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**From Jesus Christ to Jedi Knight –
validity and viability of new religious
movements in late modernity**

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From Jesus Christ to Jedi Knight – validity and viability of new religious movements in late modernity

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Abstract

In 2001, a widely distributed email urged people to indicate 'Jedi' (from the movie Star Wars) as their religious affiliation on the National Census to be undertaken that year. The email, which may have originated from a prank, stated that if large enough numbers of people declared an affiliation to Jedi, the government would be forced to include it as a religion in future censuses. More than 70,000 Australians and 390,000 Britons heeded the call to action and recorded Jedi as their religion in the 2001 census.

While the majority of people claiming affiliation to Jediism probably did so in a spirit of fun and/or rebellion, research suggests there are members of society who take the 'religion' quite seriously.

The introduction and establishment of new religious beliefs once reliant on migration or trade is now facilitated by a global sharing of ideas through mass media and communications technology. Using Jediism and the events surrounding the 2001 National Census in Australia, Britain and New Zealand as examples, this paper explores the legality of new religious movements and; the question of whether the study of a religion based on popular culture can provide relevant discourse on late modern religious environments, attitudes, and participation or if it should simply be dismissed as a passing fad.

The results of this research will contribute to the body of knowledge relating to changes in religious affiliation in Australia.

Keywords: New Religious Movements; religious affiliation; popular culture; Jedi; census.

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Religious Affiliation in Australia

Many nations do not collect information about the religious affiliation of their citizens and in some, most notably the USA, asking for this information is prohibited by law (US Census Bureau, 2004). In Australia, however, we are able to establish a good understanding of religious affiliation from data collected every five years by the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) in the national census. The collection and analysis of data relating to the community's religious affiliation provides information that is useful beyond statistical and administrative purposes. The religious affiliation of the community also serves as a "useful indicator of aspects of the cultural diversity of Australia's society" (ABS, 2005 p.3). The data collected since the first national census in 1911 provides the best indicator of changes to the stated religious affiliations of Australians who completed the survey.

Until 1996, Anglicanism and Catholicism dominated the religious affiliation of Australians with more than 50 percent of the population indicating identification with one of these two religions (ABS, 2004b; Bouma, 2002). Since the end of World War II, there has been a gradual decline in affiliation with Christian denominations, notably, Anglican, Methodist (the third largest religion in Australia), Presbyterian and Congregational (now known as the Uniting Church). In 1996, the continued decline of numbers reached the point where, for the first time in Australian census history, totals from three Christian religions were required to make up 50 percent of the Australian population's affiliation (ABS, 2003; Bouma, 2002).

Contributing to the changes in the composition of Australia's religious landscape has been the increase in the diversity of religious beliefs that originated from the traditions and cultures of other nations, and new religious movements (NRMs) that have no traditional or cultural links to other world religions.

The introduction and establishment of new religious beliefs and movements in Australia was once reliant on migration or trade, but now flourishes by means of a global sharing of ideas through mass media and communications technology (Bouma, 2002). This phenomena is consistent with the fragmentation of relationships and identity which is generally accepted to be a condition of late modernity (Sherkat and Wilson, 1995)

The proliferation, over time, of 'imported' and new religions prompted the development by the ABS in 1996 of the *Australian Standard Classification of Religious Groups* to be used for "the collection, storage and dissemination of all Australian statistical and administrative data relating to religious affiliation" (ABS, 2005 p.2). The document classifies religious affiliation into seven broad groups: Buddhism; Christianity; Hinduism; Islam; Judaism; Other Religions; and No Religion. Second and third level categories provide narrower breakdowns of these broad groups (ABS, 2005). The classifications were developed using

extensive research of Australian and overseas literature, employment of statistical principles and techniques relating to statistical classification, and analysis of existing data relating to the religious profile of Australia (primarily data from the 1991 Census of Population and Housing). This was supported and enhanced by information and advice from academics and religious experts, and by consultation with community and religious groups interested in this topic (ABS, 2005 p.3).

The classifications recorded by the ABS number more than 1,800. While the majority of these belief systems (1430) are in some way related by means of "similar religious beliefs; similar religious practices; and/or cultural heritage" (ABS, 2005 p.5), there are a further 347 that claim a religious belief that has no direct connection to a traditional group, but are given a counting code

for operational purposes to facilitate the coding of responses such as inadequately described religious affiliations, which present particular problems in that they cannot be allocated one particular religious group, narrow group or broad group code (ABS, 2005 p.10).

The recognition of the validity of religious movements is a serious task involving extensive research and consultation, and is made especially difficult when attempting to assess new movements that have no legal or doctrinal ties to existing religions.

In 2001 a series of events surrounding one such uncategorised belief system and the National Census to be held that year, commanded attention from media and governments in Australia and internationally. Using this belief system and the events surrounding the 2001 National Census as examples, this paper explores the legality of new religious movements and; the question of whether the study of a religion based on popular culture can provide relevant discourse on late modern religious environments, attitudes, and participation or if it should simply be dismissed as a passing fad. It is my contention that far from being a passing fad, the religion and events explored in this paper exemplify a movement and a situation that were indicative of right time, right place and right religion.

The Census, the law and the Jedi

In early 2001 a global email campaign was launched encouraging Australian, British and New Zealand citizens to indicate their religious affiliation in their National Census' to be held that year, as 'Jedi Knight' (Natchers, 2001). The Jedi, conceived and popularised in George Lucas' Star Wars movie series, are heroic, peacekeepers possessing supernatural powers said to come from 'The Force' (Brother.John, 2006).

In May of that year, the ABS released a statement responding to media reports that it might fine people who, in response to the global email campaign, stated their religion as Jedi Knight in the upcoming 2001 Census (ABS, 2001). The campaign, which started as a prank, drew similar responses from the Office for National Statistics in Britain and Statistics New Zealand (Mikkelson and Mikkelson, 2001; ONS, 2003; Unknown, 2001).

The possible of legal consequences did not deter 390,000 (0.70%) of Britains (ONS, 2003), 71,000 (0.37%) of Australians (Bouma, 2002) and, 53,000 New Zealanders (Perrott, 2002) who heeded the 'call to action' and indicated a religious affiliation to Jediism.

Google Groups [Web](#) [Images](#) [Video](#) [News](#) [Maps](#) [more »](#) [Advanced Search](#)

[alt.games.jedi-knight](#) > [Do you want to be JEDI?](#)

From: Natchers - [view profile](#) Not yet rated
Date: Fri, Apr 6 2001 6:11 am [show options](#)

As some of you may know there is a census coming around on August the 7th [UK Only].

For those who don't know, a census is where the government collates general information about its residents (number of people living in your house, religion, etc)

If there are enough people, who put down a religion that isn't mentioned on the census form it becomes a fully recognised and legal religion. It usually takes about 10,000 people to nominate the same religion.

It is for this reason that it has been suggested that anyone who does not have a dominant religion to put "Jedi" as their religion.

Send this on to all your friends and tell them to put down "Jedi" on their census form. And rememberIf you are a member of the Jedi religion then you are by default a 'Jedi Knight'.

So if this has been your dream since you were 4 years old.... Do it because you love Star Wars, If not..... then just do it to annoy people.

"May the Force be with you!"

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Despite the number of responders, the three governments refused to recognise Jediism as a religion in its own right. The reason cited by the ABS was that the Jedi religion did not fit within the definition of a religion as established in a landmark case in 1993 when the High Court recognised the Church of the New Faith (Scientology) as a religion (Solomon, 1983). The ruling stated in part:

For the purposes of the law, the criteria of religion are twofold: first, belief in a Supernatural Being, Thing or Principle; and second, the acceptance of canons of conduct in order to give effect to that belief, though canons of conduct which offend against the ordinary laws are outside the area of any immunity, privilege or right conferred on the grounds of religion (ABS, 2005 p.4)

The definition has been simplified and clarified by the ABS (2005 p.4)

A religion is regarded as a set of beliefs and practices, usually involving acknowledgment of a divine or higher being or power, by which people order the conduct of their lives both practically and in a moral sense.

While the majority of people claiming affiliation to Jediism probably did so in a spirit of fun and/or rebellion, there are members of society who take the 'religion' quite seriously (Perrott, 2002). The High Court's definition provides a framework from which to explore the legality and validity of the Jedi religion.

Evidence suggesting religious validity of Jediism is found on a number of Jedi religion websites that bring together a loosely-bound group of followers from countries around the globe, including Australia. The Temple of the Jedi Order (<http://templeofthejediorder.org/>), a registered non-profit organisation in Texas, USA describes itself as a "religion and a community" (Brother.John, 2006) and presents comprehensive canons including: a *Code*; *The 16 Teachings of the Jedi*; information that details how to become a Jedi; a *Creed*; and an *Oath* (Brother.John, 2006).

Validity and legality of Jediism under Australian law may be tested by contrasting the above canons against the two criteria of the 1983 legal precedent. The first criterion, which demands "belief in a Supernatural Being, Thing or Principle" (ABS, 2005) is addressed in two of the *16 Teachings of the Jedi*:

Jedi feel the Living Force flowing around them, they are spiritually aware of the Force, and are sensitive to its energy and its fluctuations and disturbances

Jedi believe in destiny and trust in the will of the Force, they accept the fact that what seems to be random events are not random at all, but the design of The Force of Creation at its deepest level. Each living creature has a purpose, understanding that purpose comes with a deep awareness of The Force (Brother.John, 2006)

Support for the second criterion "the acceptance of canons of conduct in order to give effect to that belief" (ABS, 2005) is found in *The Jedi Oath*

I profess before all my fellow Jedi that I, (state your legal name) born on (date of birth), without reservation, choose the Jedi path, with all its duties and responsibilities. I shall do that which is right and profess my allegiance to the Force and its will. I vow to uphold the Jedi teachings, and to henceforth devote myself to the life of a Jedi (Brother.John, 2006).

Based on this information it would appear that Jediism, superficially at least, meets the criteria required by the High Court of Australia to be recognised as a legitimate religion, suggesting there may be other reasons behind the ABS decision not to recognise Jediism as a religion.

It is likely that an important factor in ABS's decision was the sudden surge in numbers of those claiming an affiliation with Jediism after the email 'call to action' which had no religious foundation, coupled with the fact that the religion, although based on ancient principles (Moyers, 1999), is a product of popular culture. The 'religion' promoted in the email campaign could have been any one of the categorised or uncategorised religions recognised by the ABS including *Wiccan/Witchcraft* (6135 Nature Religions), *Satanism* (6995 Misc. religions), *Jesus Freak* (2000 Christian) or even *Presleytarian* (0003 Not Defined). It is my contention, however that the large number of Jediism affiliates is indicative of a symbiotic relationship of the *right time, right place* and the unique characteristics of Jediism that made it the *right religion*. I further believe that an examination of these conditions will provide an insight to the current and future state of religious affiliation in Australia.

The right time

In his seminal work *The Sacred Canopy* (1967) Peter Berger, asserted that unless a religion operates in a monopolistic, state supported role its plausibility will eventually decline. Religious pluralism in the Modern era, he believed, would lead to fragmentation and from fragmentation to social irrelevancy. This idea was contested by Finke and Stark (1988) who proposed that increased pluralism would result in greater religious mobilisation.

Assertions that the effects of globalisation and modernisation - pluralism, disestablishment and fragmentation - would see the decline of religion have not been realised (Sherkat and Wilson, 1995). Rather than evidencing the inevitable secularisation that was predicted by early theorists, late modernity and globalisation has instead witnessed a decline in *ascriptive* religious affiliation (i.e. affiliation with the religion one was born into) in favour of *chosen* affiliations. The effects of choice on cultural consumption are described by Sherkat and Wilson (1995)

Our choices are structured by what we know about alternatives. Rationality is inherently bounded by information. Decisions are made on the basis of not only what is desired but what is known about alternatives. The impetus for change is new information about competing products (p.997-998).

Warner (1993) describes the collection, sorting and selection of this information as "a centrifugal process...on the basis of which identities are constructed" (p.1078). This 'centrifugal process' that results in dissemination of religious ideas is conducive to the establishment of new religions. Daniel Olsen (cited in Warner, 1993) posits

in a system where religious institutions comprehend not the whole society but subcultures, modernity, migration and mobility make it possible for people to found new religious associations that are at once self-selected and adapted to present circumstances (p.1060).

These 'new religious associations that are at once self-selected and adapted to present circumstances' are indicative of what Hammond (cited in Warner, 1993) describes as the "growing shift from *collective-expressive* church membership in the past to *individual-expressive* religious involvement - voluntary and independent of other social ties" (p.1075). Hammond's observations regarding 'voluntary and independent' religious affiliation are added to by Bouma (2002) who states that

a secular postmodern society is not anti-religious or even irreligious, but one where the religious and spiritual is less under the control of religious organizations. This reflects the postmodern sentiment, 'I believe but I do not belong' (p.22)

Bouma's claim is supported by data collected in the 2002 ABS General Social Survey, that revealed only 23 percent of the Australian population surveyed attended a church service in the three months prior to the survey (ABS, 2004a) compared with 75 percent who claimed affiliation with a religion in the 2001 National Census (Bouma, 2002). Acknowledging that there is a variety of sources from which people may receive information on matters of the spirit including the media, religious publications and the internet, it may be surmised that people are making their choices based on mediated information that 'fits' their increasingly individual requirements.

The mediated representation of religious messages is not a new phenomenon; the human interpretation of scripture as a source of authority is characteristic of most mainstream religions, however at a time when more people go to the movies than attend church (Kohn, 2005) implicit or explicit messages transmitted by popular culture have the potential to both inform and influence. Audiences may not be intentionally seeking information about religion however as Lynn Schofield Clark explains in relation to young people,

It's not that they're looking for religion, or even that they're interested in religion. They think religion may not be very important in their lives, but they still pick up understandings about religion from popular culture, in places like fantasy film (Kohn, 2005)

The right religion

'May the Force Be with You', a quote from the original Star Wars film released in 1977, was recently judged eighth in the 100 greatest movie quotes in American films of the past 100 years (*AFI's 100 Years...100 Movie Quotes*, 2005). The Force is described by Emfinger (2006) as

the White Current, or even simple magic, whatever appellation one chooses, they all describe the mystical energy field that permeates the universe surrounding everything and flowing through all life. [...] Throughout the history of the galaxy, for what seems like no rhyme or reason, certain civilizations, species, and individuals have been blessed with a unique affinity to the Force.

Jediism, like many of the more than 1800 categorised faiths (ABS, 2005) is an amalgam of beliefs that claims to originate from ancient roots

Jediism is both an old and new religion; we did the same thing that religions have done for thousands of years ... we assimilated spiritual teachings from other and ancient faiths. Taoism, Zen Buddhism, Mysticism, as well as the honourable martial art's philosophies; this spiritual mixture is potent. We call this fusion "Jediism" (Brother.John, 2006)

For those who seek more than a generalised understanding of The Force, the canons of the religion can be located on various internet sites found using a *Google* search. The Jedi Code transcends racial, class and gender boundaries by promoting universal values or sentiments (Murray, 2004) and, in the present climate of fear and uncertainty, may offer a panacea to the troubles that some see as being associated with mainstream organised religion

Jedi are the guardians of peace and justice throughout the World. Jedi use their powers to defend and protect, never to attack others. Jedi respect all life, in all it's forms, they are humble and live to serve all living things. For the good of others, Jedi seek to improve themselves through knowledge and wisdom, a journey that is never ends (*sic*) (Brother.John, 2006).

Also, the innocuous nature of the requirements for Jedi membership makes it, for some, a guilt free addendum to other religions as revealed on a Jedi blog site by an 'apprentice':

The Jedi teachings are the yellow brick road to modern day Christian living.

The teachings of the Bible are no less important, I dont (sic) mean to imply that. The Bible is timeless and to me, represents my Truth in this world. Where the Bible uses parables, the Jedi teachings use a direct approach. They coorelate (sic) with each other, going hand in hand, neither contradicting the other.

Being a Christian means I love the Lord and follow his Word, being a Jedi means I constantly seek knowledge and enlightenment. Jediism is the lit path to my ultimate goal: knowing my Saviour (*How can you be Christian and Jedi?? Would one not be lost to the other?*, 2006)

In an interview with Time Magazine, George Lucas, the director of the Star Wars series of films, stated that it was not his intention to instigate a new religious movement as a result of the inclusion of religious themes in Star Wars but rather to:

try to awaken a certain kind of spirituality in young people--more a belief in God than a belief in any particular religious system. I wanted to make it so that young people would begin to ask questions about the mystery [...] I think it's important to have a belief system and to have faith (Moyers, 1999).

The right place

While it may not have been Lucas's plan to instigate a new religion the Jedi phenomena is evidence that, intentional or unintentional, religious references in popular culture can have the effect of solidifying beliefs. In a market focussed on niche products designed to fit individual lifestyles and identities, popular culture provides currency and form to hybrid beliefs that may be established or implied through dialogue or actions awaiting interpretation by an audience. Lucas describes what he believes to be the attraction of the Jedi:

I'm telling an old myth in a new way. Each society takes that myth and retells it in a different way, which relates to the particular environment they live in. The motif is the same. It's just that it gets localized. As it turns out, I'm localizing it for the planet. I guess I'm localizing it for the end of the millennium more than I am for any particular place (Moyers, 1999).

This concept of localised globalisation is expanded upon by Giddens (1991) who explains:

modern social life [is] characterised by profound processes of the reorganisation of time and space, coupled to the expansion of disembedding mechanisms – mechanisms which prise social relations free from the hold of specific locales, recombining them across wide time-space distances (p.2).

It is not only new religious movements that benefit from this reorganisation of time and space; Kurtz (1995) provides examples of what may be perceived as positive outcomes for established religions and their affiliates as a result of these 'disembedding mechanisms':

Jews from around the world can now fax their prayers to the Wailing Wall in Jerusalem. Fortune tellers in China provide computer-generated astrological

charts. Telecommunications satellites link isolated religious communities at separate ends of the earth; American television offers its viewers Christian preachers and Buddhist teachers (p. 1)

The nations who have the most license in this disembodied, and yet interconnected, global environment are predominantly western in character and capitalist in their economic ideologies. “A defining feature of capitalism is that it requires commodification of goods and services – including religion” (Beyer, 1998 p.85).

Rational choice theory, posited by contemporary scholars suggests that the commodification of religion necessitates the use of ‘religious marketplace’ (Iannaccone, 1995; Kurtz, 1995; Sherkat and Wilson, 1995; Warner, 1993) or the ‘religious economy’ (Miller, 2002) as metaphors to describe and facilitate an understanding of the changes in religious affiliation that are occurring in western societies. Sherkat and Wilson (1995) go so far as to suggest that “the description of a marketplace consisting of freely choosing individuals and competitive organizations is a new paradigm in the sociology of religion” (1995 p.993).

However, it should be acknowledged that religion rarely expresses the culture of a society as a whole, but rather “the subcultures of its many constituents” (Warner, 1993 p.1047). It is proposed by Kurtz (1995) that

heterogeneous societies with multiple religious communities will develop a culture in which religion (even all religions represented in the society) constitute only a part of the culture, especially when there is a secular state [however] in societies with little institutional differentiation, religion and culture are often essentially the same eg Iran (p. 9).

Conclusion

Debate and discourse on the effects of popular culture on both new and old religions is fecund in contemporary society. The Dan Brown novel *The Da Vinci Code* gives new significance to the term ‘searching for meaning’ and has had the flow on effect of increasing interest in Christian religions, thereby enabling churches to present their viewpoints by engaging in a dialogue with curious, current and potential, adherents (Charles, 2004). Interest in other religious topics such as the Knights Templars and Gnosticism, both featured heavily in the book, has also increased (Charles, 2004).

The entertainment media industry is already onboard with idea of marketing religion. Brooks Barnes (2005) reports in *The Wall Street Journal* that television is “tapping into religion [with] the television industry’s answer to the cash-generating power of biblical stories put through a pop-culture spin cycle” (B1).

Data from the 2006 Australian census will be telling - we may never again see 70,000 people affiliating with Jediism, however, Possamai (Kohn, 2006) recently reported existence of another religion inspired by popular culture - Matrixism – that has been formed on the internet. With its implied religious undertones and cult following similar to Star Wars, given the right promotion Matrixism may well be the next internet ‘religion’ to find its way into a census controversy.

The inductive theories of secularisation were developed in the context of the modern era; a time that was hallmarked by positivism, and a confidence that what was known was correct and what was not known would eventually be known (Saunders and Franklin, 2006) however a defining aspect of late modernity is that the only certainty is that we are uncertain about a lot of things.

The challenges posed by Australia's increasingly diverse array of religious affiliations is acknowledged by Bouma (1992), who states

“while federal and state politicians praise Australia's multiculturalism, working out the extent of the provisions made to tolerate and permit the expression of highly diverse and occasionally mutually conflicting religious sub-communities is going to be challenging” (p.109)

The Jedi census controversy may be a one off event and the legitimacy of the Jedi as a religion may be questionable, however the continuing dilution of authority of Christian authority, the proliferation of new ways of articulating religious belief and the conditions of late modernity, set the scene for a repeat or similar scenario that will, once again, demand interpretation by government and society.

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