

EMILE DURKHEIM'S *ELEMENTARY FORMS OF RELIGIOUS LIFE* AS SEEN THROUGH STAR WARS

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Introduction

When Emile Durkheim set out to begin his study of the most elementary forms of religious life, as the title of his book suggests, he did so with a specific purpose in mind. With regards to the text and sociology he writes, "It does not seek to become acquainted with bygone forms of civilization for the sole purpose of being acquainted with and reconstructing them... its purpose above all is to explain a present reality that is near to us and thus capable of affecting our ideas and actions. That reality is man."¹ This approach also will be our goal in connecting the elementary principles of religious life to examples found in that fantastic Galaxy Far, Far Away, in Star Wars. A titan of science fiction and fantasy storytelling, Star Wars has stood the test of time and enthralled millions of people over the past three decades, and it continues to be a huge hit across the world. We would argue that much of this popularity is not due to special effects or production value, but on Star Wars' ability to aid in explaining and understanding the present reality of man, much as Durkheim attempted to do in his own work. In this way, Star Wars stands at an intersection of fandom and sociocultural

insight. This paper shall endeavor to explore the Star Wars universe and the incredible amount of examples found within it. We hope to make accessible, through the medium of fandom, many of Durkheim's original points about religion, introducing in a new way these fascinating principles of sociology. Whether it is the dichotomy of the Jedi and the Sith, their relation to the Force, or simply how the galaxy itself is creatively filled with life and stories, Star Wars is a fascinating tapestry of ideas wherein much of the concepts that Durkheim observed and came to understand in the *Elementary Forms of Religious Life* come to life in a variety of new and exciting ways. Throughout this paper, a variety of examples will be used to discuss how Durkheim's study of religion in humanity can be tied to Star Wars. Ranging from topics such as churinga and totem, all the way to the nature of the soul, and much in between, Star Wars is a fascinating wellspring of incredible connections.

¹ Durkheim and Fields, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*. Emile Durkheim ; Translated and with an Introduction by Karen E. Fields, 1.

Religious Objects – Churinga & Totem²

One of the first connections we would like to make between Durkheim and Star Wars is tied to Durkheim's concept of the churinga. Durkheim describes the churinga by saying:

In themselves, the churingas are merely objects of wood and stone like so many others; they are distinguished from profane things of the same kind by only one particularity: The totemic mark is drawn or engraved upon them. That mark, and only that mark, confers sacredness on them.³

It is this concept of churinga that we believe is strongly reflected in one of the most iconic objects in all of Star Wars, the lightsaber. To begin with though, some explanation of what a churinga is exactly should be obtained. Durkheim describes them as objects that, while made of ordinary materials, are imbued with a power and awe that comes from their association and inscription with the sacred totem of the tribe. Within Star Wars, the lightsaber acts not only as the weapon of the Jedi Knight, but it also acts as an identifying badge of their membership in the order, and one that is both unique and sacred to them and as such, acts as their churinga.

² Star Wars material in this section sourced from: "Lightsaber," "Kyber Crystal," "The Gathering"; "The Force"; "Category:Force-Based Organizations"; "Rakata"; "Massassi," all in *Wookieepedia*.

³ Durkheim and Fields, 121.

During their training as younglings, young Jedi take part in a sacred ritual known as The Gathering. It is during this time that the younglings are allowed to visit the restricted Jedi temple on the planet Ilum, and during their time there, they are allowed to step into the hallowed walls of the Crystal Cave. Within this cave the naturally occurring, and incredibly unique, kyber crystals are found. These crystal formations are virtually colorless until they come into contact with a youngling whose presence in the Force resonates with the crystal's own link to the Force, and they become attuned to one another. During this time, the kyber crystal begins to take on a unique hue as it attunes itself to its new owner, it is from this process that the color of the lightsaber is born. Having found their sacred crystal and bonded with it in the intimate way that only a connection to the Force would allow, the Jedi youngling is now ready to begin the assembly of their lightsaber, and they proceed to do so in a meditative state, channeling the Force as they constructed their sacred weapon and tool.

It should be noted that the shell of the lightsaber so to speak, that is, its frame, is entirely ordinary just as Durkheim makes mention of in the quote above. It is a simple emitter, power cell, and switch contained within a metal frame. It is not the materials that make up the lightsaber that set it apart as sacred; it is the crystal within that marks it as sacred. For, without it, the signature colored blade would not be able to function, and the Jedi would not be able to use it to so great an effect. It is their attunement to the kyber crystal that allows the Jedi to use the lightsaber with such skill, and why all other

wielders who attempt to use one feel as if it is a clumsy tool in their hands.

Throughout the Star Wars universe, the mere sight of a lightsaber was often enough to put an end to a brewing conflict, as the power it contained as a churinga of the Jedi Order was incredible. If a lightsaber was displayed, it was done to indicate to all around that the individual carrying it was a member of the Jedi Order, demonstrating both their sacred nature, and quite literal control of the Force. In Episode I, Anakin glimpsed Qui-Gon's lightsaber under his robe, and later asked him if he was a Jedi. Qui-Gon responds by asking why he would even ask such a question (attempting to keep a low profile) to which Anakin replied that he saw his lightsaber, and that only Jedi carried that weapon.⁴ Moving forward to Episode IV, Obi-Wan tells Luke something similar as he presents to him his father's lightsaber. He tells Luke that it is his father's, that it is called a lightsaber, and that it is an elegant weapon from a more civilized age, the weapon of a Jedi Knight.⁵

It should also be noted that the Sith, ancient enemies of the Jedi who wielded the Dark Side of The Force, did not utilize these natural kyber crystals. Instead, they would synthetically create their own, and forcibly imbue them with the Dark Side energy. It was this process which gave the Sith's lightsabers their crimson hue, which acted to set them apart from the Jedi. This largely stemmed from the Sith's inability to enter the Crystal Cave, or even land on the planet of Ilum. Since they could not obtain the true

sacred crystals, they created their own artificial type, and, as opposed to them naturally holding Force energy, they force it upon the mock crystal through the power of the Dark Side. Every Sith presented in the major films has wielded a red bladed lightsaber, and it further emphasizes the nature of these objects as churingas in the Star Wars universe.

There are numerous other examples throughout the Star Wars universe that further tie the lightsaber to the Jedi, but the key connection to Durkheim is that the nature of the lightsaber, and in particular the lightsaber of the Jedi, as a churinga stems from the Force. It is the sacred crystal contained within, bonded with its wielder, that enables the Jedi to use their lightsaber with such power, skill, and precision. While members of the galaxy at large might have been largely ignorant of the appearance of a Jedi, once a lightsaber was revealed they knew that they belonged to the Jedi Order. It was this impression that allowed the Jedi to act as peacekeepers and guardians of the Republic for over a thousand generations. It was also this malformed relationship between Force wielder and crystal which made the Sith's crimson blade such a powerful identifier into their nature.

Another example of Durkheim's connection of concept in Star Wars is how Durkheim presents the idea of a totemic force in religion, and how remarkably similar that force is to the Force found in Star Wars. Durkheim describes totemism and the totemic force by saying:

In other words, totemism is not the religion of certain animals, certain

⁴ Lucas, *Star Wars Episode I: The Phantom Menace*.

⁵ Lucas, *Star Wars. Episode IV: A New Hope*.

men, or certain images; it is the religion of a kind of anonymous and impersonal force that is identifiable in each of these beings but identical to none of them. None possesses it entirely, and all participate in it... Taking the word “god” in a very broad sense, one could say that it is the god that each totemic cult worships. But it is an impersonal god, without name, without history, immanent in the world, diffused in a numberless multitude of things.⁶

Using the quote above, it can be seen that throughout the Star Wars films and its Expanded Universe legends that Durkheim’s description of this powerful totemic force is nearly identically reflected in the world of Star Wars in what is known there as simply the Force.

To begin with, as Durkheim describes, totemism is not a religion of a certain animal or object. It is anonymous and identifiable within things, but is identical to none of them. This is much like the Force in Star Wars. In the Star Wars galaxy, the force is never solely imbued in one being, it is never the tool of one sole Jedi or Sith, it is a universal force throughout the galaxy. In addition to this, the Force is not just a tool of these two well-known Force based organizations within Star Wars. The Expanded Universe of Star Wars is home to many Force based organizations among whom are the Aing-Tii, the Baran Do, the Matauki, Rakata, the mystics of Voss, and many others. While the names of these

organizations might sound like nonsense to all but the most dedicated of Star Wars fans, they embody the point that Durkheim makes. The Force in the Star Wars galaxy does not belong to a certain individual, object, or animal. Nor is it the sole object of a single Force based organization. For the Jedi, it is the kyber crystal and the sacred spire within the Temple that are their holy objects and places. The original Sith had the planet of Korriban which they revered as the birth place of the Massassi, the place where they first became Force sensitive. The Rakata had the first infinity gate, an object that first awoke their latent Force potential. All of these groups and more have their own sacred totems and symbols, but they do not, as Durkheim said, make it solely about a certain place or image. All of their sacred sites and temples arise because they are an object or nexus of the Force. It is through these sacred objects and places that they all came to touch and interact with the Force of the Star Wars galaxy. While they might have their own traditions, just as the different religions and tribes of our own world do, they all stem from the Cosmic Force.

The other key point that Durkheim makes in the above quote is that the “god” is impersonal and diffused in a numberless multitude of things. This basic principle, in strikingly similar words, is how Yoda explains to Luke the nature of the Force. He describes it as being all around them, surrounding and binding them. Not only binding them to each other, but to ties that extend between them, the trees around them, and the rocks. The Force was found within all of these objects. The impersonal god diffused in a numberless multitude of things

⁶ Durkheim and Fields, 191.

as Durkheim described were similarly connected to the Living Force for Yoda. It was this knowledge of the Living Force that Yoda told Luke was what made him so powerful. Yoda in and of himself was quite simply just a 900-year-old hermit at that time, but, as he told Luke, he had a powerful ally in the Force. Much as people of our world draw strength, belonging, and purpose from their sacred objects, so too is this principle dramatically put forth in the Star Wars galaxy. While the galaxy of Star Wars might at first blush appear fantastical, we believe that it has uncanny way of taking these principles discovered by Durkheim and making them understandable in an incredibly exciting way.

Religious Differentiation- Consecration & Tattooing⁷

Continuing in our study of the Star Wars galaxy as we endeavor to explain the reality of man, our discussion now turns to the concept of a code or creed and its ties to the Durkheimian conception of the Sacred and Profane.

Durkheim describes the consecration of ideas by saying:

Just as society consecrates men, so it also consecrates things, including ideas. When a belief is shared unanimously by a people, to touch it—that is, to deny or question it—is forbidden, for the reasons already

⁷ Star Wars material in this section sourced from: “Sith Tattoo”; “Force Wars”; “Je’daii Order”; “The Force”; “Sith Order”; “Jedi Code,” all from *Wookieepedia*.

stated... Even the peoples most enamored of free thinking tend to place on principle above discussion and regard it as untouchable, in other words, sacred.⁸

In the reading of this passage from Durkheim’s *Elementary Forms*, it is striking how incredibly similar to the Star Wars universe it can be seen to be. Durkheim in the quote above discusses how the belief that something is sacred can be tied to something more than just a physical object, it can be attached to even an idea. In the Star Wars galaxy this is found within the concept of the Jedi Code. The Jedi Code states:

Emotion, yet peace.
Ignorance, yet knowledge.
Passion, yet serenity.
Chaos, yet harmony.
Death, yet the Force.

The Jedi Code originated with the founding of what would come to be known as the Jedi Order on the planet of Tython. It was on Tython that one of the oldest collection of force sensitive cultures arose. This culture, originally known as Je’daii, lived and worked on Tython, relatively unknown to the rest of the galaxy, meditating on and studying the Force as they understood it. The Je’daii perceived in the Force two aspects which they called Ashla (the light side of the Force) and Bogan (the dark side of the force.) The Je’daii saw these aspects of the Force as existing in balance with one another, neither one dominating or

⁸ Durkheim and Fields, 215.

overtaking the other. All of this changed though when an event known as the Force Wars occurred. The Force Wars was an invasion of the planet Tython by the only other advanced race at the time, the Rakata. The Rakata were a race that had steeped themselves in the dark side of the Force and used its energies to fuel their galactic conquest. When they came to Tython, the Je'daii were forced to defend themselves, with many of the members coming to rely on what they knew as Bogan to fight the invaders. While the Je'daii were able to repel the invaders, the members of their order who had strong embraced Bogan became tainted after the conflict with the Rakata and began to attack members of their own order. The Je'daii Order endured, but was irrevocably broken, casting out the followers of Bogan from the planet, the remaining members renamed themselves Jedi, and created their code.

The Jedi created their code out of the intense desire to codify what their core beliefs were. The goal of the Jedi code in turn was to set apart their beliefs from that of all other Force based organizations they had come into contact with at that time. The Jedi strived earnestly to embrace the aspects of Ashla in order that they might never again experience a schism like that which the Force Wars had caused. In essence, they did just as Durkheim said a society would do, they consecrated the very idea of Ashla into a written word and mantra. This code would then endure for over 30,000 years, changing very little during that time. It was this code which every Jedi apprentice memorized and meditated upon when they joined the Order. It was this mantra that Jedi repeated to

themselves in times of great hardship. It was this idea that Yoda passed on to Luke during his own training, albeit in a simpler form since Luke had had no contact with the Order. Luke asked Yoda how he would know the Light from the Dark to which Yoda responded, "You will know when you are calm, at peace, passive. A Jedi uses the force for knowledge and defense, never for attack."⁹ Thousands of years later, Yoda is still passing on the principles of the Jedi Code to his final student. Much as the Jedi order codified concepts and ideas, the Sith, too, created things unique and distinct to their order, and it is to them that we turn to in the next section of this paper.

Another of example of Durkheimian, elementary religious forms comes through the discussion of markings and tattoos upon the body. Durkheim describes this idea by saying:

The best way of testifying to oneself and others that one is part of the same group is to place the same distinctive mark on the body. Proof that such is indeed the *raison d'être* of the totemic image is that, as I have shown, it does not try to copy the appearance of the thing it is considered to represent... The purpose of the image is not to represent or evoke a particular object, but to testify that certain number of individuals share the same moral life.¹⁰

⁹ Lucas, *Star Wars. Episode V, The Empire Strikes Back*.

¹⁰ Durkheim and Fields, 234.

Nowhere in Star Wars is this concept more clearly visible than in the tattoos of members of the Sith Order. In particular, the Sith Darth Maul the secondary antagonist from *Episode I*, dramatically and visually demonstrated his dedication to the Sith Order by covering his entire body with Sith tattoos. In the climactic battle at the conclusion of *Episode I*, the Sith are revealed to be operating again in the galaxy, and Darth Maul's identification as Sith stems largely from the ritual tattoos in which he had adorned himself and their connection to the Sith Order.

For much of galactic history, members of the Sith Order utilized a unique tattooing process to set themselves apart from other force users and in particular other Dark Side force users. This was done in large part to indicate to the galaxy at large that the bearers of the tattoos were set apart from all other Force organizations, and could trace their lineage in the Force to the original Sith Lords. This process originated with the species known as the Sith, from which the order so well known in the films drew much of its inspiration, including its very name. To give the importance of this fact some context, some Star Wars history should be explored.

Following the Force Wars on Tython, the defeated Je'daii who chose to embrace Bogan fled to the far reaches of the galaxy, eventually arriving on a planet known as Ziost. It was there that they discovered the Sith species, a primitive alien race which had also embraced the use of Bogan. Noticing the tattoos which the native Sith species marked themselves with to delineate their clans, the fallen Je'daii tattooed

themselves in a similar fashion, utilizing the venom of an insect native to Ziost, and used their mastery of the Dark Side to enforce their domination over the native Sith species. It was through this domination that the dark Je'daii came to call themselves Sith Lords, the enforced rulers of the Sith species.

For the thousands of years that made up its existence, virtually every Sith Lord would possess some form of Sith tattoo to indicate their connection and lineage to this original fallen Je'daii. It was a crucial part of the indoctrination process, and many aspiring Sith considered it a mark of pride to bear the tattoos upon their body, for it was the purest expression of their dedication, as Durkheim said, to the idea of a particular moral life. While this "moral" might have been a dark one, it is symbolic of much of what the Sith Order sought to embody.

It is this connection, going thousands of years into Star Wars history which makes Darth Maul's tattoos so impactful. For centuries, following the retreat of the Sith Order into hiding, the followers of the Sith way had kept their tattoos in easy to conceal places so as to not draw overt attention to themselves. But, as Palpatine began his machinations to destroy the Jedi, which makes up the plot of the prequel films, Darth Maul is the harbinger of this coming threat. Brazenly revealing his fully tattooed face as he duels both Qui-Gon and Obi-Wan, Maul stands as a testament to the return of the Sith Order. Qui-Gon himself says as much when he gives his report on the incident with Maul on Tatooine to the Jedi Council. He simply says, "...my only conclusion can be that it

was a Sith Lord.”¹¹ Even thousands of years after the first wielders of Bogan tattooed themselves, it still only takes the very sight of the marks for a Jedi to know that it is a Sith which they face, and not some pretender foe. It is much like what Durkheim said in his study of religion in our own galaxy. Those distinctive marks upon Darth Maul’s face said more than any other pronouncement could have about Darth Maul’s belonging to the Sith Order. Maul did not have to espouse the Sith code or announce his allegiance to the Dark Side; the marks on his face made all of that self-evident.

The Soul¹²

As we continue our discussion linking Durkheim and Star Wars, we would like to now turn to Durkheim’s discussion of the soul. Durkheim describes the soul by writing:

Since no other souls but these exist, we arrive at the conclusion that, in general terms, the soul is none other than the totemic principle incarnated in each individual. Nothing about this derivation should surprise us. We already know that this principle is immanent in each member of the clan, and that by permeating individuals, it inevitably becomes individualized.... Since each

consciousness has its own form, the soul in each takes a distinct form.¹³

Here, we can see that as Durkheim discusses the nature of the soul, and how its acknowledgement is essentially an extension of the totemic principle at work in society, only in a distinct form, ties into a Jedi becoming “one with the Force” yet also manifesting as a Force Ghost.

Within Star Wars, a Force Ghost or Force Spirit, is an individual who, through deep meditation and training in the Light Side of the Force, has gained the ability to manifest their presence outside of their body, even following their own death. This ability is possessed only by those who follow the Light Side, though, and it comes from a Jedi’s ability to flow through and with the living Force, thereby enabling their souls to persist, even following death.

This ability is rediscovered by Jedi Master Qui-Gon Jinn following his death in his duel against Darth Maul. His meditations on the Light Side of the Force had helped him to rediscover this lost talent, and it helps to highlight many of Durkheim’s key points about the soul.

To begin, the Jedi are keen to point out, as Yoda does to Luke when he is training on Dagobah, that life and the Force surround everything and everyone in the galaxy. It is this life which creates the Force and gives a Jedi his or her power. Given this, it is clear that all living things, to some extent, possess a soul in accordance with Jedi philosophy. But it is thanks to a Jedi’s training that they are able to take the essence of their soul and

¹¹ Lucas, *Star Wars Episode I: The Phantom Menace*.

¹² Star Wars material in this section sourced from: “Force Ghost”; “Immortality,” all from *Wookieepedia*.

¹³ Durkheim and Fields, 251.

manifest it fully in a fashion much like Durkheim describes. The inability for users of the Dark Side to perform this action is deeply tied to how they approach and utilize the Force itself. Few Sith, if any, have ever truly understood what it means to embrace the Force. For the followers of Bogan, the Force is something to be dominated, and this is reflected in their ideology, where the Force is not something that is with you and around you; it is something to be dominated and used as a tool. This is most succinctly summed up in the simple expression used when members of each order would speak to others. When a Jedi spoke to anyone, regardless of their Force sensitivity, their parting words would often be, “May the Force be with you.” For the Sith, the parting comment would be, “May the Force serve you always.” Even this though, would only be spoken to other Sith, never to a non-Force sensitive.

We first see this ability to manifest the soul utilized by Qui-Gon in the Star Wars timeline when he cries out to Anakin as a disembodied voice as Anakin slaughters a tribe of Tusken Raiders, in very un-Jedi-like fashion to avenge the death of his mother. Qui-Gon cries out as a Force Spirit to try and stop Anakin, who sadly does not hear him.¹⁴ Yoda, in his meditations, does hear Qui-Gon, and he reaches out to him to learn how he was able to do such a thing. Here we see Durkheim’s principle at work of how certain people are able to see and commune with by souls “...by virtue of special powers they owe to either age or special

¹⁴ Lucas, *Star Wars. Episode II: Attack of the Clones*.

knowledge.”¹⁵ In the case of Yoda, he possesses both.

It was thanks to this revelation by Qui-Gon that Obi-Wan, Yoda, and even Anakin were able to present themselves as Force Spirits throughout the original trilogy of films. Obi-Wan appears to Luke as a disembodied voice as he runs the Death Star trench, telling to turn off his targeting computer and to instead use the Force. He appears again to him as a visible Spirit on the ice planet of Hoth, telling him to seek out Yoda on Dagobah. Finally, all three of these individuals appear before Luke on Endor following the defeat of the emperor.¹⁶ In each of these instances, the Force Spirit is shimmering, and tinted blue, definitely non-corporeal, but not quite immaterial either. They remain present, and readily identifiable in a distinct form which looks much like their bodies did originally in their own lives. It is this principle which so drives home Durkheim’s point. The Jedi freely admit that all life flows through the Force, but it is thanks to their meditation upon it, or their special power, that they are able to see and manifest as a Force Spirit before others. It is through their unity with the Force that a Jedi is able to realize their spirit’s own distinct role and presence within it, thus enabling them to persist on, guiding, advising, and communicating with those still alive.

The counterpoint to the Jedi’s ability to do this is strongly highlighted in the nature of the Sith. For millennia, the Sith had been attempting to find a method to secure eternal

¹⁵ Durkheim and Fields, 244.

¹⁶ Lucas, *Star Wars. Episode IV: A New Hope*; Lucas, *Star Wars Episode V: The Empire Strikes Back*; Lucas, *Star Wars. Episode VI: Return of the Jedi*.

life. This was the goal of many powerful Sith Lords throughout the history of Star Wars. Names such as Darth Vititate, Darth Nihilus, and even Darth Sidious from the films all had immortality as their goal. None of them ever succeed in attaining their desire. Those who even got close, such as Vititate and Sidious, only did so through the utilization of host bodies, never through the simple manifestation of their Force Spirit. It was an ability that, due to its very nature, was impossible for the Dark Side. This further serves to highlight Durkheim's point about how the soul is an incarnation of the totemic principle, a principle which the followers of the Dark Side have no understanding.

Religious & Magical Groups¹⁷

To bring our discussion to a close, we would like to make one final comparison between Durkheim's elementary forms and the Star Wars universe. It is this point that we believe truly ties these two methods of understanding humanity together. Durkheim discusses how religion itself, through all of its constituent parts, totem and churinga, tattoo and soul, comes to impact man. He does this by saying:

If religion protects man against the desire for self-destruction, it is not that it preaches the respect for his own person to him with arguments *sui generis*; but because it is a society. What constitutes this society

¹⁷ Star Wars material in this section sourced from: "Jedi Order"; "Sith Order"; "Rule of Two"; "Padawan," all from *Wookieepedia*.

is the existence of a certain number of beliefs and practices common to all the faithful, traditional and thus obligatory. The more numerous and strong these collective states of mind are, the stronger the integration of the religious community, and also the greater its preservative value. The details of dogmas and rites are secondary. The essential thing is that they be capable of supporting a sufficiently intense collective life.¹⁸

In particular, this quote can be tied to how Durkheim's discussion around the integrative force of religion plays itself out in the nature of the two largest Force organizations in the Star Wars galaxy, the Jedi and the Sith.

Within the Star Wars universe, the Jedi and Sith are the two primary collective bodies of Force users. There are a variety of others, but none have been as long lasting or as impactful to the Star Wars galaxy as a whole as these two groups have been. The key point we would like to draw out of this is how the nature of the Jedi and the Sith, and their status as a religion versus a cult or magic society, respectively, is played out in the work of the Star Wars films and the expanded universe literature.

To begin, the Jedi can be looked upon as what Durkheim would call a religion. They possess many things that have been discussed in this paper and have been discussed in papers written previously, that mark them as operating in what Durkheim would call a religious fashion. Whether it is

¹⁸ Durkheim and Fields, 170.

the nature of their initiation rites, their use of totem and churinga in the lightsaber, the connection to the Force itself which is the source of their power, their ability to channel or present the spirit, the possession of their Code, or a myriad of other factors, they possess many of the hallmarks of a religious group. The sheer longevity and continuity of the Jedi order is what we wish to highlight. In the Star Wars galaxy, the Jedi order has existed, nearly continuously, for over 5,000 years. It was of virtually one mind for much of its existence, and acted as a unifying force not only for its own members, but also for the Galactic Republic, of which it operated as *de facto* guardians. This is evident in their very symbol, wherein the number nine representing unity to the early Je'daii was expressed in eight spokes joining together to form one new whole. Not only did this symbol remain integral to the Jedi philosophy, it also came to be adopted by the Republic they had so steadfastly guarded for thousands of years.

The Jedi Order was incredibly integrated, and stressed this integration throughout its lifetime. It possessed a tireless dedication to the Jedi Code, and the training and meditation needed to make that code a reality. From a young age, Jedi trainees would be paired with a Master, who would then take that trainee into every aspect of their life, with the trainee becoming what is known as a Padawan. The Padawan sleeps, eats, trains, even goes on missions with the Master as they continue their training together. Their bond becomes incredibly strong, and it is ultimately the Master who presents his Padawan for the initiation rites into Knighthood. If the

Padawan passes, he or she then becomes a Knight, and is allowed to take on their own trainee, who when they ascend to Knighthood qualifies the elder Knight for the rank of Master. The entire process is geared toward integrating the Padawan into the ideals and lifestyle of the Jedi. The bond between Master and Padawan is incredibly strong, and it leads to, as Durkheim might say, a rather intense collective life for members of the order. It is this collective strength which has allowed the Jedi order to function for as long as it has, and to endure even the most arduous of trials. They stand in stark contrast to the Sith Order.

The Sith Order is a group of Dark Side Force users that have very little bonding them together other than their lust for power. The various forms their order has taken have been marked by internal strife, and near destruction several times over. Their very birth came from the schism of the Force Wars discussed earlier in this paper, and their existence has been anything but stable, continuous, or peaceful. From the fall of several Sith Empires, to their near extinction that resulted in the rule of two, wherein only two Sith could ever exist, one Master and one Apprentice, they are the near antithesis of what the Jedi Order represents. The Apprentice exists only to usurp and ultimately kill the Master, and it is this cycle which has brought the Sith to near destruction multiple times over. For the Sith, there are no truly strong collective states which serve to protect them or their members. The legacy of the Sith has been one of pain and fracture, and is more akin to those who use magic for Durkheim than a true religion.

The best way to elucidate this is to define exactly what Durkheim considers to be a church, and how that ties into religion. For Durkheim, “Religious beliefs proper are always shared by a definite group that professes them and that practices the corresponding rites.”¹⁹ He then goes on to say, “A society whose members are united because they imagine the sacred world and its relations with the profane world in the same way, and because they translate this common representation into identical practices, is what is called a Church.”²⁰ Given this definition, it is clear through all that we have discussed that the Jedi fit this description most strongly. The Sith on the other hand, fall most strongly into what Durkheim would call magic. He describes magic by saying:

Granted, magic beliefs are never without a certain currency. They are often widespread among broad strata of the population, and there are even peoples where they count no fewer active followers than religion proper. But they do not bind men who believe in them to one another and unite them into the same group, living the same life. *There is no Church of magic.*²¹

It is clear that utilizing these Durkheimian definitions we can sort the Jedi and Sith into religion and magic, church and non-church. The Jedi’s focus on uniting and the Master/Padawan training plan showed their

dedication to their code, and their commitment to Ashla, the Light Side of the Force. On the opposite end of the spectrum, the Sith Order sought only power, and would kill their own without a second thought if it meant they could secure victory or safety. As mentioned above, this became embodied in their Rule of Two, wherein an Apprentice existed only to one day usurp and kill their Master.

This theme of religion versus magic is highlighted throughout the entire Star Wars saga, and its catalyst is found in *Episode VI* where Darth Vader sacrifices himself to save his son Luke, and in turn redeems himself as Anakin, the Chosen One of the Force. The Sith, on the other hand, take the survival of the fittest, Herbert Spencer approach. The whole goal behind the Rule of Two was to produce an apex Sith, one who, by virtue of their very survival, did so because of their ability to dominate and defeat all that had come before. The films made it clear who the ultimate victor was, and that balance would always return, but the parallels even here remain fascinating.

Conclusion

Ultimately, we have found it incredibly interesting how time and again the Star Wars galaxy has become a place where the ideas of Durkheim and others can be seen at work in a variety of fascinating ways. Seeing the Jedi Order as a religion and the broader Star Wars galaxy as a whole, not from the traditional point of view, but from Durkheim’s, has allowed us to see Star Wars in an entirely new light. It is our hope that this paper will, much as Durkheim hoped to

¹⁹ Ibid., 41.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid., 42.

do with his own original work in *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, help those understand the reality of humankind today through a lens they might not have expected to look through. As Durkheim said, "...religion was able to be the womb in which the principal seeds of human civilization have developed."²² Durkheim found the evidence of this birth of civilization of aboriginal Australia. Ultimately, we think one can find evidence of this same birth in the galaxy of Star Wars. Its status as a cultural icon, a juggernaut of astounding proportions whose value is in the billions of dollars did not become what it is today purely by happenstance. It was able to tap into something primal within people, something that spoke to individuals the world around regardless of nationality or creed. That something was the elementary forms of religious life.

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²² Durkheim and Fields, 224–25.

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