

Star Wars: Light and darkness on screen

By Thomas Froese

It is the foolish things of this world that can shame the wise and the weak that can upend the strong. This is how it was put a couple of millennia ago by the apostle, Paul when he foreshadowed this great reversal, this deep sorting out that will be known only fully in the hereafter.

But it is the story-tellers in the here-and-now, who often say the very same thing, and you would have to be blind or deaf or both not to see it in the new Star Wars movie, "Episode VII: The Force Awakens," which recently made it here to Uganda.

To his fantastic excitement, I took my young son, then later my wife, to watch the movie in a Kampala theatre. Shortly later, all five of us in the family, including my two daughters, watched the original three Star Wars movies from 1977 to 1980 and 1983 in our living room.

That is enough space viewing to make anyone delirious, but we are not alone. Worldwide, *The Force Awakens* has now brought in almost \$2b, more than half of that from outside of North America. It is quickly becoming one of the most successful shows in movie history, currently sitting in third place in gross sales.

People are watching, even if it is a pirated DVD so easily found on Kampala street-corners for a few shillings.

(By the way, you may be interested to know that five of the seven Star Wars movies have scenes shot in the African country of Tunisia.)

For those unfamiliar with the storyline, *The Force Awakens* is largely a clone of the first Star War movie, *A New Hope*, from 39 years ago. They have similar plot points and *The Force Awakens* includes several of the same actors from 1977 – a little older and wiser and fuller at the mid-sections from when *A New Hope* was first released when I was 12 years old.

In that first movie, young Luke Skywalker emerges out of obscurity to join the galactic rebellion to overthrow what is simply known as the "Empire," a corrupt and dark power structure. For Luke, nothing (even discovering his own true identity), comes easy.

Like Luke, rebels in subsequent episodes have only their dearest friends to rely on, and, of course, the Force, a mysterious power granted not to the self-sufficient, but to the hopelessly needy.

Interestingly, the Force is a mythological-religious concept that is boiled down to almost nothing. Four decades ago, producers George Lucas and Gary Kurtz, had long discussions about various religious philosophies when they wanted to bring forward a clear and easy theme that is expressed with the now iconic phrase, "May the Force be with you."

This phrase used by the rebels, actually comes from the Medieval Christian expression "May God be with you." It is a precursor to our modern phrase "good-bye," and in Medieval England, it was used to bestow safety in potential danger.

Which is not to say that Star Wars is a billboard for Christianity any more



Some of the characters in Star Wars, Episode VII: The Force Awakens



A scene from the movie. Five of the seven Star Wars movies have scenes shot in Tunisia

than it is for Zen Buddhism or its other religious influences. This sort of proselytizing would only make for both bad religion and bad movie-making.

It is to say, though, that this epic space opera has become hugely successful in part because it reflects common challenges of our own world. It also offers hope through the prism of faith, like Christianity, which, after all, has something to say about human abuse of power, about justice, about miracles and relying on divine power and about our everyday

choices.

The main players – starting with the innocent Luke Skywalker and the evil Darth Vader – must choose if they will align themselves with the powers of evil or good. They must choose if they will let their own anger and fear overtake their thinking, or if they will learn how to master their own harmful natures.

Their choices have outcomes, of course, and even though these outcomes are predictable, just like in our world, that does not make these choices any easier. Evil, after all, has

its allure. And, like in our own world, there is no middle ground.

In Star Wars, just when Luke or other rebel comrades think that the darkness is too onerous, when it threatens to suffocate with the stench of its Vader-like breath, that is when light still breaks through, even as light broke through the void and darkness at our world's beginning.

In Star Wars, that light comes often enough from a light-sabre, a weapon wielded by hand.

And how terrible the battle is when even (unbeknownst to them) sons

IMPORTANT LESSONS

■ Like Luke, rebels in subsequent episodes have only their dearest friends to rely on, and, of course, the Force, a mysterious power granted not to the self-sufficient, but to the hopelessly needy.

and daughters and fathers battle each other.

"Daddy, this is violent," said my oldest daughter at one point of our recent watching. "No it is not," said the youngest, her sister. And they are both right, because there is violence and then there is violence.

In Star Wars, the violence is of the sort that reminds me of another fantasy series known well by my children, C.S. Lewis' *Chronicles of Narnia*. At one point in these mythological stories, the Great Lion Aslan, the Messiah figure, lovingly warns Peter, the child-king with the slain, bloody wolf at his feet: "Peter, you must remember to always wipe your sword."

Yes, we live in world that is red in tooth and claw. Whether we like it or not, we are part of it. In the womb, we were suckled in the darkness and at our dying breath, each of us will return to the darkness of the grave, even as many of our days in-between are dark and violent.

Still, in this world, the light does pierce the darkness and it is here where we each make our choices.

You may be called a fool and weak for believing any of this. But this is the only way if you are going to have half a chance of getting out of it alive.

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