<sup>13</sup>

The idea that *Star Wars* uses a Japanese worldview in a stealthy, below-the-radar kind of way actually does go a long way to explaining the way Lucas was able to holistically step away from the whole Christian cultural edifice usually present or implicit in major motion pictures in America before *Star Wars*. The scene of the bickering peasants in *The Hidden Fortress* was recreated by Lucas in the famous scene between C3PO and R2D2 after they land on the planet Tatooine. Both movies, *Star Wars* and *The Hidden Fortress*, place the two lowly characters in a huge and wild landscape, two tiny figures trying to make their way through a natural and even beautiful, but also somewhat alien universe with only each other to rely on. Thus depicted, these tiny, lowly characters are not wealthy, special, important or necessary to their society or to their world. This idea distinctly challenges the relationship dynamic implicit in the Christian idea of god creating the world for humans, with humans nobly occupying the premier place at the center. Rather (and more realistically, since we know that our planet is a floating rock in a vast cosmos), characters are depicted in *Star Wars* as tiny specks in the enormous universe.

The scientific idea that earth (with humans) are at the center of the universe was defended with deadly violence by the Christian Church in the 1500s and 1600s, and even after science proved that the sun was physically the center of our solar system and that the universe has no center, still, culturally, humans (especially white male humans) in the west assumed political, social, and economic, 'central' privileges wherever they went, with few exceptions. They

went in for colonialism, slavery, capitalism and rapid adoption of fossil fuels.

So the emphasis on the lowly characters in *Star Wars* shows a folkish outlook, akin to the way fairytales, which have been proven to be thousands of years old, (i.e. much older than Christianity), often (no matter where they are from) focus on the ‘simpleton’ or ‘naive youngest son’, who makes his way through an enchanted and supernatural world. Japan, which closed its borders for 250 years specifically in order to repel and avoid Christianity, has kept this basic folkish premise as one thrust of storytelling all along. This folkish idea was therefore, like Momus, exiled from the west, as a sort of heresy, until recalled by Lucas, who found it “striking”.

Speaking of ‘exile’, of course, children’s literature such as fairy tales, was another type of exile (a market demographic exile instead of a geographical one) which *Star Wars*, with its princess, rescue quest, and fantastical characters, put an end to. George Lucas originally wanted to make a live-action film of Flash Gordon, the children’s comic book hero, but was turned down when he sought to buy the rights and so he came up with the idea for *Star Wars* instead, and intentionally incorporated many comic book elements into it.

Comic books, of course, represent another sort of exile this time of stories geared towards children and away from the major cultural products. (George Lucas’ subsequent *Indiana Jones* movies were broadly described as “B-movies” that had been elevated into major motion pictures. B-movies, of course, were those low-budget simple adventure series aimed at the youth market in the 1940s, 50s and 60s.) These “simpler” cultural products: comic books, fairy tales, and B-movies were all *de facto* simpler, with magical and supernatural characters, and the stories were less “Christian” and moralistic. Children were a profitable market, too valuable to be ignored, but they were cognitively too young to care about the ‘moralistic’ implicitly Christian outlook which permeated the artistic products aimed at the grownup market.

Next, let's examine how the fantastical characters, such as Chewbacca and the monsters in the "Mos Eisley Cantina" scene in *Star Wars* contribute to the post-Christian atmosphere of the film. First, these fantastical characters seem to be often selected for criticism online by Christians as the most "occult" and therefore one major reason they advise pious believers to avoid the film series.

In this sense, *Star Wars* is not alone. Many movies (Harry Potter, Avengers, Twilight series, and so forth) are on these lists of movies (with "occult" characters) which Christians are therefore advised to avoid, but all are more recent than *Star Wars*, and this is one reason why I think *Star Wars* must be particularly credited with releasing Momus from exile on the tip of Callisto's tail. The movie *The Wizard of Oz* (1939) (a children's movie avoiding the grown-up demographic), which features a few witches, has also famously been the subject of Christian worries about entertainment, and was and still is banned from many American school curriculums. (Fantastical characters are apparently not permitted because, not being "real", one of those things created by the Christian deity, they would automatically represent some sort of negative spiritual element, a *de facto* sort of "devil".)

Third, Princess Leia established herself as a cultural feminist hero with her courageous actions and bravery. This image of women's bravery, cleverness and independence is contrary to the sexist image of women in the Christian Church, where Eve is at once blamed as the morally deficient female who cunningly led Adam astray, yet paradoxically, at the same time, is also held to be, as a woman, intellectually deficient.

The *Catholic Encyclopedia* declares "The female sex is in some respects inferior to the male sex, both as regards body and soul" (Walker 921), while in the Bible, we read the words of St. Paul: "The head of every man is Christ; and the head of every woman is the man" (1 Corinthians 11:3). In the 1890s, the president of a leading theological seminary thundered, "My Bible commands



the subjection of women forever” (Walker 921), while in 1971 (six years before *Star Wars*), an Episcopalian bishop wrote that “the sexuality of Christ is no accident nor is his masculinity incidental. This is the divine choice” (Walker 921).

Princess Leia, on the other hand, a working agent for the Rebel Alliance, overturns the notions that a heroine should be inferior, helpless or dependent on a man:

Luke: I’m Luke Skywalker, I’m here to rescue you.

Princess Leia: You’re who?

Princess Leia wisecracks, insults people, fires at the enemy, and fights her way to freedom as well as any man. Returning to *The Hidden Fortress*, it is likely that the feisty Princess Yuki, who commands respect while smartly wielding her bamboo whip and tolerating no insults from anyone, may have played a key role in influencing George Lucas when he came up with Princess Leia. Again, in Japanese mythology, goddesses are as strong, clever, vigorous and important as gods.

Finally, let’s examine “the Force”, a vaguely religious concept, which, importantly, includes material *things* as its core element:

When *Star Wars: A New Hope* premiered in 1977, audiences likely anticipated the starships and fantasy settings. But “the Force” was an unforeseen concept. Old Ben Kenobi explained the Force best when he said, “It’s an energy field created by all living things. It surrounds us and penetrates us; it binds the galaxy together.”<sup>14</sup> (my emphasis)

This reference to material “things” as sacred in some way significantly contradicts Christianity, which stresses that the non-material is the highest source of divinity and sacredness (“God”). The Christian deity is not to be found in any material form at all; this is one of its foundational rules.

Giordano Bruno was a pantheist, and his main criticism of Christianity was that Nature and the material world were excluded from sacredness. In *Gli Eroici Furori* (*The Heroic Enthusiasts*) (1585) Bruno retells the Greek myth of Actaeon and Diana with a difference, depicting Actaeon’s great intellectual and spiritual pleasure at being turned into a stag and then, in his eureka moment, realizing that he is made of the same material as everything else — and that it is all divine — as his dogs devour his flesh. Actaeon, (in Bruno he is a philosopher of course), had been looking for the Divine Truth, the Diana, before the goddess of the moon and nature spotted him and angrily transformed him into a stag. In Bruno’s re-telling, Actaeon’s death into the material world completes his spiritual awakening to his divine material nature. More pantheist ideas are found in *The Expulsion of the Triumphant Beast*, where Bruno writes:

those wise men [the Egyptians] knew God to be in things, and Divinity to be latent in Nature, working and glowing in differently in different subjects and succeeding through diverse physical forms, in certain arrangements, in making them participants in her, I say, in her being, in her life and intellect...  
(Bruno 237)

In creating “the Force”, George Lucas implicitly made use of Japanese culture, which does have material as divine (Shinto nature gods, and also spirits in ordinary things such as trees, rocks, needles, dolls, or indeed any material thing).

Interestingly, Japan has two major religions, Buddhism and Shinto. However, (in every article I’ve read on this topic) it is always Buddhism, and not Shinto, which is cited as Lucas’ major influence for “the Force” (making me wonder if western culture can more readily acknowledge Buddhism than ‘pagan’ Shinto):

Director George Lucas apparently took inspiration from Samurai warriors to coin ‘Jedi’, whose etymology comes from ‘*jidai*’ (Japanese). ‘*Jidai*’ is short for ‘*jidaigeki*’, a movie genre heavily featuring Samaria warriors. Many of the Jedi’s names even sound Oriental or otherwise East Asian (e.g., Yoda and Obi-Wan Kenobi). Samurai warriors were highly spiritual people who, at least in the depictions of *jidaigeki* movies, were inspired by their moral values, which can be compared to the Jedi way. Samurai warriors were taught how to calm their minds following Zen teachings such that they could increase their focus *in the present*, for example, during sword fighting....Both Zen and Jedi teachings also impress on the importance of compassion — selflessly benefitting others; unconditional love — and imposing self-restraint and frugality.

Individuals in mindful mental states are able to cultivate greater understandings of reality — or so Buddhists and the Jedi believe. A key feature of reality that many of us miss in our superficial attachments to sensory experience and cognition is reality’s interdependence, for things are connected in ways which are not immediately obvious to us.

Pratīyasamutpāda is a Buddhist doctrine which states that all being is connected. If one entity disappears from existence, so do others: they coexist. Such is the principle of dependent origination. Pratīyasamutpāda, then, kind of works like causation (a more-familiar idea in Western philosophy) except, in this case, interdependence must be imagined as *a great web of dependence* of entities (*sankhata*) as opposed to *mere chains* of events. These entities, dharmas, incorporate many doctrines through which law and order is governed in the Universe.

Analogously, the Jedi believe that everything is connected through the Force, which stores greater power than any Jedi can offer individually or as a sum. Nevertheless, the Jedi — highly trained in the art of mindfulness — can illuminate their minds to *feel* these connections, regardless of certain physical dispositions ...

But, we might ask, *how* is everything connected? Specifically, how do the Jedi's mental powers have physical effects? The Jedi are 'luminous beings' who possess exceptional mental faculties. They have the ability to manipulate the Force to physically move objects with their minds. Arguably, then, there is a *mental* connection between (1) Jedi, (2) the Force, and (3) the material objects the Jedi move. Therefore, the Force and material objects carry properties of consciousness such that there is a tripartite connection is maintained between all three.<sup>15</sup>

It is beyond the scope of this paper to distinguish between the Shinto 'animist' idea that materials have spirits and the Buddhist idea of "panpsychism" — "the thesis that everything in the Universe has properties of consciousness, even subatomic particles".<sup>16</sup> Suffice it to say that both ideas exist in Japan and in *Star Wars*, but not in Christianity.

George Lucas himself has spoken about his religious intentions with the whole *Star Wars* franchise:

George Lucas, the creator of "Star Wars," says he wanted to do more than entertain the masses. He wanted to introduce young Americans to spiritual teachings though "new myths" for our globalized, pluralistic millennium.

"I see 'Star Wars' as taking all the issues that religion represents and trying to distill them down into a more modern and accessible construct," Lucas has said. "I wanted to make it so that young people would begin to ask questions about the mystery."

In this, Lucas sounds a lot like his mentor, Joseph Campbell, a scholar who studied world myths. Campbell argued that all cultures impart their values to the next generation through archetypal stories. He believed the same about organized religion, but said it must "catch up" to the "moral necessities of the here and now."

Lucas himself has been called a "Buddhist/Methodist," though it's not clear that he identifies with either religious tradition. "Let's say I'm spiritual," he told Time magazine in 1999.<sup>17</sup>

So as far as sharply breaking with the past and swiftly ushering into popular American culture (and therefore into western culture at large) many things that had been until then "exiled" (religiously heretical, geographically and culturally distant, and marketed to a different demographic), *Star Wars* did succeed. In this sense, as well as in its magical title, it is the perfect candidate for the Momus figure recalled from his exile on a *star in Callisto's tail*.

In the years after *Star Wars*, many movies (which were, like *Star Wars*, so successful they became parts of movie franchises) that followed the trends set by *Star Wars* were released. A partial list of these franchises includes Pirates of the Caribbean (five films), Harry Potter (8 films), DC Extended Universe, (10 films), Marvel's Cinematic Universe (around 30 films), Batman (around 8 movies), Transformers (seven films), Twilight Saga (five films) and The Hunger Games (4 films) though there are many more (too many to list here).

We should ask if these, like *Star Wars*, participate in western culture in a post-Christian way. The answer is obviously "yes". For instance, The Marvel Cinematic Universe features characters with names of famous gods like Thor, Loki and Odin. In several of the Pirates of the Caribbean films there is a sea goddess and whole crews of ghosts. The Twilight Saga has vampires, while

Harry Potter features witches and wizards. The supernatural is found in almost all of the films. And, of course, there are online debates for all of these movies about whether pious Christians should give them a wide berth.

I am struck, moreover, by how much these movies follow conventions and patterns of Japanese anime and manga (comics): they are both episodic (with the premise that as long as there is demand, another episode or sequel can be produced); there are merchandising opportunities; both feature large and varied casts of diverse (gender, sexuality, nationality, ethnicity, socio-economically, etc.) characters; both have worldwide fandoms; and of course they both have supernatural elements. Manga, anime and these franchise Hollywood films also engage heavily in what is called “worldbuilding”, which is described well here:

In order to appeal to geeks, fantasy artists today are obliged to create not just movies, novels, or comics, but entire fictional cultures, languages, species, landscapes, histories, mythologies — sprawling alternative earths, strange other places that can be described so confidently and so thoroughly that their flora and fauna and machinery seem as solid and convincing as our own.<sup>18</sup>

Moreover, during the same time frame as the post-*Star Wars* trends in films occurred, interest in Japanese manga and anime has exploded in the west (and around the world). Also, as I live in Kyoto, it is evident (until covid) from the millions of foreign tourists thronging Kyoto streets, shrines and temples that visiting Japan has been trendy for a decade or two, especially among millennials and GenZ. So in a larger context, looking back over some decades, it seems that George Lucas was very early to jump into the “Japan” trend with *Star Wars*.

Nikolai Afanasov, in an article entitled "Insects and Rain. Anime Beyond Human", writes that "Japanese popular culture has been and continues to be at the forefront of artistic interpretation of new ideas in philosophy" and "Japanese animation, while maintaining its connection with traditional [Japanese] culture and having no background of European Enlightenment thought, often refers to the key themes of the new materialism".<sup>19</sup> Once again, this word "materialism", the world of things, pops up. The popularity of anime, connected to Japanese culture, can therefore be considered one aspect of the cultural "turn to the material", also called 'New Materialism'. Under western thinking (derived from Christian theology), "inanimate matter" as well as all non-human forms of living--has always been considered as passive, inert, unable to convey any independent expression of meaning" (Iovino 2). However, as the world becomes more sensitive to effects of industrialization and fossil fuel use, people realize that actually, the "world is filled with intermingling agencies and forces that persist and change over eons, producing new forms, bodies, and natures..." (Iovino 1).

Following the realization that environmental problems would affect our bodies, health and lives in a deeply material and spiritually meaningful way, it seems that people in the west began to actively seek out a closer and personal dialogue with the material world. To do so, it was necessary to look far afield, at the culture of a country, Japan, that had never abandoned the material world and nature as a source of agency, spirituality and meaning. And it seems that the concrete and accessible way to contact Japanese culture in a massive, spontaneous, self-generating, affordable and emergent way (commensurate with the enthusiastic and optimistic way that Jove proposes to take down and eat the fish constellation), is to engage in cultural activities such as seeing fascinating popular movies.

Thus we see the emphasis on material elements of the movies that followed *Star Wars*: the supernatural creatures, the gods and goddesses, the light sabers, magic devices, cosmic settings, “worldbuilding” and so forth (all heavily associated with computer graphics because technology creates the effects). Materials take their place beside humans as the stars of the show.

Afanasov also adds, “As a logical continuation of the logic of non-human, human, the author sees the theme of the Apocalypse, which is organically inscribed in the anime, as the quintessence of the relationship between man and nature.” Japanese anime therefore often end with gigantic battles, colorful explosions, tragic deaths (which bring about a new political/social order for the next episodes), and so forth.

Interestingly, *Star Wars* also ends with such a battle. And so do the various franchise movies that followed in the *Star Wars* trend, so much so that “The Final Battle” (epic or apocalyptic clashes of armies) is listed as one of the “Top 10 Hollywood Blockbuster Franchise Trends”.<sup>20</sup> Afanasov’s phrase characterizing Apocalypses as “the logical continuation of the non-human” points to the rationale for using Apocalypses.

Eras, the products of material conditions, come to a close as material conditions change, even the Christian Era (to be eventually “devoured and digested by time”, according to Bruno) (Bruno 258). However, before this happens, Bruno predicts final and apocalyptic conflicts between those (“lowly, ignorant and criminal” according to Bruno) who want to retain Christianity (and its secular iterations such as capitalism) and those (“noble, wise and truly good” according to Bruno) who don’t. *Star Wars* can therefore be considered



a metaphorical portrayal of this battle, and it is clear whose side George Lucas is on.

#### Note

- 1 [https://www.academia.edu/39160576/\\_What\\_dost\\_thou\\_mean\\_by\\_this\\_Why\\_does\\_Hamlet\\_call\\_Polonius\\_a\\_fishmonger\\_](https://www.academia.edu/39160576/_What_dost_thou_mean_by_this_Why_does_Hamlet_call_Polonius_a_fishmonger_)
- 2 <https://www.pewforum.org/2021/12/14/about-three-in-ten-u-s-adults-are-now-religiously-unaffiliated/>
- 3 <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2018/05/29/10-key-findings-about-religion-in-western-europe/>
- 4 <https://religionnews.com/2021/05/26/study-more-churches-closing-than-opening/>
- 5 <https://qz.com/quartz/1411909/the-explosive-growth-of-witches-wiccans-and-pagans-in-the-us/>
- 6 <https://aesopsfox.blog/2017/06/05/the-troll-of-ancient-greece-momus/>
- 7 <https://www.clubofrome.org/history/>
- 8 <https://cooldesign.medium.com/the-sound-of-a-second-shoe-dropping-8d9e22c8f1a2>
- 9 In 1981, with its re-release, the 1977 film *Star Wars* was given the new title *Star Wars Episode IV: A New Hope*, as subsequent sequels and prequels were being planned. I shall refer to the 1977 film simply as *Star Wars* in this paper.
- 10 <https://screenrant.com/star-wars-a-new-hope-unknown-facts/>
- 11 <https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/movies/movie-news/star-wars-is-one-important-works-art-cinema-950830/>
- 12 [https://www.everydaychristian.com/blogs/post/should\\_christians\\_read\\_twilight/](https://www.everydaychristian.com/blogs/post/should_christians_read_twilight/)
- 13 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TEJ6CzG9zVc>
- 14 <https://www.starwars.com/news/star-wars-inside-intel-religions-of-the-force>
- 15 <https://www.thehumanfront.com/buddhism-in-star-wars/>
- 16 <https://www.thehumanfront.com/buddhism-in-star-wars/>
- 17 <https://edition.cnn.com/2018/01/26/us/star-wars-religion/index.html>
- 18 <https://lithub.com/from-star-wars-to-lord-of-the-rings-how-to-build-a-world/>
- 19 Afanasov, N. (2020). Insects and Rain. Anime beyond Human. *Galactica Media: Journal of Media Studies*, 2 (4), 35 – 51. <https://doi.org/10.46539/gmd.v2i4.108>
- 20 <https://screenrant.com/star-wars-major-hollywood-blockbuster-franchise-trends-george-lucas-saga-started/>

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