Star Wars: Between Myth and Gospel

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EPISODE I: INTRODUCTION

Mimetic theory, as it was first developed by René Girard, sheds a particular light on mythical stories. It will become clear, hopefully, in what sense the *Star Wars* movies form a kind of mythology.

Mimetic theory also explains how its light actually originates from the Judeo-Christian narrative, especially from the story of Christ's Passion.

These sessions deal with the first six episodes of the *Star Wars* film saga. They explore how George Lucas translated the work on mythology of his mentor Joseph Campbell into the space adventures of his alternative universe.[1]

They also show how this approach to mythology is challenged by René Girard in light of the Gospel.

Campbell points out that mythical narratives, despite surface differences, basically have the same shape. His concept of the monomyth summarizes the structural similarities between myths from around the world.[2] The monomyth represents the supposedly one (hence "mono") story (hence "myth"), told repeatedly in many cultural guises. It is a container of the narratives people rely on to make sense of their experiences**.**

Essentially, the monomyth proclaims that members of a society must be prepared to make individual or collective sacrifices to establish a cultural identity. Individuals who redeem society by making those sacrifices become heroes. The monomyth is a hero myth.[3]

Girard agrees with Campbell that a mythical narrative about the redemptive violence of heroic sacrifice lies at the heart of cultural identity formation. Unlike Campbell, however, he does not consider that ever-present narrative as a mere expression of human self-understanding, but as a persistent untruth.

Moreover, for Girard, Christ's Passion does not endorse the myth of redemptive sacrificial violence, but instead reveals the divine grace of a redemptive non-violent love.[4] The Gospel uncovers the lies behind the ever-recurring mythical imagination and liberates individuals and communities from a deceptive sacrificial self-understanding.[5] As the following analysis makes clear, the first two *Star Wars* trilogies form a tragedy that situates itself between the deceitful mythical justification of sacrifice and the Gospel revelation of the scapegoat mechanism.

The Hero Myth of Redemptive Violence

Mythical narratives reflect the difference between what a culture deems "good" (heroic, constructive) violence and "bad" (monstrous, destructive) violence. All cultural distinctions arise from this distinction. Like destructive violence itself, all acts, objects or subjects associated with that violence are taboo. However, if ritual allows them in a structured way, they are deemed beneficial.

When read with Girard, sacrifice can be understood as a *vaccine* of controlled violence that redeems communities from the *epidemic disease* of uncontrollable violence. The reality of violence, and everything associated with it, is considered divine or sacred in archaic communities around the world; both in its constructive as well as in its destructive appearances.

Myths recount how any transgression of taboos outside of a ritual context leads to disasters.

By evoking the fear of these disasters, myths not only encourage respect for cultural prohibitions and all kinds of rituals, but also encourage active participation in acts of sacrificial violence as a means to preserve social order.

In short, myths provide the cultural imagination that coordinates the maintenance of human communities.[6]

Star Wars certainly does the job as far as providing a language to interpret all kinds of human affairs. For example, the Strategic Defense Initiative of late American president Ronald Reagan was nicknamed the *Star Wars* program. It once again separated American allies from American enemies during the Cold War. Reagan also referred to the Soviet Union – the main adversary of the USA at the time – as an 'Evil Empire' that shares characteristics with the Evil Empire in *Star Wars*.

On the other hand, *Star Wars* has also been used to blur the lines between so-called friends and enemies. *Star Wars* creator George Lucas has done that several times, particularly with reference to the Vietnam War, also in an interview with fellow director James Cameron. It is this approach to *Star Wars* that will make it understandable as a Tragedy between Myth and Gospel.

One of the stories that inspired *Star Wars*, the well-known Oedipus myth, illustrates the basic features of stories about redemptive violence.[7] In this narrative, Oedipus represents the ironic, almost comic, paradox at the heart of tragedy. Despite efforts to avoid the prophecy that he will kill his father and marry his mother, he cannot evade his fate. In fact, his transgressions unleash a plague, transforming Oedipus into the monstrous vector of violent disaster. However, by "dying" to himself and by removing himself as the monster of violence, Oedipus becomes the community's redeemer.

Girard accurately summarizes the ambiguous depiction of mythical heroes like Oedipus:

"A source of violence and disorder during his sojourn among men, the hero appears as a redeemer as soon as he has been eliminated, invariably by violent means. It also happens that the hero, while remaining a transgressor, is cast primarily as a destroyer of monsters. … The hero draws to himself a violent reaction, whose effects are felt throughout the community. He unwittingly conjures up a baleful, infectious force that his own death – or triumph – transforms into a guarantee of order and tranquility. … There are stories of collective salvation, in which the death of a single victim serves to appease the anger of some god or spirit. A lone individual, who may or may not have been guilty of some past crime, is offered up to a ferocious monster or demon to appease him, and he ends up killing that monster as he is killed by him."[8]

Campbell concurs. He considers myths and the sacrificial rites they sustain as attempts to reconcile the human mind with the apparent inevitability of death to create life.[9] According to him, we are governed by an endless sacred cycle of destruction and creation. At the heart of this transcendent system lies heroic sacrifice, which transforms the cosmic forces of disorder into a force for order and harmony.

Campbell, in *The Power of Myth*: "One of the main problems of mythology is reconciling the mind to this brutal precondition of all life, which lives by the killing and eating of lives. You don't kid yourself by eating only vegetables either, for they, too, are alive. So the essence of life is this eating of itself! Life lives on lives, and the reconciliation of the human mind and sensibilities to that fundamental fact is one of the functions of some of those very brutal rites in which the ritual consists chiefly of killing—in imitation, as it were, of that first, primordial crime, out of which arose this temporal world, in which we all participate."

For Campbell, the ambiguity of mythical creatures metaphorically expresses the human awareness of the ambiguous nature of these cosmic energies. Divine heroes or heroic gods are at once responsible for crisis and order.[10] Hence Campbell claims: "Whether you call someone a hero or a monster is all relative to where the focus of your consciousness may be."[11] In short, the mythical hero balances the two sides of the sacred by bringing so-called necessary sacrifices and thus sets an example. Following the scenario of their particular hero myths, communities all over the world attempt to redeem themselves from crises through sacrifice.

Glimpses of the Scapegoat Reality

Tempting as the universal myth of redemptive violence may be because of its promise of peace, there is something fishy about the picture reflected in the Oedipus myth. Apparently, the force embodied by Oedipus causes the chaos of a *natural* disaster as the consequence of a transgression of *social* taboos.

Yet there is no causal relationship between killing your father and marrying your mother on the one hand, and the outbreak of the plague on the other.

Oedipus is a *scapegoat*, in other words, one who is accused of causing an epidemic for which he bears no responsibility.

That said, of course it is true that natural disasters may reinforce the tensions that are already present in a community. Oedipus simply may have been a convenient common enemy who temporarily reunited the community of Thebes. After all, as a king and relative stranger he remains somewhat of an outsider throughout, which makes it easier to single him out.

Girard's mimetic theory uncovers the role of the scapegoat mechanism at the foundation of our cultures and our myths. Girard suggests that the mythical narrative of our community obscures three truths.[12] First, it blurs the imitative or "mimetic" aspect of our desires.

Second, it distorts the similarities between ourselves and our enemies.

Third, it hides the arbitrariness of the deadly violence we ultimately use to redeem our community from disasters.

Girard puts it succinctly: "In myth, violent death is always justified."[13]

Tragedy hints at the true origin of social chaos, namely our tendency to imitate each other's desire.

If we cannot or do not want to share the object of that mimetic desire, rivalry turns us into enemy doubles. Girard writes: "[The tragic poet] whistles up a storm of violent reciprocity, and differences are swept away in this storm..."[14]

As different competitors find social unity by imitating each other's enmity against one of the rivaling parties (the "scapegoat"), the collective elimination of the latter is easily experienced as a fateful outcome of the whole process.

Tragedy articulates this experience of so-called necessary violence. Instead of acknowledging that the reunited community and its victims had an equal share in the violence, tragedy reintroduces a radical difference between the community and its victims. Instead of disclosing the role of mimetic dynamics on all sides, tragedy convinces its audience that those who died were responsible for disorder in the first place, which makes their death inevitable to establish order. In short, tragedy ultimately *reflects*

the working of the scapegoat mechanism, instead of *revealing* it. It resorts to the mythical justification of sacrifice.[15]

A closer look at the story of Anakin Skywalker in *Star Wars* makes clear in what sense it is a tragedy as Girard understands it.

EPISODE II: THE TRAGIC REFLECTION OF MYTHICAL LIES IN STAR WARS

"The original idea was a story, ultimately of salvation, of revealing that the villain is actually the hero."[16] These words of George Lucas about his story's leading character recall the ambiguity of Oedipus.

Star Wars also reflects a belief in a Janus-faced sacred force. This "Force" has a life of its own. It permeates all that is. The "dark side of the Force" is responsible for violent disorder and breeds rivalry. The "light side of the Force" is responsible for peaceful order; it eliminates violent threats. Thus, the Force animates acts of destructive and redemptive violence. The Jedi Knights are guardians of peace in the Galactic Republic. They are locked, however, in a seemingly endless battle with the Dark Lords of the Sith.

1) A Psychosocial Crisis

According to Lucas, "if you see all six films, then you realize the story is really about [Anakin Skywalker]."[17]

There are many parallels between Anakin's tragic story and the Oedipus myth. Anakin is considered by some as the "Chosen One," foretold in a prophecy as "the One who will bring balance to the Force." He seems to originate partly from the Force itself, both because of his great control over it and because he has no biological father. He is a promising apprentice to Obi-Wan Kenobi, his Jedi Master, who trains him to let go of his emotional attachments. However, traumatized by the loss of his mother, Anakin is overwhelmed by a nightmare. He dreams that his pregnant wife, Padmé Amidala, might die in childbirth. Padmé has been Anakin's caregiver. By secretly marrying this mother figure, Anakin fails to respect the Jedi prohibition on attachments. Thus, like Oedipus, Anakin becomes a transgressor of taboos.

The Grand Master Yoda tries to restrain Anakin from taking the path of the dark side. "Attachment leads to jealousy. The shadow of greed, that is," Yoda observes, and commands Anakin: "Train yourself to let go of everything you fear to lose."[18]

Yoda's advice is in vain. Anakin more eagerly listens to the Sith tragedy of Darth Plagueis, told to him by Senator Palpatine. According to Palpatine, Plagueis was such a powerful Sith Lord that he could create life and keep his beloved ones from dying. However, by not completely sharing his power with his apprentice, Plagueis provoked the latter's rivalry. Finishing the story, Palpatine paints Anakin a picture of Masters who lose their power by withholding it from their apprentices:

"Darth Plagueis became so powerful… the only thing he was afraid of was losing his power, which eventually, of course, he did. Unfortunately, he taught his apprentice everything he knew, then his apprentice killed him in his sleep. Plagueis never saw it coming. It's ironic he could save others from death, but not himself."[19]

Plagueis is what Girard calls a model-obstacle, a role model in a paradoxical double-bind. On the one hand, he commands his apprentice to imitate his desire. On the other hand, he possesses the object of desire and so becomes an obstacle to his apprentice's desire. The apprentice is simultaneously enticed – *imitate me* – and rebuffed – *imitate me not*. Also, the more Plagueis holds on to the power desired by his apprentice, the more he in his turn imitates the desire of his apprentice, which arouses the latter's desire even more – and *vice versa*. It is no coincidence that "Plagueis" refers to "a violent plague" or "the plague of violence."

Girard:

"In giving my model a rival I return to him, in a way, the gift of the desire that he just gave to me. I give a model to my own model. The spectacle of my desire reinforces his at the precise moment when, in confronting me, he reinforces mine."[20]

For instance, when a toddler notices the interest of a playmate for a toy he had forgotten about, his desire for the toy might be aroused. Instead of enjoying whatever he was doing, he will likely claim the toy as being his and insist that he was "the first" to want it. Often, the playmate will mirror the toddler's behavior. For each one of them, remaining blind to the mimetic nature of their own desire, their violence is a defensive response to the other's so-called first aggression.

Girard notices that

"The more the antagonists desire to become different from each other, the more they become identical. Identity is realized in the hatred of the identical. This is the climactic moment that twins embody, or the enemy brothers of mythology such as Romulus and Remus. It is what I call a confrontation of *doubles*."[21]

The rivalry between doubles contagiously spreads, until a society finds itself in a crisis. Palpatine tricks Anakin into rivalry with the Jedi. He is the secret mastermind of a civil war, yet manages to present himself as the solution to the crisis he actually organized himself. The mimetic dynamic embodied by Palpatine is the Biblical Satan. Girard clarifies:

"Satan… is a kind of personification of 'bad contagion' just as much in its conflictive and disintegrative aspects as in its reconciling and unifying aspects. Satan… is the one who foments disorder, the one who sows scandals, and then at the height of the crises that he himself provokes, Satan suddenly brings them to an end by expelling the disorder."[22]

Palpatine establishes the first Galactic Empire. As a dictatorial "false Messiah" Emperor Palpatine sows the very fear from which he promises to save the Republic. He turns out to be Darth Sidious, a Sith Lord.

Anakin becomes his apprentice, Darth Vader. Seduced by the dark side of the Force, Vader tragically loses his future with Padmé in his attempts to save it. His rage against the Jedi causes her death.

Moreover, Vader himself ends up being dismembered as he tries to slay his "brother" Obi-Wan. The Emperor saves Vader, but the cost of this salvation is steep, for Vader is entombed in black machine armor to keep him alive. Jesus describes how "those who want to save their life will lose it" (Mark 8:35a). The price Vader pays to gain power over the Empire indeed seems a Pyrrhic victory. Additionally, Vader's twin son and daughter, who already lost their mother Padmé in childbirth, will end up rivaling the monstrous twin Sidious and Vader.

2) A Political Solution

Mimetic rivalry ends when one of the fighting parties either surrenders, is banned, or is eliminated. Of course, the one with the most allies usually has a better chance at emerging victorious. "Majority rule" enables victors to depict the enemy's violence as a "monstrous" attack and their own violence as a "noble" act of self-defense.

A tragedy like *Star Wars*, however, reveals that the rulers and their enemies are two sides of the same coin of mimetic rivalry: they are essentially the *same*.

In fact, *Star Wars* suggests that power is inherently mimetic: power results from a *comparison with* (sometimes imagined) competitors (be it natural or social forces). Without the threat of its loss, a sense of power doesn't exist at all. Power only exists as an endless reaffirmation of the victory over, and thus rivalry with, that threat. This is the inescapable law of the Force in *Star Wars*.

Palpatine makes clear that both the Sith and the Jedi are subjected to a rivalry over power in a conversation with Anakin: "The Sith and the Jedi are similar in almost every way, including their quest for greater power. […] The fear of losing power is a weakness of both the Jedi and the Sith."[23] By comparing the Jedi with the Sith, Palpatine articulates Campbell's idea of the mythical consciousness, which expresses an amoral – or at least morally relative – universe: "Good is a point of view, Anakin. And the Jedi point of view isn't the only valid one. The Dark Lords of the Sith believe in security and justice also, yet they are considered by the Jedi to be evil."[24]

Yoda and Palpatine, the respective leaders of the Jedi and the Sith, believe peace can only be established by the elimination of the enemy. They present their own policy to solve the crisis as a matter of self-defense.[25] Palpatine: "The Jedi are relentless; if they are not all destroyed, it will be civil war without end. […] Once more, the Sith will rule the galaxy, and we shall have peace." The Jedi Council echoes this sentiment: "I sense a plot to destroy the Jedi. […] Destroy the Sith, we must."

The first victory goes to the Sith. The Jedi are nearly extinguished, children included. Palpatine, personifying the temptation to disintegrating rivalry, resembles Satan even more in the way he deceivingly renews order. Girard writes: "Satan expels Satan by means of innocent victims whom he succeeds in having condemned."[26]

3) A New Crisis, a New Solution, Yet the Same Old Story

In the years after Palpatine's rise to power, Padmé's twin children lead separate lives. Luke Skywalker grows up on a remote planet as the sole child of his adoptive parents. Like Oedipus, he doesn't know his father. Nevertheless, like Anakin, he sets out to become a Jedi. He, too, is trained by Obi-Wan and Yoda. Eventually, Luke finds out Leia is his sister. He also learns that the Jedi's sworn enemy, Darth Vader, is his father.

In Luke's final confrontation with Vader, the father finds himself on the losing side. Luke, poised to vanquish his father, receives encouragement from the Emperor. In conquering the father, the son can become the father. Luke, however, contemplates his robotic hand and empathizes with his father, who has the same lost appendage. When Luke refuses to kill Vader, the Emperor violently unleashes the Force against Luke. Father and son seem lost. Until, that is, Vader gathers his strength and vanquishes the Emperor.

Thus, as in the legend of Darth Plagueis, Sidious is fought by an apprentice who is his equal. Vader kills Sidious, but is mortally wounded during the fight. The rivalry between these monstrous doubles dies as they kill each other. In their deaths, the plague of violence abates. Moreover, having destroyed their common enemy, Vader and his son find themselves reconciled before Vader dies. In other words, the crisis comes to a halt through the mimetic bonding against a common enemy, who is eventually eliminated. Myths, however, obscure the mimetic origin of both crisis and new unity by wrongfully depicting the victim as the origin of both crisis and order. Although *Star Wars* at some point evokes the violent reciprocity between the Jedi and the Sith, the story ultimately blames the Sith for the crisis in the Galaxy and justifies their expulsion to restore peace.

Anakin fulfills the prophecy of the One who brings balance to the Force. According to the logic of the story, this is a fate he cannot escape. Anakin follows the trajectory of the mythical hero. A *monster*, responsible for destructive violence while alive, Anakin becomes the *hero* who performs an act of redemptive violence in sacrificing the monster – himself! He is at once the embodiment of the dark and light side of the Force.

4) A Cultural Commemoration

In the first six episodes of *Star Wars*, the epidemic of violence provisionally ends with the Sith's elimination. It allows the Jedi to re-imagine themselves as defenders of peace and to interpret their own violence as "necessary, good violence." They preserve the taboo on a vengeful return of the Sith by imitating the founding redemptive violence of Vader. Each sacrifice of so-called violent threats is a re-enactment of Vader's *salvific dead presence*. It is believed to keep the haunting violence of his former *evil living presence* outside the community.[27] Interestingly, during the victory festivities of the Jedi, the ghost of Anakin is depicted alongside the ghosts of Yoda and Obi-Wan. Anakin has become godlike, keeping watch over the Galaxy.

Girard observes that this process characterizes myths in general:

"The transformation of the evildoer into a divine benefactor is a phenomenon simultaneously marvelous and routine. All this is explicable if we see that by the end of these myths unanimous violence has reconciled the community and the reconciling power is attributed to the victim, who is already 'guilty,' already 'responsible' for the crisis. The victim is thus transfigured twice: the first time in a negative, evil fashion; the second time in a positive, beneficial fashion. Everyone thought this victim had perished, but it turns out he or she must be alive since this very one reconstructs the community immediately after destroying it. He or she is clearly immortal and thus divine."[28]

In light of the Gospel, *Star Wars* reflects the mythical lie about violence. Anakin, like other mythical victims, seems to possess a transcendent "Force" that is responsible for destructive and redemptive violence. Hence Girard writes: "The peoples of the world do not invent their gods. They deify their victims."[29]

In reality, however, there are no inevitable forces to blame for an ever-recurring cycle of violence, and which decide who is "fittest" to survive. The Gospel revelation of this truth destroys every "mythical" justification – be it religious, political or pseudoscientific ("neo-Darwinian") – for violence. Girard stresses the Gospel's subversive power:

"The word of the Gospel is unique in really problematizing human violence. All other sources on humankind resolve the question of violence before it is even asked. Either the violence is considered divine (myths), or it is attributed to human nature (biology), or it is restricted to certain people or types of persons only (who then make excellent scapegoats), and these are ideologies."[30]

To justify violence by referring to a non-existent decisive transcendence, is thus to use an ultimate scapegoat. Violence and its sacrificial outcomes are mimetic, human realities. The Gospel proclaims the model of a non-violent God who frees us to a non-rivalrous new life.

EPISODE III: THE GOSPEL REVELATION OF REDEMPTIVE GRACE

Asked what the most important commandment is, Jesus answers: *"Love God, and your neighbor as yourself"* (Mark 12:28-31). "To love God" is, in a Jewish sense, the prohibition on idolatry (Exodus 20:3-4). It is the prohibition to deify anything, including your own identity. Since your basic identity results from the mythical imagination of the community you belong to, the dynamic of love proposed by Jesus challenges the deification of that community and its attitude towards external enemies.

For instance, a member of a girl clique may very well believe that a smart girl is excluded because she is a "slut" who "spoils group atmosphere." It's the kind of deceptive gossip myth that differentiates a group from an external enemy. It provides internal uniformity.

Joseph Campbell: "In bounded communities, aggression is projected outward. The myths of participation and love pertain only to the in-group, and the out-group is totally other." René Girard: "The preference that cultures grant to themselves is inseparably bound up with the identity, the autonomy, the very existence of these cultures."

The internal uniformity, provided by the mythical imagination, is illustrated in *Star Wars* by the "robotic" sameness of the Imperial Storm Troopers. "Otherness" in such groups is merely a difference of hierarchical position, since every member is expected to accept the same "truth" (of the leader).

Jesus points to the sameness between a group and its external enemy to enable neighborly love (Matthew 5:44), which ends the differentiating exclusion of the other and paradoxically allows for internal diversity and integrity (Matthew 10:34-36).

Jesus challenges the violent peace of any sacrificial order (John 14:27) and enables the peace of non-violent internal conflict. A girl who criticizes her clique's depiction of an excluded so-called "slut" causes inner debates, which might result in the inclusion of the latter. The "other" turns out not to be that different from "us" after all. In his tragedy, *Romeo and Juliet*, William Shakespeare masterfully paints the picture of two noble households – Montague and Capulet – who are rivals, not because they are different, but precisely because they are "both alike in dignity." However, both parties have a hard time coping with this situation, and as the law of mimetic rivalry predicts, the more they try to distinguish themselves from each other, the more they resemble each other. The way out of this conundrum could lie in each household criticizing its own in-group myth about the other, in this case, out-group household. Of course, as Jesus observes, telling one's own household or group that the so-called enemy isn't that different after all, could create tensions, discussions and even enmity in one's own quarters. Nevertheless, these types of discussions can end the sacrificial peace of age-old feuds and open the gateway to the peace of non-violent conflict beyond the need for sacrifice. Sadly, in *Romeo and Juliet*, the enmity between the two families only comes to an end when both lovers die.

The dynamic proposed by Jesus goes against the one articulated by Palpatine, who also points to sameness, but only to provoke rivalry.

Jesus, in line with certain texts from the Hebrew Bible, transforms the mimesis of a desire for power into a mimesis of withdrawal from rivalry over power – grace!

The creativity of the love that is Jesus' God, is not easily grasped. When the Pharisees ask Jesus whether it is lawful to pay taxes to the emperor (Matthew 22:15-22), they are amazed by his answer:

"Give to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and to God the things that are God's." Instead of becoming a collaborator with the Roman oppressor, or an ally of the Jewish insurgents, Jesus reveals love as a dynamic that does not take part in a competition over power.

Hence, Jesus is neither for nor against any given rule. For him the question is whether policy contributes to neighborly love or not. His peace does not depend on the abolishment of any cultural order (Matthew 5:17), but on a transformation of existing laws from the perspective of neighborly love. Therefore he says: "The sabbath was made for humankind, and not humankind for the sabbath" (Mark 2:27). Thus, although the love of Jesus is universalist and transcultural (since it challenges every culture to rethink itself), it is not totalitarian. Indeed, the mutual withdrawal between cultures from rivalry over power creates the space for a multicultural society.

Like the Sith and the Jedi, Caiaphas the high priest (one of the leaders of the Jewish Council called the Sanhedrin) presents the age-old solution of sacrifice to save the community from a so-called looming civil war wherein Jesus would be one of the leaders: "It is better for you to have one man die for the people than to have the whole nation destroyed" (John 11:50).

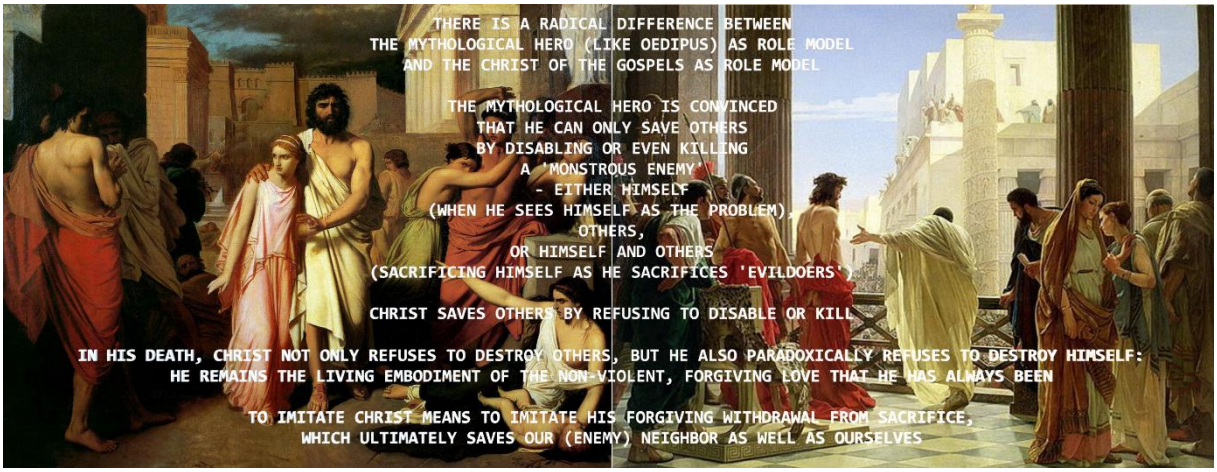
After Jesus is arrested, the promised sacrificial peace seems imminent: even the Roman governor Pilate and the Galilean ruler Herod become friends at the expense of a tortured Jesus (Luke 23:12). As the leaders mimetically hold on to their power, they can only conceive of Jesus as a rival. The Gospel reveals this jealousy as the true cause of their desire to eliminate Jesus (Matthew 27:18). Despite the vehemence of the violence used against him, Jesus never succumbs to the temptation to answer violence with violence, which he uncovers as the dynamic of Satan (Matthew 4:10; 16:23). The imprisoned Jesus withstands the satanic, mimetic cycle of rivalry and its provisional sacrificial peace.

Even Pilate concludes that Jesus is innocent of the charges against him (John 18:38). The power that needs the lie of an outside threat to justify its myths of self-defense cannot stand this truth about the scapegoat in its midst. This is why Jesus is crucified.

CONCLUSION

To his opponents, the crucified Jesus seems to have lost. "He saved others, he cannot save himself" (Matthew 27:42). Although these words seem to characterize the self-sacrifice of Darth Vader, Jesus' death differs radically from Vader's.

Vader dies to himself and becomes the embodiment of a redeeming violence. The cultural order of the Jedi continues to exist thanks to the violent elimination of enemy threats. The death of Jesus, however, does not transform Jesus into a ghostly ruler of this world, who is imitated in further acts of violence. Contrary to Vader, Jesus saves others by refusing to kill.



When Jesus dies, further attempts to draw him into the world of violence become impossible. The violent logic that needs its victim's involvement in violence to justify itself utterly fails. What dies on the cross is the foundation of violence. This is why Jesus proclaims, right before dying: "It is finished" (John 19:30). The universal lie of the scapegoat mechanism behind the ever-recurring myths of redemptive violence is revealed. In that sense, Jesus is: "The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world" (John 1:29).

Girard points to the real irony:

"By nailing Christ to the Cross, the powers believed they were doing what they ordinarily did in unleashing the single victim mechanism. They thought they were avoiding the danger of disclosure. They did not suspect that in the end they would be doing just the opposite: they would be contributing to their own annihilation, nailing themselves to the Cross, so to speak. They did not and could not suspect the revelatory power of the Cross. […] The powers are not put on display because they are defeated, but they are defeated because they are put on display."[31]

Easter Sunday reveals the crucified Jesus as the living incarnation of the non-violent Love that redeemed the lives of "friends" and "enemies" from a potential civil war.[32] Therefore, the Eucharistic commemoration of Jesus' death is not the repetition of deadly violence to establish peace. It is the sacramental presence of Jesus as Risen Christ and true Messiah, who does not feed on violence to become a so-called savior, but who invites us to imagine ever new ways of sharing his forgiving withdrawal from violence. Imitating Jesus' "Father" means imitating a grace that wants us to be fully alive in reconciling with each other. Imitating "Vader" means imitating a rivalry that demands our death, and/or the death of our neighbor. As the apostle Paul writes, we are called to imitate Christ.

Remember… beyond dismemberment…

The totalitarian, sacrificial/violent peace in the *Star Wars* Myth:

"If they are not all destroyed, it will be civil war without end… We shall have peace."

The universalist, non-sacrificial peace of internal, non-violent conflict in the Gospel:

Jesus, in Matthew 10:34-36,
"Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I have not come to bring peace, but a sword. For I have come to set a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law. And a person's enemies will be those of his own household."

Jesus, in John 14:27,
"Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. Not as the world gives do I give to you."

Darth Vader, like Oedipus, "dies to himself" and becomes the embodiment of a redeeming violence. He is imitated in further acts of violence. Contrary to Vader, Jesus saves others by refusing to kill, neither others, nor himself. Jesus remains the incarnation of non-violent love throughout, even unto death. This non-violent love lives among "friends" and "enemies" who did not die in a potential civil war, as Jesus refused to take part in the dynamic of violent mimetic rivalry.

Star Wars does not imagine the full potential of forgiveness, as it remains enmeshed in a fateful cycle of retaliatory violence.[33] Hence, for instance, the titles *Revenge of the Sith* and *Return of the Jedi* for episodes III and VI respectively. However, the saga does evoke a sense of compassion for those who commit evil while they are desperately trying to do good. As Luke Skywalker discovers, there is a Darth Vader in all of us. Compassion for our own dark side may become compassion for the dark side of others as well, until there is only the life-giving space of mutual forgiveness: the space opened up by the *Resurrection of the Christ*.

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