

Magazine

Have Jedi created a new 'religion'?

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EPA

Followers of Jediism are aiming to build a belief system that goes beyond the Star Wars films. But does it amount to a new religion?

It began as a joke at the expense of statisticians. In the UK's 2001 Census, 390,127 people - or 0.7% of the population - described themselves as Jedi. A question on religious belief had been

asked for the first time in a census and Jedi - from the cloak-wearing, lightsaber swishing rebels in the Star Wars films - was a tongue-in-cheek response.

It was a post-modernist Star Wars joke by atheists. Or so many assumed. But for some the force was strong.

An ideas festival at Cambridge University this weekend will look at how new "religious movements", such as Jediism, the Indigo Children and Wicca, have expanded online. And in the case of Jedi, how they have developed ever-more complex doctrines and scriptures.

What might have started as an intellectual exercise by fans adding to the movies and filling in the gaps, has become an attempt to build a coherent religious code.

Beth Singler, a researcher in the Divinity Faculty of Cambridge University, estimates that there are about 2,000 people in the UK who are "very genuine" about being Jedi. That's roughly the same number as the Church of Scientology, she says. Jediism is not a joke for them but an inspiration. They don't believe in "A long time ago in a galaxy far, far away...", says Singler quoting the opening text that fills the screen of Star Wars. "It's somewhere between metaphor and literal truth."

2011 England and Wales census: 176,632 people answered "Jedi" to the question, "What is your religion?"

"Feel the force" has become a rather tired cliché. But behind it is a New Age mysticism similar to many of the "holistic" ideas that emerged in the 1960s and 70s. "The Force is what gives a Jedi his power," says Obi-Wan Kenobi, played by Alec Guinness, who initiates young men into Jedi tradition. "It's an energy field created by all living things. It surrounds us and penetrates us. It binds the galaxy together."

The Jedi belief system is a patchwork quilt of Taoism, Buddhism, Catholicism and Samurai, says Singler. Often the ideas offer a simple dualism of good and evil, light and dark. "Fear is the path to the dark side," Yoda tells Anakin Skywalker. "Fear leads to anger. Anger leads to hate. Hate leads to suffering. I sense much fear in you."

Star Wars creator George Lucas never intended to start a "religion", she says. "Most Jedi don't see him as a guru in the same way that L Ron Hubbard is in Scientology."

Many Jedi have moved away from the Star Wars stories. The Temple of the Jedi Order in the US has three tenets - focus, knowledge and wisdom. "The philosophical and theological considerations of Jediism are not so much from Star Wars as from the inspirations behind Star Wars," says "Akkarin" aka Michael Kitchen, of the Temple of the Jedi Order, a spokesman for the Temple. Star Wars was based on the mythological ideas put forward by the writer Joseph Campbell, who in turn was influenced by thinkers such as Carl Jung, Alan Watts, and Jiddu Krishnamurti. "None of them is given any sort of reverential treatment as saints," Kitchen says. "We study only their ideas, not the person themselves."

How many Jedi are there?



- Australia - 65,000
- Canada - 9,000

- Czech Republic - 15,070
- England and Wales - 176,632

Source: 2011 census data

Patrick Day-Childs, a 21-year-old video games journalist in Southampton, is a council member of the UK's Church of Jediism. The Church has 200,000 people around the world who are active online, he says, although not all are necessarily believers. Day-Childs first joined when he was 14 for a joke but he says the more he looked into it, the more it made sense. "I use it every single day of my life," he says. It is both calming and inspiring.

Jediism permits people to have more than one religion. But Day-Childs having spent time looking at other faiths found Jediism was the only one that fitted him. "It's an actual religion, not just about fandom. At its absolute core it's about helping people." Unlike many older faiths, there is no divine being. He feels that the ancient religions are losing relevance. But because Jediism embraces technology and science it appeals to a new audience. The Church's founder, Daniel Jones, has written scriptures that go beyond Star Wars, instead dealing with how a Jedi should live. The doctrine has occasionally proved controversial. In 2009 Jones was **thrown out of a Tesco store** for refusing to remove his Jedi hood. He said he felt humiliated. At that time the hood was required in public places.

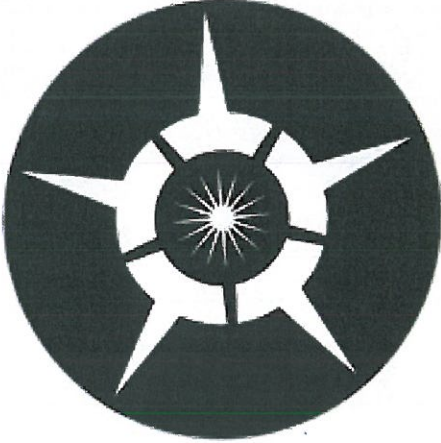
But Jedi doctrine has since changed so that children can no longer demand it's their right to wear the hood at school. Education is too important to Jedi for that, Day-Childs says. However the hood can still be useful for young Jedis who are anxious in public, he says.



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Temple Of The Jedi Order: Church Of Jediism



We are not a community of Star Wars roleplayers, but a church of a genuine religion, Jediism. The Jedi at this site are not the same as those portrayed within the Star Wars franchise. Star Wars Jedi are fictional characters that exist within a literary and cinematic universe.

...and sincerely believe in its

...embrace Jediism as a real living, breathing

TEMPLE OF THE JEDI ORDER

People who join must learn key tenets of the faith. The Church has a code made up of five statements, one of which reads: "There is no Passion there is Serenity - We can like things but we must not become materialistic and obsessed by them."

There are no physical Jedi temples. So why join what is essentially a big online forum? George D Chryssides, author of *The Study of Religion*, compares it to the reason why people join different political parties. In the end it comes down to community.

For Mark Vernon, a former priest, psychotherapist and writer, the Jedi story has real power. "The reason it's so powerful and universal is that we have to find ourselves. It's by losing ourselves and identifying with something greater like the Jedi myth that we find a fuller life."

Who are the Jedi?



Jedis Obi-Wan Kenobi (Ewan McGregor) and Qui-Gon Jinn (Liam Neeson) in Star Wars: The Phantom Menace

- First seen in the 1977 film *Star Wars*, they are an order of warrior monks who serve as "the guardians of peace and justice in the galaxy" and embrace the mystical Force. The film's hero Luke Skywalker is mentored in the ways of the Jedi first by Obi-Wan Kenobi, and in the film's sequel, *The Empire Strikes Back* (1980) by the only surviving Jedi master, Yoda.
- The third film in the trilogy, *Return of the Jedi* (1983), sees Skywalker take on, defeat and

redeem Darth Vader, Obi-Wan's former pupil, a former Jedi who went over to "the dark side" of the Force.

- The second trilogy of Star Wars, beginning with *The Phantom Menace* (1999) deals with the rise of the young Darth Vader, who - it is believed by a Jedi master - is the "chosen one" of a Jedi prophecy; Subsequent films deal with how Vader grows up to be seduced by the dark side, and how he helps the evil Palpatine hunt down and destroy most of the Jedi.

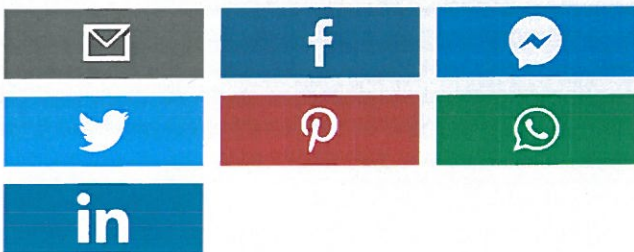
The Anglican Bishop of Manchester, the Right Reverend David Walker, says Jediism is another way that people look to give meaning to their lives. Unlike the metaphysical religions, which have an element of God "and speak to something beyond", other faiths, like Jediism, are a code for living,. Like a lot of codes for living, he suspects that Jediism is about people living happier, more fulfilling lives, while also containing an element of altruism.

One of the central questions is, at what point does a belief system become a religion? For Bishop Walker it is a "very difficult question" but he puts forward a few hunches. It has to be about bettering society and altruism, he says. There needs to be a significant number of adherents, and, crucially, it will need to have been around for a long time. "We'd want to look at the Jedi for quite some decades before accepting them, [as a religion]" he says. But he admits that there are no hard-and-fast rules.

Naysayers should perhaps pause for thought: "If you strike me down," Obi Kenobi tells Darth Vader, "I shall become more powerful than you could possibly imagine."

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