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## This is the Way: Christian Asceticism Alive in the Star Wars Universe

David Allen OSB

*College of Saint Benedict/Saint John's University, [dmallen@csbsju.edu](mailto:dmallen@csbsju.edu)*

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## ABSTRACT:

This article is a creative reflection on how the Desert Fathers, especially Saint Antony, could be compared in a pastoral way to the Jedi Masters found in the Star Wars Film and Television Canon.

# This is the Way

## Christian Asceticism Alive in the Star Wars Universe

by Brother David Allen, OSB

“Once you start down the dark path,  
forever will it dominate your destiny.”

– Master Yoda, *The Empire Strikes Back*

After first watching *Star Wars: A New Hope*, I was so excited I could hardly sleep that night. I was eight years old, and completely enthralled by the story I had just seen. Certainly, I was not alone in my enthusiasm, as *Star Wars* has become one of the most massive media franchises in contemporary culture. As of February 2023, *Star*



*Wars* media spans across eleven films, over five different television series, hundreds of comics, over fifty novels, and a whole collection of toys ranging from action figures and *Legos* to stuffed animals. George Lucas' imaginative story of good and evil, the hero's journey of Anakin Skywalker who would eventually become the sinister Darth Vader, and the creative cast of intergalactic creatures continue to leave me curious and interested in expanding the story. The quest to master the Force and become a Jedi gives the *Star Wars* saga its shape and its lasting power. As I explored my own vocation to ministry and monastic life, I began learning more about the saints and figures of Christianity who shaped different spiritual practices. Often in reading about the life of the Desert Christians and their ascetic practices, I would imagine interesting teachers like those Jedi found in the *Star Wars* universe. One figure we read about this past semester who stands out for me as a "spiritual cousin" to the Jedi is Antony. In reading Antony, it is hard to not imagine engaging Obi-Wan Kenobi and Yoda as contemporary illustrations of desert monasticism, teaching, and ascetic practice. These characters, the role of the Force, and the struggle between good and evil in *Star Wars* continue to draw parallels to the ancient desert Christian community and monastic asceticism.

"You must feel the Force flow around you"- Master Yoda, *The Empire Strikes Back*

Before jumping into the connections between Antony and the Jedi figures of *Star Wars*, it may be helpful to offer a brief explanation of some key ideas. First, George Lucas presents an energy to the audience known as "The Force." For those who are unfamiliar with *Star Wars*, the Force is a binding field of energy that connects other sources of energy, such as living matter. The Jedi are a monastic order of warriors who have learned to harness this energy for a variety of effects. While some Jedi possess a greater mastery of the Force than others, each member of the order can perform extraordinary feats, such as telekinesis and mind control. While the Jedi represent those spiritual individuals inclined to use the Force for benevolent purposes, there also exists an order with a different agenda

known as the Sith.<sup>1</sup> There are two sides of the Force, the Light Side, which can be used for good, and the Dark Side, which leads to anger, fear, and violence towards others. As Yoda says, “Fear leads to anger, anger leads to hate, hate leads to suffering.”<sup>2</sup> The Light and Dark Sides of the Force, Lucas said, “are designed around compassion and greed.”<sup>3</sup> Like spiritual prayer, the Force ideally offers the Jedi a sense of balance, serenity, and wisdom. Although the Jedi are trained in tactical fighting and defensive skills using a sword called a “lightsaber,” their primary teachings promote compassion and peace, and their goal is the restoration of balance to the galaxy from the Dark Side the Force. Like a monastic vocation, this goal for peace and balance is not a simple endeavor.

Antony was a monk of the Egyptian Desert, known as one of the first major figures to move outward to the wilderness to embrace the inner and physical desert. It is here Antony believed he could best achieve the greatest practice of ascetic life and virtues. Raised and formed primarily in his home, Antony’s monastic calling led him outside of his home and village. Eventually, after being led to the tombs and barracks of a community at war, he found a calling to the desert wilderness on the outskirts of the village. Antony spent almost twenty years alone practicing his ascetic discipline of prayer, fasting, and refraining from the temptations of the body, rarely seen by anyone. As a spiritual father, Antony believed that the perseverance of the ascetic life was the great goal of the monk: “Instead, as though we were beginning anew each day, let each of us increase in fervor. For the entire lifetime of a human being is very brief when measured against the age to come.”<sup>4</sup> Antony believed that the greatest discipline must be practiced in this life to grow closer to God and to prepare oneself for the next life. This perseverance is like the lessons of the Jedi, especially as Yoda begins his training of Luke

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- 1 Joshua Hays, *A True Hope: Jedi Perils and the Way of Jesus*, (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys Publishing, 2015), 37.
  - 2 *Star Wars: Episode I – The Phantom Menace*, directed by George Lucas
  - 3 Jeffery A. Smith, “Hollywood Theology: The Commodification of Religion in Twentieth-Century Films,” *Religion and American Culture: A Journal of Interpretation* 11, no. 2 (2001): 194.
  - 4 Athanasius, John, and Serapion, *The Life of Antony*, translated by Tim Vivian, Apostolos N Athanassakis, and Rowan A Greer, Cistercian Studies Series, no. 202, (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 2003), 99.

Skywalker. Yoda calls Luke to be patient, to grow in balance with his understanding of the Force. For Antony, a monk must show humility, refrain from all pleasures of the world, and like a physical and spiritual athlete, train one's mind, body, and spirit to grow in love for Christ.

“Judge me by my size, do you?”- Master Yoda, *The Empire Strikes Back*

To me, the most riveting and compelling scene in *Star Wars: A New Hope* is Luke Skywalker's first visit to the home of an old hermit beyond the desert sea. Here, “Ben” Kenobi reveals his identity as the Jedi Obi-Wan Kenobi, who Luke realizes is the person a lovely woman in distress is calling for help in a recording played by the droid, R2-D2. We meet Obi-Wan Kenobi at the end of his life, in a sort of exile on the desert planet Tatooine. The desert is the place to hide away from the wrath of the evil Empire but also is where Obi-Wan dedicates himself to watch Luke Skywalker coming into adulthood. He has become accustomed to the wild desert and its terrain, even being able to fend off the native Sand People while rescuing Luke and his beloved droids, R2-D2 and C-3PO. As the story continues, Obi-Wan will eventually introduce Luke to the Force, inviting him to actively discern the worldview advocated by the Jedi masters.

While in the Egyptian desert, Antony grew accustomed to the ruggedness and extremes of the wilderness. Here, he fasted all the time, withdrew from his village, and was determined not to go out or receive anyone. The strategy backfired on him, as Antony gained a reputation as a great teacher and mentor of the Faith. To all the monks who came to see him, he never tired of giving the exhortation to “have faith in the Lord and love him.”<sup>5</sup> Both Antony and Obi-Wan Kenobi initially hope to present a resigned disposition to students, but as their call to enlighten and share their gifts with the young arises, they are willing to show the way.

“You are my only hope”- Princess Leia Organa, *Star Wars: A New Hope*

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5 Athanasius, John, and Serapion, *The Life of Antony*, 175.

Humility for Antony was central to his disposition and character, like Obi-Wan, who when meeting Luke Skywalker refrains from listing his highly notable achievements. Besides Princess Leia's call for Obi-Wan Kenobi's protection, Obi-Wan does not initially appear to have a disposition or backstory of a great Jedi Master. We come to learn he was once a general in the Clone Wars, the Jedi Master who personally trained Luke's father, and incredibly knowledgeable in the ways of the Force. Humility is a true value to the Jedi. One of the greatest moments of humility in *Star Wars* is when Luke and R2-D2 travel to the swampy planet Dagobah in *The Empire Strikes Back*. Here, they encounter a little green being using strange grammatical syntax who appears to be a foolish and crazy fellow. Luke is shocked to learn that this is the "great warrior" he has been sent to seek out and learn from, known as Master Yoda.<sup>6</sup>

Similarly, Antony presented himself in humble and strange ways. Antony lived a life of extreme poverty, wearing animal hides, keeping himself unclean, and practicing fasting from food and drink. Despite this appearance, and because of his training in the desert, Antony's reputation as a wise monk gained the attention of his fellow monks. Antony was known as a spiritual father, even sharing his wisdom with others without showing a sense of personal pride. This sense of humility drew him closer in a relationship with Christ and modeled a sense of inner peace and love.

"I sense much fear in you"- Master Yoda, *The Phantom Menace*

One of the major themes found in exploring the life of St. Antony is the fight against temptation and demons.

"We ought to fear God alone, therefore, and hold the demons in contempt and not be at all concerned about them. For a great weapon against them is an upright life and faith in God. Without a doubt, demons are afraid of ascetic practices: fasting, keeping vigil, prayer, gentleness, tranquility, poverty, moderation, humility, love of the poor, almsgiving, and above all, a devotion to Christ".<sup>7</sup>

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6 John C. McDowell, *The Gospel According to Star Wars: Faith, Hope, and the Force*. 2nd ed. (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2017), 105.

7 Athanasius, John, and Serapion, *The Life of Antony*, 127.

Antony believed, like Obi-Wan and Yoda, that fear was the work of the devil and that fear and anger led one down a path away from Christ. Antony was a firm believer in the practice of meditation and prayer without ceasing. “Not only should the sun not go down on anger, but it should also not go down on any other sin. Examine yourselves, test yourselves”.<sup>8</sup> The Devil, like the Dark Side of the Force, tempted Antony. He raised in Antony’s mind a great dust cloud of thoughts wanting to separate him from his ability to make correct choices.<sup>9</sup> “The mind of the soul is strong when the pleasures of the body are weak.”<sup>10</sup> God has mercy on the monk who offers repentance, examines himself, and strives to grow closer to God in humble action and service to others. Antony knew this as true and constantly called his monks to fend off temptation by being as disciplined as possible to fasting, refraining from fornication and even sleep and drink, and practicing a devotion to daily prayer, physical strength, and a love for Christ.

“Skill is the child of patience”- Obi-Wan Kenobi, *Attack of the Clones*

What he lacks in height or beauty, Yoda makes up for with his integrity, patience, and compassion when teaching his students, whether it be the younglings or a future Jedi Master. Watching Luke Skywalker frustrated to understand the Force, we viewers become sympathetic to Yoda, who has been training Jedi for 800 years. Luke’s stubbornness and impatience frustrate Yoda, and we can all identify with those moments when Yoda wails, “I cannot teach him. The boy has no patience.” Like a Stoic sage, Yoda lacks the vices of fear, anger, hatred, and aggression, and his ascetic life on Dagobah reflects his self-discipline. Compassion is perhaps Yoda’s greatest gift. He has empathy for all things living and tries to see the best even in the worst of people.<sup>11</sup>

Luke and his father Anakin before him are constantly preoccupied by the future. The fear of the future and desire for knowledge of it is a major

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8 Athanasius, John, and Serapion, *The Life of Antony*, 177.

9 Athanasius, John, and Serapion, *The Life of Antony*, 67.

10 Athanasius, John, and Serapion, *The Life of Antony*, 77.

11 Roslin Smith, “Class Wars: How to Use Your Jedi Master,” *Counterpoints* no. 486 (2017): 18.

theme found in the life of St. Antony as well. “It is necessary to pray, not to know the future, or to demand compensation for ascetic discipline but that the Lord may help us to victory over the Devil. If at some point, we are concerned about knowing the future, let our minds be pure.”<sup>12</sup> This anxiety to know what the future has in store for our lives is a temptation many in discernment face today. Whether one is pursuing marriage and family life or discerning a religious vocation, the temptation to know how the future will unfold is alive and plays a role in the spiritual life. Finding balance and acceptance of the present moment is the sign that someone is spiritually at peace with their vocation, allowing the uncertainties of the future to be God’s responsibility to showcase, not our own. Antony calls the monks, like Yoda to the Jedi, to be more aware of the life in the present and to become more at peace with today. A great lesson for all of us.

## CONCLUSION

Like Anakin and Luke Skywalker, St. Antony faced his own war between light and darkness. Antony was not exempt from the experience of sin, and believed that through the discernment of spirits, one could live within the tension of good and evil. For Antony, the “Light Side” is the nature of virtue. “All virtue needs, then, if for us to will it, because it is within us and has its origins from us. Virtue maintains its nature when it remains as it came into being, and it came into being good and perfectly upright.”<sup>13</sup> For Antony, the Dark Side of spiritual life is the experience of being tempted by various demons. He shares that the demons work in us through the temptation of sin, by desire, which gives birth to sin, which gives birth to death.<sup>14</sup> Antony encourages the monastics, as with all Christians, to correct one another, companion those experiencing vices of demons, and assist one another along the path that leads to Christ. This encouragement, found in a disciplined routine of prayer, moves the monk towards the good, for the goal of the spiritual life is to be always in love with Christ. In Star Wars, one of the greatest sources of good in Luke’s journey is the fidelity and loyalty he is offered in those friends, teachers, and allies he encounters. He is not alone but is called to companion

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12 Athanasius, John, and Serapion, *The Life of Antony*, 133.

13 Athanasius, John, and Serapion, *The Life of Antony*, 107.

14 Athanasius, John, and Serapion, *The Life of Antony*, 109.



Princess Leia, Han Solo, Chewbacca and the beloved droids along the journey. The Christian seeker faces a cosmic battle between good and evil, light and darkness, a battle where God's love is the secret to victory.

*Star Wars*, although fiction, presents a relevant story to the formation of today's spiritual person. This is a great example of someone discerning between paths of good and evil. This discerner is supported by friends, mentors, teachers in his quest for self-knowledge and inner peace.

Today's monastic embarks on a similar journey by practicing a life of prayer, witnessing mutual obedience to members of a community, and discovering the love of Christ intimately. As for all Christians, the heart of St. Antony's life is the pursuit of perfect love with God. From family relationships, the pursuit of wisdom, friendship, and a pursuit for greater self-knowledge, the themes found in *Star Wars* illustrate a pattern of values and practices like those undertaken by the monastics of the Christian Desert. Like the example of Yoda and Obi-Wan Kenobi, the monastic tradition offers the world a different picture of the Christian experience both in history and in a more contemporary lens. As one embarks into monastic life, one notices the many ways they are tempted away from God and overtime discovers the gift of trusting in the community's work to provide mutual support, nurturing, and guidance with the goal of perfect love. Ours is a lifelong journey, a frontier waiting to be explored, shared and celebrated. May we find hope in the love of Christ alive in our hearts.



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