• Articles •

The Jedi Community:
History and Folklore of a Fiction-based Religion

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Abstract: *The Jedi Community is a loose confederation of groups and individuals who, inspired by George Lucas'* Star Wars *movies, have adopted an identity as Jedi Knights. Contrary to* Star Wars *fans who may occasionally and temporarily play as Jedi, members of the Jedi Community aim to simply be Jedi Knights – always and everywhere. They will even say that they are the real Jedi – as opposed to the fictional Jedi of the movies. Members of the Jedi Community also believe that the Force, the cosmic power from* Star Wars, *actually exists in the real world. An important part of the practice as Jedi Knights is thus to study the Force and connect with it in ritual. This article provides the most comprehensive overview to date of the Jedi Community. It sketches the history of the Jedi Community since its emergence from the online* Star Wars *roleplaying community in the late 1990s, and presents an overview of the Community members' core beliefs and practices. Throughout, due attention is paid to the divergent views on issues of doctrine, practice, and identity held by the two main factions within the Jedi Community, the Jedi Realists, for whom the Jedi Path is a spiritual way of life, and the Jediists who seek to develop Jediism into a full-fledged and legally recognized religion.*

As Henry Jenkins has famously pointed out, fans of popular culture are no passive consumers, but active agents – "textual poachers" even – who engage in "a type of cultural bricolage through which [they] fragment texts and reassemble the broken shards according to their own blueprint" (1992, 26). In other words: fans use popular culture as a resource for the creation of their own folk culture or folklore. This process of turning popular culture into folklore can arguably take place at three levels. At the most basic level, any consumption of popular culture involves the co-construction of "folk meaning." Readers interpret popular culture in light of their own experience, and use fan texts to make sense of situations, relationships, and aspirations in their own lives. This interpretative freedom is what Michel de Certeau

had in mind when he originally characterized reading as poaching (1984, xii, xxi, 165-169). The second level of the folklorization of popular culture is reached when fans form alternative communities, organize collective folk practices (e.g., cosplay and conventions), and produce cultural artefacts (e.g., fan fiction and fan art). When Jenkins (1992) characterized TV fans as textual poachers, he was referring to this collective and productive mode of fandom. In this article I argue that the folklorization of popular culture can be taken to an even higher level of independence vis-à-vis the source text. We have this third level when individuals construct identities, world-views, and spiritualities based on popular cultural source texts and claim that these cultural products are in some way more real or genuine than the source text itself.

The best example of such radical appropriation of popular culture is the Jedi Community, a loosely organized milieu consisting of groups and individuals who, inspired by *Star Wars*, have adopted an identity as Jedi Knights. Members of the Jedi Community meditate to get in contact with the Force, see themselves as the "real" Jedi Knights (as opposed to the "fictional" ones in *Star Wars*), and have formed groups, both online and offline. Members of the Jedi Community insist that they are different from conventional *Star Wars* fans and they are right to do so for whereas *Star Wars* fans may occasionally and temporarily play as Jedi Knights, members of the Jedi Community aim to simply be Jedi Knights – always and everywhere. Members of the Jedi Community also believe that the Force, the cosmic power from *Star Wars*, actually exists in the real world, and an important part of their practice as Jedi Knights is to study the Force and connect with it in ritual. They do not, however, believe that Yoda and the other characters from *Star Wars* are real or that the storyline of the movies has taken place in actual history.

Since the Jedi Community involves religious beliefs and practices, it can be classified as a religious community rather than as a community of fans. However, since *Star Wars*, the core text of the Jedi Community, presents itself as a fictional tale and does not make the claim to non-fictionality typical of the authoritative

narratives of conventional religions, it is clear that we are dealing with a particular *kind* of religion – which I have referred to elsewhere as "fiction-based religion" (Davidsen 2016a; cf. Davidsen 2013) and which Adam Possamai has referred to as "hyper-real religion" (2005, 2012). With its several thousand active members, the Jedi Community easily constitutes the largest fiction-based/hyper-real religious milieu at present, but it is not the only one. Other examples include Tolkien spirituality, based on J.R.R. Tolkien's books and Peter Jackson's movie adaptations (Davidsen 2012, 2014), and the Church of All Worlds, based on Robert Heinlein's *Stranger in a Strange Land* (Cusack 2010, Ch. 3, 2016); for more examples of fiction-based (or hyper-real or invented) religions, see also Possamai (2012), Cusack (2010), and Cusack and Kosnáč (2017).

The first academic discussions of the Jedi Community were prompted by the so-called Jedi Census Phenomenon when more than 500,000 individuals put down "Jedi" as their religious affiliation in the 2001 censuses in New Zealand, Canada, Great Britain, and Australia (Possamai 2003, 2005, 71-83; Porter 2006; Cusack 2010, 120-128). The Jedi Census Phenomenon, more on which below, was largely a practical joke, but it helped researchers locate those people who sincerely pursued the Path of the Jedi. Later studies have discussed subsequent censuses (Singler 2014), recounted the Jedi Community's struggle for legal recognition (Singler 2015), and have taken up the question why *Star Wars* lends itself to religious appropriation in the first place (Davidsen 2016b). Surprisingly little effort, however, has been taken to map the history, beliefs, and practices of the Jedi Community in detail. Some first steps in this direction have been made by McCormick (2012) and myself (Davidsen 2016a), but both articles suffer from a crucial weakness that plagues all existing literature on the Jedi Community, namely that observations from a small and non-representative selection of Jedi groups are generalized to count for the entire Community.

This article aims to move beyond the existing literature by offering the most complete overview to date of the history and folklore of the Jedi Community, based

on analyses of homepages and community texts from all main Jedi groups. A key contribution of this article is the attention paid to the diverse opinions on issues of doctrine, practice, and identity held by different factions within the Jedi Community. As will be apparent, one important fault line within the Community (but not the only one) runs between the self-identified Jedi Realists for whom the Jedi Path is a spiritual way of life, and the Jediists who seek to develop Jediism into a full-fledged and legally recognized religion. Jedi Realism developed out of the online *Star Wars* roleplaying community in the late 1990s and Jediism, in turn, emerged out of the Jedi Realist community in the early 2000s. In the four following sections I discuss, in turn, the history, beliefs, practices, and social organization of the Jedi Community, before rounding off with an account of the Jediist struggle for legal recognition of Jediism as a religion.

From Roleplay to Religion: The History of the Jedi Community

The ultimate roots of the Jedi Community can be traced back to the release of *Star Wars* (later renamed *Star Wars Episode IV: A New Hope*) in 1977. In this movie, manuscript writer and director George Lucas introduced the audience to "a galaxy far, far away" in which peace and justice is upheld by the Jedi Knights, a group of robed and light sabre-wielding monks-cum-special agents. In the early 1980s, two additional movies completed "the original trilogy." In *Star Wars Episode V: The Empire Strikes Back* (1980), main protagonist Luke Skywalker initiates his training as a Jedi Knight under Master Yoda, a small, goblin-like creature who turns out to be the mightiest Jedi Master in the galaxy. In *Star Wars Episode VI: The Return of the Jedi* (1983), Luke confronts and redeems Darth Vader, the main villain of the trilogy, who turns out to be Luke's own father and to have been a Jedi Knight before he turned to the Dark Side of the Force.

As this brief plot summary demonstrates, the *Star Wars* saga is steeped with religious motifs. Many of these stem from Christianity (original trilogy: fall and redemption, good versus evil, Franciscan-inspired Jedi Knights; later movies: virgin

birth), whereas others are borrowed from Buddhism (master-apprentice relation, non-theistic higher power, meditation). This combination of Christian and Buddhist motifs is not coincidental, of course, but reflects contemporary religious fashions in the West, as well as Lucas' own religious stance. Indeed, Lucas' daughter had in school described the family's religious position as "Buddhist Methodist," and in an interview with Orville Schell, Lucas endorsed this assessment (Schell 1999). (On Lucas' inspiration from Christianity, Buddhism, and other religions, see Lyden 2000, 2003, 217-225; Schultes 2003; Bowen and Wagner 2006). In another interview from 1999, this time with Bill Moyers, Lucas furthermore explained that his use of religious motifs in *Star Wars* was intentional – that he "put the Force into the movie in order to awaken a certain kind of spirituality in young people – more a belief in God than a belief in any particular religious system" (Moyers 1999). In the same interview, Lucas stated that he did not want to invent a new religion, only to "explain in a different way the religions that have already existed" (Moyers 1999). Even so, Lucas' movies *did* provide the building-blocks out of which spiritually inclined fans would actually construct a new religion.

The Jedi Community began to emerge from the *Star Wars* fan and roleplaying community around 1995, as fans and roleplayers, who would eventually adopt the self-designation Jedi Realists, started to discuss how to apply the ideals of the Jedi Knights to their own lives. An ambition was formulated to recreate, as accurately as possible, the Jedi Knights of *Star Wars* in the real world, and central to this endeavor was the establishment of education centers in which members could study the Jedi ethics and learn about the Force. The earliest Jedi Realist website was probably Kharis Nightflyer's Jedi Praxeum on Yavin4 (launched December 1995), but Baal Legato's Jedi Academy (active 1998-2003), which included a discussion forum (BBC message board in 1998; Ezboard from 1999 onwards), was the first real meeting place for Jedi Realists and the central hub in the Jedi Community between 1999 and 2002 (Macleod 2008, 16).

One may wonder why the Jedi Community did not emerge until twenty years after the first *Star Wars* movie, but I think there are good reasons for this timing. One facilitating factor in the late 1990s was that *Star Wars* fandom reached a new climax, due to the cinematic re-release of the original *Star Wars* trilogy in 1997 and the anticipation of the so-called prequel trilogy, consisting of *Star Wars Episode I: The Phantom Menace* (1999), *Star Wars Episode II: Attack of the Clones* (2002), and *Star Wars Episode III: Revenge of the Sith* (2005). More importantly, however, the emergence of the Jedi Community was made possible by three other factors: the release of *Star Wars: The Roleplaying Game* in 1987 which invited fans to try on a Jedi identity for size, the publication of Kevin J. Anderson's *Jedi Academy t*rilogy in 1994 which afforded a blueprint for Jedi training, and the emergence of the mass Internet in the mid-1990s which provided a platform for group formation.

Already during the early and mid-1980s, *Star Wars* fans had been discussing the movies' religious themes, both offline, at conventions, and online, through Usenet (McCormick 2012, 168-169). However, these discussions were focused entirely on the *Star Wars* universe and did not seriously pose the question whether the Force and the Jedi ideals could also be relevant in the real world. This situation began to change with the publication by West End Games of *Star Wars: The Roleplaying Game* in 1987 (Costikyan 1987). The game offered fans a chance to actively inhabit and expand the *Star Wars* universe, and this led some players to think about what it would be like to live like *Star Wars* characters in the real world. Furthermore, whereas the game did not focus at all on playing Jedi characters (because the Jedi Knights had been as good as eliminated at the point of time within the *Star Wars* universe when the game was set), it introduced the idea that the Jedi follow a "Jedi Code." The roleplaying handbook even included, for the very first time, a written four-line excerpt from the Code. (The Jedi Code was not mentioned in the original movie trilogy and is mentioned only once in the later movies, in *The Phantom Menace*).

Building on ideas introduced in the roleplaying game, Kevin J. Anderson published the *Jedi Academy* trilogy in 1994 (Anderson 1994). The trilogy is set eleven years after *The Return of the Jedi* and tells of Luke Skywalker's restoration of the Jedi Order after its near-destruction during the Great Jedi Purge (later narrated in *Revenge of the Sith*). The books give much information about Luke's training of a new generation of Jedi Knights and provide plenty of apprentice Jedi to identify with. For these reasons, the *Jedi Academy* trilogy became popular among *Star Wars* fans and was soon followed up by two Jedi-centered supplements to the *Star Wars* roleplaying game, *Tales of the Jedi Companion* (Strayton 1996) and *The Jedi Academy Sourcebook* (Sudlow 1996). Anderson's books and the Jedi-focused roleplaying supplements were direct sources of inspiration for the emerging Jedi Realist community. The very name of the Jedi Academy, the first major Jedi Realist site, was taken directly from Anderson's books, and the Jedi training offered at the site was based on the trilogy and on the roleplaying books.

While novels and roleplaying books provided the ideological content for Jedi Realism, the Internet contributed the social technology – in terms of chat rooms, websites, and bulletin boards – that was needed to form a Jedi community. Internet penetration in the United States reached 16.4% in 1996 and 50% in 2002 (Worldbank 2012), and it was during the mid-1990s that all kinds of *Star Wars*-related websites emerged, including, in roughly chronological order, fan sites, roleplaying sites, and specialized roleplaying sites for Jedi characters. Within the online roleplaying community, some players started to talk about developing non-RPG sites devoted to Jedi training and discussions about being a real-world Jedi. For example, Streen and Mitth'raw'nurida (who together with Relan Volkum consider themselves the "big three" of early Jedi Realism) met in the popular RPG chatroom the Mos Eisley Cantina in 1998 (Jedi Spirit: Mitth & Streen). In 1999, they merged their respective Jedi websites (both called Jedi Alliance) and founded, together with Relan Volkum and other prominent Jedi Realists, the Jedi Council, which was later renamed the Jedi Creed (Jedi Spirit: Jedi Creed). The Jedi Creed was an important

hub for Jedi Realists around 2000 and for this reason became the main target of a BBC story run on 6 March 2001, titled "The Gospel According to Luke (Skywalker)" (BBC 2001). The group fell apart due to internal division on how to respond to the unexpected media attention (Jedi Spirit: Jedi Creed), but soon other groups took its place.

Reflecting their RPG-heritage, most of the big Jedi Realist sites in the early years, including Jedi of the New Millennium (active 1997-2004), Jedi Creed (active 1999-2001), and Jedi Temple (active 2000-2009), combined roleplaying and serious Jedi training on their sites (Macleod 2008, 14, 21). Furthermore, whereas the Jedi Academy initially aimed to be a non-RPG site, it had turned into the roleplaying site Forsaken Jedi by 2003, leaving the non-RPG members to form new Jedi Realist groups, including Jedi Mythos (active 2003-2008) (Macleod 2008, 4, 17). On the other hand, Jedi Realist groups that had successfully cut their ties to the community's roleplaying past started to emerge in 2000, including Temple of the Jedi Arts (active 2000-2005) and the influential Jedi Organization (later renamed JEDI; active 2001-2006). At the same time, a new type of Jedi groups emerged that styled themselves churches (rather than academies) and whose members considered themselves to be followers of a genuine religion – Jediism. Jediism did not emerge out of thin air. Just as *Star Wars: The Roleplaying Game* helped nurture the idea that Jedi Realism could be a viable lifestyle in the real world, one can point to an important background phenomenon that nurtured the idea that Jediism could be a viable religion. I am hinting at the so-called Jedi Census Phenomenon of 2001.

New Zealand, Australia, and Canada organize a census every five years and have always included a question about religious affiliation on the census bill; in Great Britain censuses are held every ten years, and the question about religious affiliation was added to the bill for the first time in 2001. One might not suspect such a situation to cause a stir, but taking advantage of the new social technologies of the Internet, a chain email was circulated prior to the 2001 censuses that urged people to report their religious affiliation as "Jedi." Probably this was partly meant as a

political protest, partly as a practical joke. In any case, the campaign was a massive success, starting in New Zealand (where the census was held in March) and soon spreading to Great Britain (April), Canada (May), and Australia (August) – helped along by generous media coverage by newspapers, such as *The Guardian* (Porter 2006, 96; Singler 2014, 154). In the end, more than 500,000 people across the four countries had claimed to be "Jedi." With more than 390,000 self-identified adherents, Jediism came out as the fourth-largest religion in Great Britain, outscoring both Judaism and Buddhism. The largest concentration of Jedi, however, proved to live in New Zealand where they constituted almost 1.4% of the total population (Porter 2006, 96-98; Possamai 2005, 72-73) – in some university cities close to 10%. Campaigning was less intense prior to the following censuses in 2006 and 2011, but the number of self-reported Jedi remained high, and the phenomenon spread to other countries, including the Czech Republic, which counted 15,000 Jedi in the 2011 census. Also, a news story in the *Washington Post* in 2009 reported that Jedi was the tenth-most common religious self-identification on Facebook (if one chunks the diverse Christian self-identifications, such as "Protestant," "Catholic," and "Mormon," together to form just one category; Wan 2009). Please consult table 1 below for an overview of the census figures of 2001, 2006, and 2011. Between brackets, I give the percentage of the population identifying as Jedi.

TABLE 1. The Jedi Census Phenomenon

	2001	2006	2011
Australia	70,509 (0.4 %)[1]	58,053 (0.3 %)[2]	*c.* 65,000 (0.3 %)[2]
Canada	*c.* 20,000 (0.1 %)[2]	N/A [religion question not asked]	*c.* 9,000 (<0.03 %)[2]
Czech Republic	N/A	N/A	15,070 (0.1 %)[2]
England and Wales	390,127 (0.7 %)[2]	N/A [no census]	176,632 (0.3 %)[2]
New Zealand	53,715 (1.4 %)[3]	c. 20,000 (0.5 %)[2]	N/A [no census]
Scotland	14,052 (0.3 %)[2]	N/A [no census]	11,746 (0.2 %)[4]

(Sources: 1: AAP (2002); 2: Wikipedia: Jedi Census (2017); 3: Perrott (2002); 4: National Research of Scotland (n.y.))

Jediism: The Jedi Religion, the first Jediist group, was founded by David Dolan in 2001. Dolan had gotten the idea from the census campaign and had bought a website already in February 2001, when the chain email was going viral but no actual census had yet been held (Justjedi: Jediism). Dolan's site was launched in April 2001 and became the central community for Jediists until 2005. Writing in 2006, right after Jediism: The Jedi Religion had gone defunct, Jennifer E. Porter suggested that Jediism was gone and done with, whereas Jedi Realism was still going strong (2006, 105, 111). In fact, the opposite was closer to the truth. Leading Jedi Realist Kevin Trout (aka Jedi Opie Macleod) grudgingly places the high-watermark of the Jedi Community as early as 2000 in his *History of the Jedi Community 1998-2008* (Macleod 2008, 4), i.e. before the Jedi Census Phenomenon and the emergence of Jediism. By contrast, new Jediist groups were founded throughout the 2000s, including both direct successors to Jediism: The Jedi Religion, and Jediist groups unrelated to the Jediist first-mover. The successor groups included Jedi Sanctuary (active 2003-2007), The Jediism Way (active 2005-2009), Temple of the Jedi Order (founded 2005 by John Henry Phelan), and its offshoot Temple of the Jedi Force (founded 2007); the most prominent unrelated groups were the New Zealand-based Jedi Church (founded 2003) and the UK-based Church of Jediism (founded 2007 by Daniel Jones).

To be fair, also Jedi Realism thrived and developed after 2000, and Macleod's nomination of the year 2000 as the zenith of the Jedi Community must be seen in light of his personal preference for the particular form of Jedi Realism. Reflecting the roots of Jedi Realism in *Star Wars* fandom and roleplaying, the dominant ideal around 2000 was to emulate the Jedi of *Star Wars* as closely as possible, and therefore Jedi training was supposed to be based solely on *Star Wars* materials. This is still Macleod's ideal, and on Jedi sites run by him, he consistently points to three core sources on which Jedi training ought to be based: the *Star Wars* movies, Anderson's *Jedi Academy* trilogy, and the *Power of the Jedi Sourcebook* (Jedi Academy

Online: FAQ; Jedi Living: FAQ). (The *Power of the Jedi Sourcebook* (Wiker et al. 2002) is a supplement to the *Star Wars* roleplaying game that provides even more detailed information on the Jedi Knights than the roleplaying guides from 1996 mentioned above). Overall, however, the Jedi Realist community has moved away from the original purist ideal and now readily combines *Star Wars* with inspiration from real-world religious traditions, such as Buddhism, Taoism, and New Age. We see this, for example, in big Jedi Realist groups, such as the Institute of Jedi Realist Studies (founded 2007 as The Jedi Academy; name change in 2008; a main successor to the Jedi Organization), and even more pronounced in the Force Academy (founded 1998 or 1999) and the related groups Ashla Knights (founded 2006; Ashla is the name for the light side of the Force) and Knights of Awakening (founded 2009; offshoot from Ashla Knights). These groups, which today constitute mainstream Jedi Realism, share with Jediists an interest in integrating ideas from *Star Wars* with beliefs and practices from real-world religions. The main difference between Jedi Realism and Jediism today is that Jediists draw most of their extra-*Star Wars* inspiration from Christianity and seek legal recognition as churches, whereas Jedi Realist groups combine *Star Wars* with ideas and practices from Eastern and esoteric traditions and remain uninterested in obtaining legal status as religious bodies.

Another important development within the Jedi Community in the twenty-first century has been the emergence of groups that meet in real life rather than on the Internet. These groups include the Chicago Jedi (founded 2006), the Maryland/Virginia Jedi (founded 2008), the California Jedi (founded 2012), and the Heartland Jedi (founded 2014), as well as similar groups outside the United States. In America, where most Jedi live, a yearly national gathering has been organized since 2002. Local and national gatherings, attracting both Jedi Realists and Jediists, are advertised throughout the Jedi Community and are supported by Facebook groups and a dedicated gathering website (Jedi Resource Centre 2005-2015; Jedi Federation 2015-present). The first national gathering (2002; Montana) drew just a handful participants (Justjedi: First gathering), but by 2013, the number of

participants had risen to eighteen (fifteen men; three women). That year's gathering also attracted journalist Benjamin Svetsky, whose report in *Details* magazine (Svetsky 2013) led to a 10-minute long interview with Svetsky and Opie Macleod on Fox News' program *Spirited Debate* (Green 2013). Several of the first gatherings were organized by Maryland-based Moonshadow, but during the last five years Gabriel Calderon (aka Angelus Kalen; founder of the Chicago Jedi) has been the *primus motor*.

Beliefs within the Jedi Community: Jedi Realists and Jediists Compared

Jedi of all stripes agree that *Star Wars* is their core source of inspiration, but they also hold, as a matter of course, that *Star Wars* is fiction. In other words, the Jedi do not view the storyline or the characters of *Star Wars* to be real, and they do not regard George Lucas as a prophet. But they do consider the Force to be a valid term for a real, cosmic power existing in the real world. They also consider the Jedi Knights of *Star Wars* to be role models whose values and ideals are universal and worth aspiring to.

Two additional shared characteristics follow logically from the acceptance of *Star Wars* as the Jedi Community's scriptural center. First, all Jedi groups adhere to some version of the Jedi Code. As mentioned above, the first version of the Code was published in 1987 in *Star Wars: The Roleplaying Game* (Costikyan 1987, 69). This version, often referred to as the "Orthodox Code" or "Odan-Urr's version," has four stanzas and runs as follows:

> *There is no emotion, there is peace.*
> *There is no ignorance, there is knowledge.*
> *There is no passion, there is serenity.*
> *There is no death, there is the Force.*

According to various roleplaying guides, these stanzas constitute an excerpt from the Code (e.g., Wiker et al. 2002, 36), implying the existence of a much more elaborate Code. Jedi websites, however, typically present this short text as *the* Code, and supplement it with elaborate commentary of their own. A so-called Alternate Code circulates as well, which according to *Star Wars* chronology appeared shortly before the events portrayed in the prequel trilogy. The Alternate Code was published for the first time in a 1999 children's book where it was put in the mouth of Jedi Knight Qui-Gon Jinn (Cerasini 1999, 26). It was published again later the same year in *The Phantom Menace Scrapbook* (Windham 1999, 15). Some Jediists prefer the Alternate Code, but it has not displaced the Orthodox Code within the Jedi Community at large. The Alternate Code reads as follows:

> *Jedi are the guardians of peace in the galaxy.*
> *Jedi use their powers to defend and protect, never to attack others.*
> *Jedi respect all life, in any form.*
> *Jedi serve others, rather than rule over them, for the good of the galaxy.*
> *Jedi seek to improve themselves through knowledge and training.*

A slightly different version of the Alternate Code (striking the words "never to attack others" in the second stanza) has appeared in several *Star Wars* novels after 1999.

The second *Star Wars*-determined common denominator of all Jedi groups is a doctrinal emphasis on cosmology (and ethics), rather than on cosmic history and salvation. Again, this emphasis is not random, but follows from the type of religious beliefs that *Star Wars* "affords" (cf. Davidsen 2016b). Indeed, in the teachings of the Jedi in *Star Wars*, we find articulate ideas about the existence and nature of the Force (religious cosmology), as well as the related beliefs that each individual possesses a spirit or soul that is somehow connected to the Force and returns to "the Netherworld of the Force" after death (religious anthropology). By contrast, *Star Wars* Jedi are silent on matters of cosmic history. They have nothing to say on

how and why the world came into being (protology), nor anything on matters of eschatology or soteriology. The Jedi in the real world stick to the same emphasis: they believe in the Force and argue that upon death the individual soul/spirit returns to or merges with the cosmic Force. They have not developed significant protological or soteriological doctrines – even though some Jediists will say that the Force has a plan for us and that everything happens for a purpose.

Across the Jedi Community, all groups share two further characteristics that do not follow directly from its roots in *Star Wars*. The first is a non-exclusive stance on membership. All Jedi groups consider it completely natural for individuals to be members of several Jedi groups simultaneously, and for Jedi to be active also in other religious groups. The second shared characteristic of the Jedi Community goes directly against *Star Wars* lore and constitutes the best example of how the real-world Jedi have appropriated and altered *Star Wars* to serve their own needs. All Jedi reject the existence of "midi-chlorians," the tiny, symbiotic life forms that in the *Star Wars* universe live in the blood of sentient beings and act as conductors for the Force. The notion of midi-chlorians, which was introduced in *The Phantom Menace* but which Lucas insisted was part of his vision right from the start, are controversial in the Jedi Community because they come together with the idea that some people have a higher midi-chlorian count than others, and that only the most gifted can dream of entering the Jedi Order. In spite of *Star Wars*, members of the Jedi Community prefer the egalitarian idea that everyone who so wishes can become a Jedi.

So much for commonalities. Groups within the Jedi Community also differ from each other on important issues, regarding beliefs, rituals, and organizational style. Differences on these parameters largely correlate with each other and with the self-identification as Jedi Realist vis-à-vis Jediist. Consult table 2 for an overview.

TABLE 2. Comparison of Jedi Realism and Jediism

	Jedi Realism	Jediism
Force dynamology	Dynamism	Dynamism and animism
Relation to *Star Wars*	Purist or syncretic	Syncretic
Self-categorization	Philosophy/way of life	Religion
Rituals	Meditation, initiation	Meditation, initiation, prayer, sermons, rites of passage
Institutional model	Academy	Church (incl. aim for legal recognition)
Non-*SW* sources of inspiration	Eastern religions, new age	Christianity, Eastern religions
Paths	Light + dark, grey, Sith	Light
Some main groups (active)	Force Academy, Ashla Knights, Institute for Jedi Realist Studies, Jedi Academy Online	Temple of the Jedi Order, Jedi Church, Church of Jediism
Some main groups (no longer active)	Jedi Academy, Jedi Creed, Jedi Organization/JEDI	Jediism: The Jedi Religion, Jedi Sanctuary, The Jediism Way

In terms of doctrine, the main difference between Jedi Realists and Jediists concerns their view of the Force, their "dynamology." Jedi Realists tend to view the Force in *dynamistic* terms – as a relatively passive and vitalistic power or life energy. The Force Academy and the Ashla Knights, for example, compare the Force with Eastern concepts, such as chi and prana, and observe similarities between their own practice and tai chi, aikido, and Zen (Force Academy: Force; Ashla Knights: Force). In a similar fashion, the Jedi Academy Online considers the Force to be "essentially a "by-product" of life – a side effect, if you will, yet symbiotic" (Jedi Academy Online: FAQ). Jediist groups, by contrast, view the Force sometimes in dynamistic and sometimes in *animistic* terms – as an independent agent. A good example of the Jediist view of the Force is given in the "16 Basic Teachings of the Jedi," a document drawn up by Jedi Kidohdin of the Jedi Sanctuary and later adopted by other Jediist groups, including the Temple of the Jedi Order. Teaching #1 reflects the dynamistic view of the Force that all Jedi share: "As Jedi, we are in touch with the Living Force

flowing through and around us, as well as being spiritually aware of the Force. Jedi are trained to become sensitive to the Force's energy, fluctuations, and disturbances" (*The Way of Jediism* 2010, 9). Teaching #10, however, adds the decidedly Jediist animist view of the Force: "Jedi believe in destiny and trust in the will of the Living Force. We accept the fact that what seems to be random events are not random at all, but the design of the Living Force of Creation. Each living creature has a purpose, understanding that purpose comes with a deep awareness of the Force. Even things that happen which seem negative have a purpose, though that purpose is not easy to see" (*The Way of Jediism* 2010, 9).

Another point of doctrinal dispute is whether it is allowed to draw on other sources than *Star Wars* when putting together doctrines and rituals for one's Jedi path. This is an inescapable problem, for the canonical *Star Wars* movies alone simply do not provide enough material for the construction of an elaborate belief system. Members of the Jedi Community *must* supplement the *Star Wars* movies with additional material, but they differ strongly in opinion on which material can legitimately be added to this canonical core. One camp – I shall call them *purists* – argue that the *Star Wars* movies should be supplemented only by material from what *Star Wars* fans refer to as the Expanded Universe, i.e. the officially licensed *Star Wars* novels, video games, and roleplaying games. As mentioned above, this purist stance was the norm when Jedi Realism first emerged out of the *Star Wars* fan and roleplaying communities. Over the decades, however, an increasing number of members have been attracted to Jedi Realism and Jediism who like the *Star Wars* movies but are no hardcore *Star Wars* fans. Partly for this reason, most Jedi today are not purists but *syncretics*, in the sense that they draw on both *Star Wars* and material from conventional religions when constructing their doctrines and training practices. (In an earlier article, I used the terms *Star Wars*-affirmative Jediists and *Star Wars*-dissociative Jediists to distinguish between purist and syncretic Jedi; Davidsen 2016a). It is common for syncretic Jedi to use the term "syncretism" about their practice in a completely neutral and non-pejorative sense, and the syncretics

include both Jediists and Jedi Realists. For example, Temple of the Jedi Order (a Jediist group) has formulated a Jedi Creed which is in fact a modified version of one of Francis of Assisi's prayers (*The Way of Jediism* 2010, 10), and both Jediist and Jedi Realist novices are required to study New Age and Western Buddhist literature. For example, novices in the Temple of the Jedi Order read Alan Watt's *The Book: On the Taboo Against Knowing Who You Are* (1966), while the basic curriculum of the Institute for Jedi Realist Studies includes Dan Millman's *Way of the Peaceful Warrior* (1984) and James Redfield's *The Celestine Prophecy* (1994). In contrast to the syncretic stance of most groups, purist Opie MacLeod explains the Jedi Code to students of the Jedi Academy Online's "Tier One Program" by discussing the entire catalogue of "Jedi Rules of Behavior" laid out in the *Power of the Jedi Sourcebook* roleplaying game supplement (Macleod 2010, 11-20; cf. Wiker et al. 2002, 30-37).

Both Jedi purists and Jedi syncretics feel a need to legitimize their use of *Star Wars* as a foundational text. To do so, they make use of the three discursive strategies for legitimization identified by Olav Hammer (2001): appeals to science, appeals to experience, and appeals to tradition. As for scientific appeals, Jedi make reference to New Age science and argue that the metaphysical concept of the Force (like the New Age concept of energy) is ultimately identical to the natural forces that scientists talk about. Matthew Vossler, for example, brings up string theory and parallel universes in a chapter on "Scientific Backing" in his *Jedi Manual Basic*, a study book for aspiring Jedi Knights (Vossler 2009, 34-38). Jedi also make appeals to experience, claiming simply that the Force is real because one can feel it. The real world Jedi do not claim to possess the psychic abilities of the Jedi Knights in *Star Wars* (at least not to the same degree), but they hold that the Force can be experienced in individual meditation. Appeals to tradition, finally, play an equally important role as a legitimization strategy in the Jedi Community. Syncretic groups, and that is the majority of all Jedi groups, will say that their doctrine and practice is ultimately not based on *Star Wars*, but on those real religions (if they are Jediists) or on those real life philosophies (if they are Jedi Realists) that originally inspired

George Lucas. Many Jediist groups go one step further and argue, in a more or less perennialist fashion, that all religions share a common core, and that Jediism embodies that very core. This view was formulated by Jediism: The Jedi Religion as follows:

> The history of the path of Jediism traverses thought which is well over 5,000 years old. It shares many themes embraced in Hinduism, Confucionism [*sic*], Buddhism, Gnosticism, Stoicism, Catholicism, Taoism, Shinto, Modern Mysticism, the Way of the Shaolin Monks, the Knight's Code of Chivalry and the Samurai Warriors. We recognize that it is not the church who has the answer to man's problems. That answer comes from within. Theology, philosophy and religious doctrine can facilitate this process, but we believe that it would be a futile exercise for any church to claim to have all answers to all questions. Jediism can also help facilitate this process, yet we also acknowledge that it is up to the true believer who applies the universal truths inherent within Jediism to find the answers they seek (Jediism: The Jedi Religion; quoted in Possamai 2003, 75-76).

It attests to the importance of this view that modified versions of this very passage later appeared on the websites of those Jediist groups that succeeded Jediism: The Jedi Religion, including Temple of the Jedi Order (*The Way of Jediism* 2010, 6; quoted in Davidsen 2016a, 386-387) and Temple of the Jedi Force (quoted in McCormick 2012, 167-168). Furthermore, both purists and syncretics point out that George Lucas was inspired by Joseph Campbell's theory of the universal monomyth of the hero's journey (Campbell 1949; cf. Lawrence 2006). They also like to quote Campbell himself, who in an interview with Bill Moyers said: "I've heard youngsters use some of George Lucas' terms – "The Force" and "The dark side." So it must be hitting somewhere. It's a good sound teaching, I would say" (Campbell and Moyers 1988, 146). Jedi use Campbell's authority as a famous mythologist to give credence

to their view that *Star Wars* is a valid foundational text for the Jedi path, either as a myth in its own right (purists) or as a modern rendition of the monomyth that reveals the same universal truths as the world's more conventional religions (syncretics).

In this section, I have presented the most basic teachings of the Jedi Community, but in reality these teachings are much more detailed and varied. It is worth mentioning that movement intellectuals have published several books on Jedi doctrine and training, including Vossler (2012), Trout (2012, 2013a, 2013b), and Thompson (2012, 2014). The two most valuable volumes of Jedi texts are two (more or less) community-wide collections of primary material. *The Great Jedi Holocron* (Yaw 2006) includes more than one thousand pages worth of material from the Force Academy, Ashla Knights, the Institute for Jedi Realists Studies, and The Jediism Way. The recently published *Jedi Compass* (Jedi Community 2015) takes stock of the Jedi Community of today with a collection of writings from members of the Church of Jediism, the Jedi Academy Online, the Chicago Jedi, the Jedi Church, the Force Academy, the Temple of the Jedi Order, the Ashla Knights, the Temple of the Jedi Force, and more.

Practices and Paths in the Jedi Community

The religion of the Jedi Knights in *Star Wars* is devoid of most of those religious practices that people normally associate with a "real" religion. The *Star Wars* movies feature no prayers, creeds, sacrifices, sermons, or rites of passage, but the Jedi (and other characters) use the benediction "May the Force Be With You" as a farewell greeting, and we see various Jedi Knights meditate (and Darth Vader too – he has a meditation egg). Naturally, the Jedi Community has adopted both the Force benediction (sometimes abbreviated MTFBWY) and meditation. Meditation is primarily of the apophatic (or content-less) kind that aims for a peaceful and empty state of mind that can be interpreted as feeling one with the Force. This also seems to be what meditation is about in the *Star Wars* movies. Some Jedi groups, however,

including the Institute for Jedi Realist Studies, supplement apophatic meditation with cataphatic techniques, such as visualization, shamanic journeying, and even astral projection. These groups argue that also cataphatic practices are faithful to *Star Wars*, as Yoda himself sends Luke on a dream journey of sorts in *The Empire Strikes Back*, to meet and defeat his own dark self.

While meditation is clearly important, most Jedi actually spend more time on two other practices that are considered equally essential for any Jedi Knight: self-betterment and community service. The ethic of perpetual self-betterment prescribes both physical and intellectual training. Many Jedi practice martial arts, and all Jedi are expected to study the Force and contribute to community discussions on the Jedi way of life. As the Jedi Academy Online sums up, Jedi work towards

> Physical Well-Being (diet, exercise, and practical self-defense), Mental Well-Being (stress-relief, conflict resolution, and learning new subjects such as different philosophies that exist), and Spiritual Well-Being (meditation, self-awareness and self-honesty, learning about the Force) (Jedi Academy Online).

In addition to self-betterment, most Jedi consider community service to be a hallmark of Jedihood. Indeed, most Jedi groups preach a social ethic, and some groups have developed more or less institutionalized community service programs. The Order of the Jedi (Canada), for example, used to place offers for help on community bulletin boards, or worked incognito, leaving just an anonymous assist card with the wording:

> A helping hand was provided by,
> a member of the:
> Order of the Jedi Canada

www.orderofthejedi.ca

Commited [*sic*] to teaching solid values,

through strong moral and ethical guidance (quoted in Vossler 2009, 66).

There are also Jedi groups who take the Jedi ideal of helping the weak to a political level. Texas-based Temple of the Jedi Order, for instance, protests against the death penalty, echoing the Alternate Code's statement that "Jedi respect all life, in any form."

The Alternate Code also states that "Jedi use their powers to defend and protect," but whereas all Jediists endorse this dictum, Jedi Realists can muster no unanimous support. Indeed, within the Jedi Realist camp, and especially within the Force Academy, members are of the opinion that only those Jedi who follow the Light Path need worry about social ethics. If one does not want to play boy scout, one is free to follow instead the Dark Path (which entails drawing on the Force to promote one's own projects, as long as this does not hurt others), the Grey Path (which combines the Light and Dark paths), or even the Independent, Shadow, or Rogue paths (if the Dark and Grey paths do not sound special enough). Some members of the community even self-identify as Sith – the evil arch-rivals of the Jedi Knights in the *Star Wars* universe. Obviously, students of these murkier paths study other material than the followers of the Light Path. In 2008, the curriculum for Dark Jedi within the Force Academy included Machiavelli's *The Prince*, whereas Shadow Jedi argued with Friedrich Nietzsche and Thomas Kuhn that both morality and science are social constructions, and that one is therefore free to think and believe what one wants.

Interestingly, the disagreement between social and individualistic Jedi is reflected in their dynamological views of the two sides of the Force. All Jedi agree that the Force has two sides, a Light Side (Ashla) and a Dark Side (Bogan), but they disagree on what exactly the Dark Side of the Force is. The social Jedi, i.e. all Jediists and those Jedi Realists who follow the Light Path, view the Force in monistic terms.

For them, the Dark Side has no metaphysical existence of its own, but merely refers to an individual's moral corruption. This is also the dominant view in the *Star Wars* movies in which "bringing balance back to the Force" means that the Light Side prevails and that evil is extinguished (if only for a time). As the Temple of the Jedi Order formulates it, "Jedi follow […] the Light Side of the Force which is the proper use of the Force. Misuse and abuse of The Force is the Dark Side" (*The Way of Jediism* 2010, 6). The individualistic Jedi view things differently and legitimize their lack of social engagement in one of two ways. Some argue morally that since the Force is ultimately one, it is unfair to say that those who use it for their own ends are evil – they may not actively promote the Force's project in the way the Light Jedi do, but they do not actively work against the Force either. This view seems to dominate within the Force Academy. Other individualistic Jedi argue metaphysically that the two sides of the Force are like the Taoist concepts of yin and yang, and that the universe will move towards a balance between the Light and the Dark Sides no matter what we do. Therefore, working only for the Light Side is futile and ultimately against the very nature of the Force (Ashla Knights: Force).

A major difference between Jedi Realists and Jediists is that only Jediists aim to develop the Jedi path into a full-fledged religion. Only Jediists have aimed to develop all those rituals that a religion needs but which *Star Wars* lacks, and of all Jediist groups, the Temple of the Jedi Order has developed the most complete liturgy. Besides rituals for initiation as Knight (for which all other Jedi groups have equivalents), the Temple of the Jedi Order has also developed rituals for marriages and funerals and for the consecration of land and temples (*The Way of Jediism* 2010). Furthermore, as three members of the Temple explain in a contribution to a recent academic volume on fiction-based and invented religions, the group also produces "regularly published written sermons every five days, with forth-nightly, real time live services in the TotJO website's chat room" (Williams, Miller, and Kitchen 2017, 121). These services usually end with a group recitation of the Jedi Creed (Williams, Miller, and Kitchen 2017, 131). The Temple of the Jedi Order has

also drawn up a liturgical calendar that borrows dates from other religions, such as March 21 (International Earth Day; Paganism) for the Jedi Vocations Day, and December 25 (Christmas Day; Christianity) for the Temple of the Jedi Order Anniversary Day. Throughout the group's history, members have worked within five "special interest groups" (formerly "rites") that developed additional rituals for members of various religious observances. The five special interest groups are Pure Land (here meaning *Star Wars* only), Abrahamic, Pagan, Buddhist, and Humanist (*The Way of Jediism* 2010, 18).
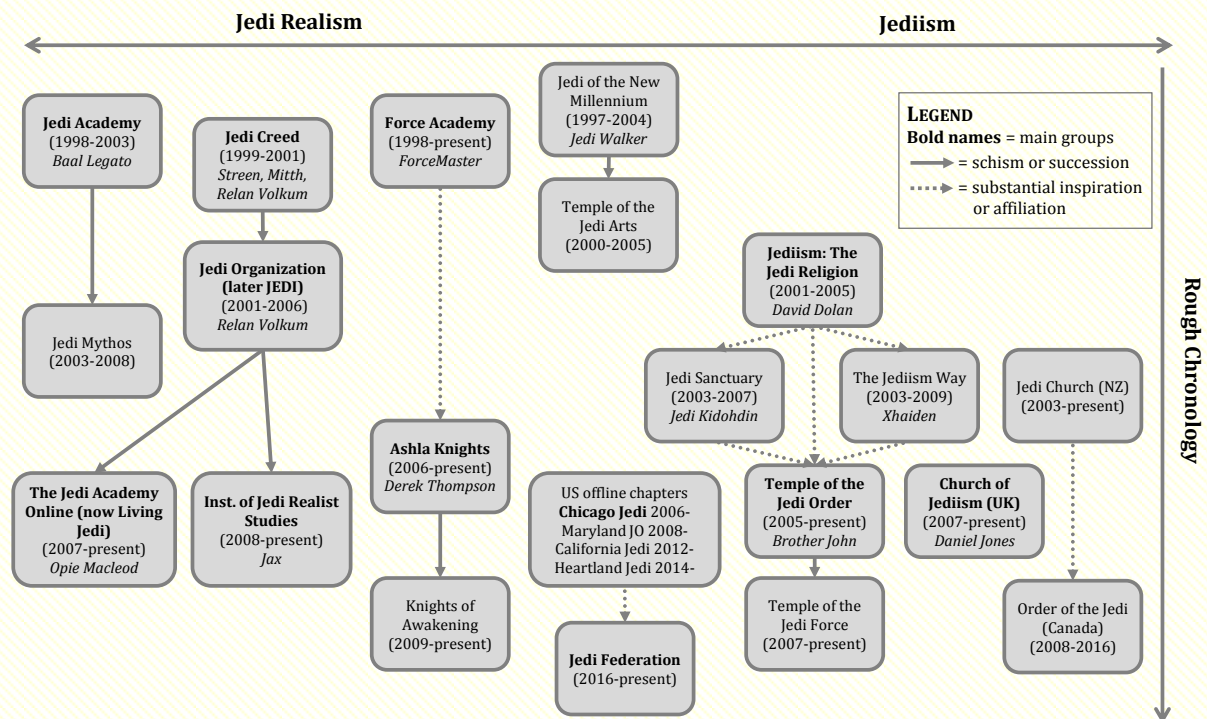
Organization of the Jedi Community

All Jedi groups are organized as initiatory orders and require a certain amount of study, the approval of a master, and sometimes success on a formal exam before one can advance to the rank of full, initiated member. Those who have achieved this rank are usually referred to as Jedi Knights, while those who are still working towards it are called novices, apprentices, students, or padawans. Study programs typically involve two phases. First, students are required to work through a set curriculum on the religion of the Jedi Knights in *Star Wars*, the history of the real-world Jedi Community, as well as additional material, such as books by Alan Watts and Joseph Campbell. In this phase, students also familiarize themselves with key doctrinal texts produced by members of the Jedi Community, such as Jedi Kidohdin's "16 Basic Teachings" and Jedi Opie Macleod's "Jedi Circle" (Trout 2012). The second phase involves individualized study under the guidance of a Jedi Master. The education program of the Jedi Academy Online, for example, follows this basic structure. In total, this training program consists of four tiers, and aspiring members are required to complete the first tier before they can apply for formal membership. Upon completion of three additional tiers (two of which are each assigned one year of study, the final having no set time frame), members can take the Jedi Academy Online Regulated Testing System, and if they pass this exam, they become Jedi of the Fourth Level – the equivalent of Jedi Knight in most other groups (Jedi Academy

Online: By-laws). Like in *Star Wars*, Jedi Knights (and Jedi holding equivalent titles) are entitled to train novices up until the rank of Knight. Jedi Knights who have raised a certain number of other Jedi to the rank of Knight (three in the Temple of the Jedi Order; two in the Jedi Academy Online) and who have proved themselves worthy in other ways as well, gain the rank of Jedi Master (or, in the Jedi Academy Online, Jedi of the Fifth Level). The ranks of Apprentice, Knight, and Master are found in most groups, but many groups use additional ranks as well. The Temple of the Jedi Order, for instance, has no less than seven ranks: Novice (has just begun training), Initiate (has completed the Initiate program, the "curriculum" part), Apprentice (has begun individualized study under a Knight), Knight, Senior Knight, Master, and Grandmaster, the latter being a honorary title (Williams, Miller, and Kitchen 2017, 129). The advancement to the rank of Knight (and sometimes into other ranks as well) comes with a ritual in which the knight-to-be takes a vow and is formally knighted, either by the master who trained him or her, or by a master of ceremonies. Ashley Collman's article "The Real Church of Jediism" includes a link to a short video showing a knighting ceremony in the Temple of the Jedi Order (see Collman 2013).

The Jedi Community is a diverse milieu composed of several independent orders and chapters. As such, the Jedi Community does not have a leader who can speak for the entire community – though it fields several influential movement intellectuals, including Jedi Opie Macleod (Jedi Academy Online) and Brother John Phelan (Temple of the Jedi Order). Crucially, and in contrast to many other new religious movements, none of the intellectual leaders of the Jedi Community have put forward a claim to extraordinary charismatic status. Leaders do not claim to receive exclusive revelations from the Force, nor do they claim that the Force gives them healing or mind-reading powers beyond what an average Jedi can aspire to. In a much more down-to-earth fashion, leaders within the Jedi Community gain authority and prestige by contributing constructively to the ongoing project of defining what being a Jedi is all about, and by facilitating this ongoing discussion as reliable administrators. Perhaps charisma has been routinized within the Jedi

Community right from the start because the role of charismatic founder figures has already been filled by the Jedi characters from the *Star Wars* movies.

Despite the multi-cephalous nature of the Jedi Community, several factors promote coherence. First, most members of the community are active, either simultaneously or serially, in several Jedi groups, and in this way help spreading ideas and practices from group to group. Furthermore, groups borrow from each other what is perceived to be successful education programs, rituals, and so on, and this helps keep the schismatic tendency in check that also characterizes the Jedi Community (e.g., Temple of the Jedi Force broke off from Temple of the Jedi Order, and Temple of the Jedi Arts broke off from Jedi of the New Millennium). Furthermore, throughout the history of the Jedi Community, several cooperative initiatives have been launched. Most recently, the Jedi Federation, which also coordinates the national gatherings of Jedi in the United States, launched *The Holocron*, a digital quarterly, in September 2015 (Jedi Federation: Holocron). *The Holocron* features articles from the main online Jedi groups, i.e. Institute for Jedi Realist Studies, Force Academy, and Temple of the Jedi Order. It is currently edited by a female Jedi, Diamond Shanks of the Indy Jedi (Indiana), and perhaps for this reason *The Holocron* includes a high proportion of articles written by women. A parallel initiative to *The Holocron* was the publication, also in 2015, of *The Jedi Compass* (Jedi Community 2015), a collection of works by members of the Jedi Community. Please consult figure 1 for an overview of most of the Jedi Realist and Jediist groups discussed in this article.

FIGURE 1. Overview of the main groups within the Jedi Community

Jedi Realism ←→ Jediism

Rough Chronology

Jedi Academy (1998-2003) *Baal Legato*

Jedi Creed (1999-2001) *Streen, Mitth, Relan Volkum*

Force Academy (1998-present) *ForceMaster*

Jedi of the New Millennium (1997-2004) *Jedi Walker*

Temple of the Jedi Arts (2000-2005)

LEGEND
Bold names = main groups
→ = schism or succession
···> = substantial inspiration or affiliation

Jedi Mythos (2003-2008)

Jedi Organization (later JEDI) (2001-2006) *Relan Volkum*

Jediism: The Jedi Religion (2001-2005) *David Dolan*

Jedi Sanctuary (2003-2007) *Jedi Kidohdin*

The Jediism Way (2003-2009) *Xhaiden*

Jedi Church (NZ) (2003-present)

The Jedi Academy Online (now Living Jedi) (2007-present) *Opie Macleod*

Inst. of Jedi Realist Studies (2008-present) *Jax*

Ashla Knights (2006-present) *Derek Thompson*

US offline chapters **Chicago Jedi** 2006- **Maryland JO** 2008- **California Jedi** 2012- **Heartland Jedi** 2014-

Temple of the Jedi Order (2005-present) *Brother John*

Church of Jediism (UK) (2007-present) *Daniel Jones*

Knights of Awakening (2009-present)

Jedi Federation (2016-present)

Temple of the Jedi Force (2007-present)

Order of the Jedi (Canada) (2008-2016)

The 2011 census counted 262,000 Jedi in Australia, Canada, and Great Britain combined, but it is difficult to estimate how many members are actually active within the Jedi Community. Obviously, much depends on the level of commitment somebody needs to show in order to count as a Jedi. In December 2015, just before the premiere of *Star Wars Episode VII: The Force Awakens*, leading members of the Church of Jediism told the *Daily Telegraph* that their group was "signing up more than a thousand new members a day" (Foster 2015). It may or may not be true that the Church of Jediism received this many emails from interested *Star Wars* fans every day, but in any case we can expect that very few of these people actually stuck around and started the group's training program – let alone finished it. More reliable membership figures can be obtained by looking at the number of registered members in discussion forums and Facebook groups. The Jedi Church, which after the founding of the Church of Jediism styles itself "Jedi Church (The original)," has

the largest Facebook group within the Jedi Community with 9,714 members as of 5 April 2017 (Jedi Church: Facebook); the Temple of the Jedi Order estimates its total number of registered members at 2,000 (Williams, Miller, and Kitchen 2017, 132). However, the number of members who actively contribute is much lower. Leading members of the Temple of the Jedi Order put their own active membership base at a mere 200 and estimate the total number of Jedi worldwide to be no higher than 4,000-5,000 (Williams, Miller, and Kitchen 2017, 133). This is obviously a rough estimate, but it seems clear that whereas the census measured Jedi by the hundreds of thousands, it is more realistic to measure active members of the Jedi Community by the thousands and sympathizers and passive members by the tens of thousands.

Geographically, most Jedi hail from the United States, the United Kingdom, and other English-speaking countries, but there are also local Jedi chapters and non-Anglophone Facebook groups based in, for example, Denmark and Brazil. Furthermore, Jedi from all over the world seek membership in the main Anglophone groups. Temple of the Jedi Order, for example, has members from various European countries (France, Germany, Poland) and even from Iran (Williams, Miller, and Kitchen 2017, 132). Most Jedi are white males, aged 20 to 40 (Williams, Miller, and Kitchen 2017, 132), but the increase in offline activities seems to have made the Jedi Community more attractive to females. In any case, whereas men founded all the online groups discussed in this article, women now head several of the offline groups. It may furthermore be expected that the introduction of female protagonists in the most recent *Star Wars* films (Rey in *The Force Awakens*; Jyn in *Rogue One*), as well as the increased attention to ethnic diversity on screen (beginning with the first black Jedi Master, Mace Windu, in *The Phantom Menace*, and culminating in the ethnically diverse *Rogue One* cast), will increase the attractiveness of the Jedi path for others than young male Caucasians.

The Jediist Struggle for Legal Recognition as Religion

All members of the Jedi Community agree that the way of the Jedi is genuine and serious, but there is outspoken disagreement on the question whether Jedi groups, as a consequence of this, should also strife for legal recognition as a religion. Jedi Realists reject this project for one of two reasons. Most Jedi Realists associate "religion" with a dogmatic and mediated engagement with the divine and see this as radically different from the free, authentic, and direct "spirituality" of the Jedi. A minority among the Jedi Realists, including the early leaders Streen and Relan Volkum (now aka Aharon and Yahunatan), oppose the aim for legal recognition on wholly different grounds. These Jedi Realists already belong to religion (usually Christianity) and reason that one cannot belong to two religions at the same time. According to this logic, it is possible to be a Jedi and a Christian at the same time exactly because the Jedi path is *not* a religion in its own right, but rather compares to belonging to a monastic order *within* a religion. Jediists, by contrast, argue that Jediism is a religion and should seek recognition as such. This is significant, for whereas Jediism is not the only fiction-based religion in existence, it is the only fiction-based religion that has lobbied for legal recognition.

The first Jediist group to receive legal recognition as a religion was the Temple of the Jedi Order which was incorporated as a non-profit corporation with 501(c)(3) US tax status in its home state of Texas by John Henry Phelan (aka Brother John) on 25 December 2005 (Singler 2014, 164). In seeking legal recognition Phelan was inspired by an earlier Jediist group, the Jedi Sanctuary, that had been registered as a congregation within the Universal Life Church (ID number 61842), and as such had attained the right to ordain ministers and to issue BA, MA, and Doctorate Degrees in Divinity. By registering the Temple of the Jedi Order as a church in its own right, Phelan not only attained tax exemption for his group, but also received the right to ordain ministers who can work as certified marriage celebrants. The Temple also gained the right to offer its own Degrees in Divinity (Jediism), and the group now hands out the Associate Degree of Divinity to initiated

Knights and the Bachelor Degree in Divinity to Senior Knights; the Doctorate of Divinity is reserved as an honorary degree (Williams, Miller, and Kitchen 2017, 130-131). Following the example of the Temple of the Jedi Order, the Order of the Jedi (Canada) applied for status as a non-profit religious body and was granted this status in its home country in 2009 (McCormick 2012, 178) and in the United States in 2012 (Order of the Jedi: News).

In contrast to the Temple of the Jedi Order and the Order of the Jedi (Canada), Daniel Jones' UK-based Church of Jediism is incorporated as a for-profit organization (limited company) (Singler 2014, 164). Within the Jediist camp, the Church of Jediism also sticks out in other ways. For example, the Church of Jediism's campaign for legal recognition as a religion is carried out in a seemingly tongue-in-cheek style that resembles the ludic happenings of the Church of the Flying Spaghetti Monster more than that the serious activism of a religious minority. Not unlike the Pastafarians who want to wear a colander on their driver's license photographs, Daniel Jones accused supermarket chain Tesco for religious discrimination after he was asked to de-hood in one of their stores (Carter 2009). It is also characteristic of the Church of Jediism's style that the organization's new website was launched on "May the Fourth" 2017, a major day of celebration for *Star Wars* fans, but hardly the most authentic-looking holiday for a serious religious group.

The for-profit incorporation and parodic attitude of the Church of Jediism, as well as Daniel Jones' propensity to make hyperbolic claims about the size and age of his organization, have caused frustration for the Temple of the Jedi Order and likeminded groups who feel encumbered in their battle for admission into the club of legitimate religions (cf. Singler 2015, 170-171). Indeed, from the perspective of these groups the fight for recognition as a genuine religion must be fought on two fronts – both *within* the Jedi Community and *without*. It was a significant disappointment for this camp that the Temple of the Jedi Order's application for official recognition as a religious charity organization in the United Kingdom was

turned down in late 2016 on the grounds that the group's beliefs were not serious enough. A rapport from the United Kingdom's official charity regulator stated, among other things, that "the Commission is not satisfied that the "Live Services" on the website, the published sermons and the promotion of meditation evidence a relationship between the adherents of the religion and the gods, principles or things which is expressed by worship, reverence and adoration, veneration intercession or by some other religious rite or service" (quoted in Bingham 2016). The negative ruling may have been influenced by the fact that the Church of the Jediism, and not the Temple of the Jedi Order, is the public face of Jediism in the United Kingdom.

Processes of Folklorization in the Jedi Community

Members of the Jedi Community have adopted the identity as Jedi Knights, and this identity is taken from the *Star Wars* universe. However, the Jedi Knights of this world do not only emulate the ideals of their popular cultural role models. They also actively and creatively mold the Jedi identity to serve their own needs and situations, and in so doing they have constructed beliefs, practices, and organization forms that depart much from the *Star Wars* baseline. In effect, members of the Jedi Community have *folklorized* the *Star Wars* Jedi in three ways. First, they have democratized the Jedi Knight. In *Star Wars*, the Jedi Order is highly elite. Only those with a rocket-high midi-chlorian count and a psyche fit for the arduous training and taxing duties of a Jedi Knight can be admitted into the sacred order. By contrast, the Jedi Community welcomes everyone who is willing to learn and to contribute to the community. Second, the Jedi Community has "down-to-earthed" what it means to be a Jedi Knight. They do not expect to serve as secret agents, nor to gain superhuman powers, such as mind-control and levitation. Their much more humble goal is to be "everyday Jedi" who offer their seats to old ladies on the bus and volunteer for the local fire brigade. Finally, real world Jedi use their own judgment (rather than *Star Wars*) to assess which practices can count as legitimately Jedi. Most importantly,

whereas the Jedi Knights in *Star Wars* are celibate, Jedi Realists are happy to live in sexual relationships and Jediists have even devised Jedi rites for marriage.

Throughout the history of the Jedi Community, a process can be perceived of *increasing* folklorization of the Jedi identity. That is to say that over the twenty years of its existence, the Jedi Community has gradually loosened its anchoring in *Star Wars* and developed a folk culture with its own inherent logic. An expression of this is that the original purist ideal, which took *Star Wars* as the ultimate yard stick for what a real life Jedi should be like, has given way to the syncretic practice of taking only from *Star Wars* what feels right (especially the notion of the Force and the Jedi ethic) and combining this with elements from other religions wherever that feels necessary (e.g., formats for rituals and strategies of legitimization). Similarly, the emergence of Jediism, which moved beyond the *Star Wars*-loyal organization model of the academy to introduce the *Star Wars*-foreign idea that Jediism can be a religion or a church, demonstrates a gradual movement away from *Star Wars* emulation towards the establishment of an independent folk culture. An interesting corollary of the folklorization of *Star Wars* is that George Lucas, the very creator of *Star Wars*, plays next to no role in the Jedi Community – nor does Kevin J. Anderson, JD Wiker, or any other author of *Star Wars* novels and roleplaying guides. Instead of caring about who *wrote Star Wars*, members of the Jedi Community engage directly with the textual universe. They consider Master Yoda, and not Lucas, to be their teacher, and they aspire to be like Luke Skywalker and Qui Gon-Jinn, not like Kevin Anderson. In a way this is not surprising, for we see the same dynamic in other "narrative cultures," such as religions and national commemoration cultures (cf. Johannsen and Kirsch forthc.; Davidsen 2016c, 486-497). To give just one parallel example, Christians do not venerate the four evangelists, but worship Jesus who is basically just a character in the story, not unlike Yoda.

With this article, I hope to have provided a fairly accurate overview of the history and folklore of the Jedi Community. Even so, I have barely scratched the surface and view this contribution only a starting point for more detailed and deep-

digging research. We still need, for example, participant observation studies of Jedi practice, both online and offline, as well as a thorough textual analysis of how Jedi doctrines have developed over the course of the community's history. We also need to study the social dynamics within individual groups and the community as a whole, in order to understand why some groups have flouished while most have collapsed after just a short time. Much work still waits to be done, but it is well worth doing, for studying the Jedi Community may tell us much about contemporary religion and about contemporary, urban folk culture.

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Appendix: Jedi Community Timeline

1977 *Star Wars*, later renamed *Star Wars Episode IV: A New Hope*, premieres. It introduces the notions of the Force and the Jedi Knights and wins 6 Oscars.

1980 *Premiere of Star Wars Episode V: The Empire Strikes Back*.

1983 *Star Wars Episode VI: Return of the Jedi* concludes the original trilogy.

1987 Greg Costikyan's *Star Wars: The Roleplaying Game* is published. It includes the first version of the Jedi Code.

1988 Mythologist Joseph Campbell tells Bill Moyers that he considers *Star Wars* a modern myth.

1994 Kevin J. Anderson published the *Jedi Academy Trilogy*.

1996 Two Jedi-focused supplements to *Star Wars: The Roleplaying Game* are published: *Tales of the Jedi Companion* and *The Jedi Academy Sourcebook*.

1997 Cinematic re-release of the original *Star Wars* trilogy.

1998   The Jedi Academy, a website including the first online discussion forum for Jedi Realists, is founded by Baal Legato. Active until 2003.

1998   Andrew Watson (aka ForceMaster) founds the Force Academy, the oldest still-surviving Jedi Realist group.

1999   *Star Wars Episode I: The Phantom Menace*, the first movie in the so-called prequel trilogy, premieres.

1999   The Alternate Jedi Code appears for the first time in the children's book *I Am a Jedi*.

2001   The Jedi Census Phenomenon. More than 500,000 people fill in 'Jedi' as their religious affiliation in New Zealand, Canada, Great Britain, and Australia combined.

2001   The Jedi Organization (later renamed JEDI) is founded by Relan Volkum. It remains the main Jedi Realist group until 2006.

2001   Jediism: The Jedi Religion is founded by David Dolan. It remains the main Jediist group until 2005.

2002   Publication of the RPG-supplement *Power of the Jedi Sourcebook*, a core text for Jedi Realism.

2002   Premiere of *Star Wars Episode II: Attack of the Clones*.

2002   First national gathering of Jedi in the United States.

2003   Jedi Kidohdin founds the Jedi Sanctuary (active till 2007) and formulates the '16 Basic Teachings of the Jedi' that influence many other Jediist groups.

2005   *Star Wars Episode III: Revenge of the Sith* concludes the prequel trilogy.

2005   Rev. John Henry Phelan (aka Brother John) founds the Temple of the Jedi Order which becomes the most-trafficked Jediist website.

2006   New census in Australia and New Zealand. The number of self-identified Jedi drops compared to 2001.

2007   Daniel Jones founds the Church of Jediism in the United Kingdom.

2009   The *Washington Post* reports that 'Jedi' is the tenth most common religious self-identification on Facebook.

2011   New census in Australia, Canada, and Great Britain. Compared to 2001/2006, the number of Jedi drops in Canada, England/Wales, and Scotland, but increases in Australia. Combined, these countries are good for 262,000 Jedi.

2013   Lauren Green interviews Kevin Trout (aka Jedi Opie Macleod) live on *Fox News*' show Spirited Debate.

2015   *Star Wars Episode VII: The Force Awakens* premieres. Jediist groups report growth as a result.

2015   Jedi Federation launches *The Holocron*, a digital quarterly for Jedi of all stripes.

2015   Publication of *The Jedi Compass*: *Collected Works of The Jedi Community*.

2016   Temple of the Jedi Order applies for legal recognition in the United Kingdom as a religious institution, but is turned down.

2016   *Rogue One: A Star Wars Story* premieres.

2017   *Star Wars Episode VIII: The Last Jedi* premieres.