

May the Force (so to speak) Be With You

By Thomas Howard

My wife and I and our son were watching a decorous old film on the television set some time ago, and as my wife was extracting the DVD (I don't know how to do it), the set clicked back onto live television, and an announcement came on, to the effect that a retrospective on *Star Wars* was about to begin. The vote was two to one that we should at least have a look at it, so I gloomily acceded.

Against all odds, it turned out to be both amusing and instructive. We had, of course, to endure the longueurs of critics, academics, and a ragtag of experts telling us all about the thing. They unrolled all the great topics—archetypes and protohistoric themes, and the hero with his journey, and the ordeal, and conflict, and how various ambiguities always salt the drama, and so forth. The matter of good and evil, however, had a flavor here that would have perplexed Hector, Arthur, and Roland, I think, since it was all cast in the vocabulary of the dark *side* and the light *side* of a single entity. Those gentlemen thought that they were warring on the side of Good against Evil which, far from being simply the “shadow side” of that Good, was an altogether distinct, and malign, entity (or force, shall we say . . .). Well, hey for enlightenment and nonny for contemporaneity, I suppose.

The saving thing was that the program was all besprinkled with lovely clips from the *Star Wars* trilogy itself. The first segment, which came out, I should think, some thirty years ago, holds up splendidly, even though “special effects” have made staggering advances in the interim. Here were R2-D2 (I have had to ask my son how to write these names down: I started this article with Artoo-Detoo) and C-3PO peeping and chortling away, and all of the

appalling troglodytes on that planet where Han Solo lands them briefly, and of course Darth Vader snuffling balefully through his black mask. Vast fun.

Then we have Alec Guinness as Obi-Wan Kenobi, the good Jedi, a sort of magus, who comes to the rescue of Luke Skywalker (this brings up the delicate topic of the acting, which we shall leave hurriedly on one side . . .). Matters have taken on a serious cast in the narrative by this time: the characters are in terrible trouble, and things

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look bleak indeed, as they should in a saga of this sort. But with the appearance of Guinness they take on what we might call a *weighty* cast—almost, I might say, a *religious* cast. In fact, it is a religious cast.

For it is here that we are introduced to the Force. A gospel is announced to the modern epoch.

No apostle, no itinerant mendicant in a cowl, no sweating Appalachian white-sock stump preacher, no shouting, weeping, television figure, has ever been more literally an evangelist than Obi-Wan Kenobi. I was galvanized as I watched Alec Guinness work

that role. As he told Luke about the Force, the sweetness and earnestness that he poured into his facial expression and voice would have served any preacher well. His eyes grew tender, his eyebrows drew together tenderly and the corners of his mouth bent up just so—as though to say, “Listen to me, Luke boy: I’m telling you something wonderful. I’m a wise and loving man. Hear me. Oh if you’ll only hear me. There’s good news here, boy.” His evangel was, of course, “May the Force be with you.” And his great word to Luke as Luke prepared for his duel was that Luke follow, not some eternal, fixed, now-to-be-revealed, moral law, but—his *instinct*. *His feelings*.

I don’t think I exaggerate my point about this “gospel”. I was agog. Everything that has made Broadway and Hollywood merry about Salvationist and fundamentalist preachers since General William Booth was here. Oh to be sure, Guinness didn’t shout. The veins in his neck didn’t stand out. But the *earnestness*. The *ardor*. The *zeal*. It was all there. My point, however, is not to jeer. Very far from it. It was exactly right. It was a perfect piece of acting. My remarks about Guinness’s performance are a high tribute to his skill.

My point is that here we had a gospel announced, not merely to Luke but to hundreds of millions of young moviegoers, and, *a fortiori*, to a populace, in an epoch that was frolicking along its way, having emerged (it supposed) from the nursery school of Western *religion* (read Christianity), and was now stepping out into brave forms of self-authentication, mysticism, Sufism, meditation, Buddhism, Jungianism, Hinduism, Taoism, Gnosticism, and non-religion generally, sometimes unwittingly and naively, and who found this vocabulary of “the

Force” exciting, appealing, and sympathetic.

Alert readers will at this point have found themselves entertaining the most sombre misgivings about the line of thought being pursued here. Isn’t the man making rather heavy weather of a fairy tale? The movie was merely a bit of *entertainment*, forsooth. And here we are, it is beginning to appear, bidden to treat it as a religious watershed in the history of the West.

The remark is just. As far as I know, George Lucas had no philosophical or evangelistic tactics in mind. Entertainment is his field, and he is good at it.

But at this point we are all suddenly thrust back onto thunderous platitudes, most notably the one about a picture being worth a thousand words—even if the picture has no agenda. But then of course, pictures do spring from sensibilities and general assumptions. Fra Angelico painted those murals because he had certain (angelic) assumptions about reality. Vermeer’s kitchens seemed suffused with luminescence and sublimity because something about luminescence and sublimity was suffusing his imagination. Pictures speak, willy-nilly. Remember Picasso’s “Guernica”. That large painting has shaped almost everyone’s view of the Spanish Civil War, facts to the contrary notwithstanding. Or Edward Munch’s “The Scream”: *such* an icon of modern angst. Or Francis Bacon’s dribbling and yelling popes with no tops to their heads. What’s *that* all about? It’s recognizably modern, whatever else it might be.

I, of course, was watching the *Star Wars* retrospective as a Roman Catholic. I wondered what

the appeal of this vast saga has been. There can be no doubt that it has been incalculable. There is, of course, the chicken-and-egg business: to what extent has *Star Wars* created a climate, and to what extent has it sprung from that climate. The same ques-

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tion hovers around The Beatles and a dozen other items from the last half century. Who will sort it all out? Himalayan piles of unsatisfactory sociology stuff the archives on the point.

I have never met anyone who actually has taken to worshiping the Force any more than I have met anyone who has started up a cult of Sauron or Morgoth (this would be very bad news indeed). But Obi-Wan Kenobi’s Force sounds indistinguishable to me from various cloudy notions being reached for in the aspirations of a thousand forms of Gnostic piety popular nowadays. At the time of this writing I am in a somewhat labored correspondence myself with a

young ex-Christian painter who finds himself galvanized by aeons and demiurges and so forth.

In so far as *Star Wars* may be taken to be a fairy tale, we may applaud it and leave it at that. We do it an injustice to ask it to be a gospel. But in so far as it actually does “speak to” or “speak for” an epoch (which it does, in fact, seem to do, by all accounts), then we may reflect on it without prejudice, it seems to me.

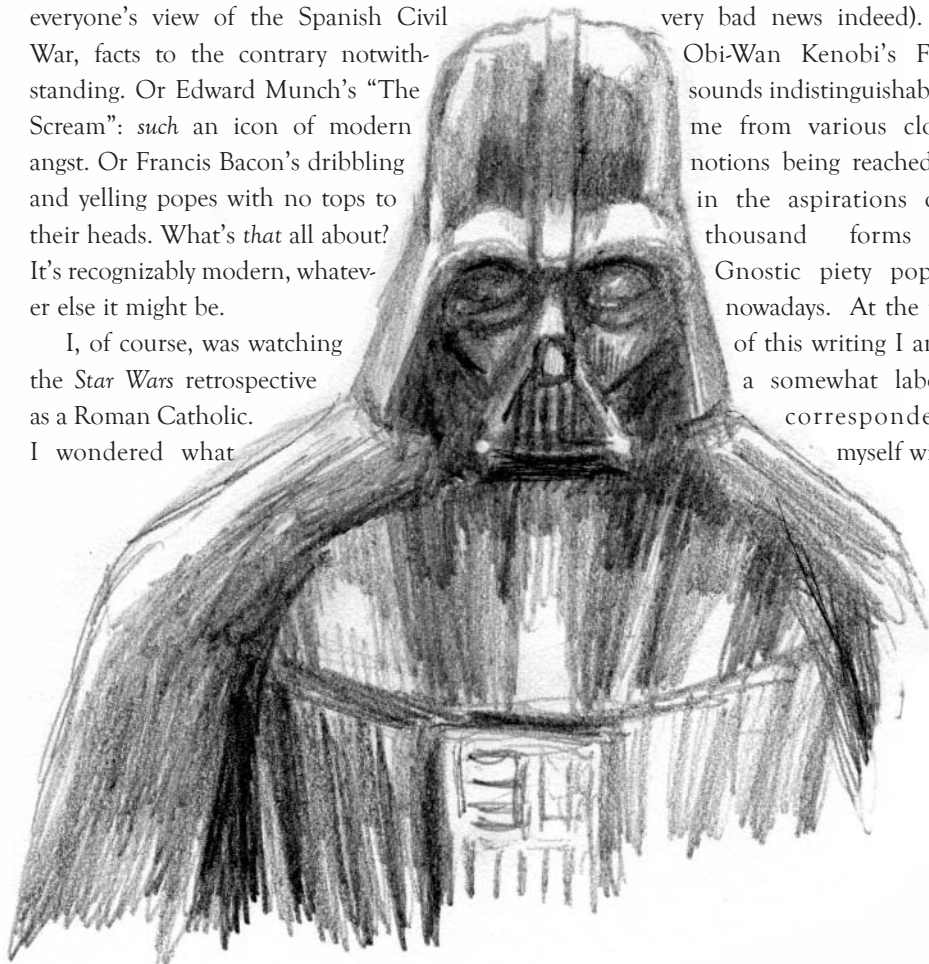
In this latter light, I found myself with two questions, among others. For one thing, this Force, along with many of the forces and principles and spirits and categories sought and invoked and aspired to in a hundred forms of contemporary piety, seems to fall short of that thing which man has sought most sedulously from the beginning, namely the Thou by whom he is addressed. The profoundest mystery of my being is my personhood. What is it? *Whence* is it? And, above all, *Who* is it?

This last is the bottomless question. *Who am I?* This “I” in me will not call itself “it”. My dog does not seem hag-ridden by the same question.

And the question is not off the end of my tongue before the next one overtakes it altogether: *Nay—Who art Thou?* It is inconceivable that I should derive from an abstraction. How shall a mere *force* have begotten an *I*?

Rummage as we will amongst the shards in Mesopotamia, Lake Baikal, or Easter Island, we can scarcely find a tribe whose god had no name. And the name of the god was, in some sense, the bearer—almost the “sacrament”—of his identity. And this, of course, “thickened and hardened and came to a point” (C. S. Lewis) with the revelation to Moses of the Tetragrammaton, the name so holy that they could not say it at all.

This finds me deep in my second question. I find myself, the man, hailed from the precincts of *holiness*, alas. The god—let us say God now—is holy. This is not an easy word to define. Morally and spiritually excellent; perfect; to be revered; sacred; consecrated; the dictionary can get us started. But it leaves us well outside the precincts of that



pure and burning glory which is the habitation of the Most High of whom we speak. Whatever may be the actuality of those dread precincts, we may be sure that it all stands at an infinite extreme from all that is squalid, petty, frivolous, inconsequential, venal, pusillanimous, indistinct, flaccid, craven, vain, and perfidious. Here one is not left to proceed upon instinct, much less upon feelings, so untrustworthy in any event, but notably so in this august place. All the pagans have known this, along with all Greeks and all Hebrews and all Christians. One enters a hard school here, with many a rigorous lesson. One's prefer-

ences, instincts, feelings, and inclinations are no more consulted here than are those of the boy who would be a gymnast, an athlete, a ballet dancer, or a Spartan warrior. But at the far end, one will find oneself a participant in a state of affairs which is unimaginable to one at the outset.

Have we asked too much of *Star Wars*? Or read too much into it? It's always a tricky business, this. We need to pick our way along in these fairy tales circumspectly. Do we want to find ourselves warning our children darkly that the Red Queen has all along been a crypto-Monophysite? Is Piglet a proto-Arian? Surely Mrs. Tiggle Winkle has

got Socinian leanings? And isn't this an alarming tincture of Patripassianism that we descry in Reepicheep? Come.

Yes. This sort of thing is tricky. But I found an odd confluence between that *Star Wars* retrospective and various laborious conversations and exchanges of correspondence in which I have found myself mired recently, and I wondered whether *St. Austin Review* readers find the same thing.

Thomas Howard is a popular author of numerous books. The Night is Far Spent: The Best of Thomas Howard has recently been published by Ignatius Press.