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Sacred Heroes Across Cultures: Religious Worldviews in *Journey to the West* and *Star Wars*

Across the globe, storytelling has long served as an outlet for people to express religious beliefs and moral values. Legendary narratives often elicit spiritual worldviews through the hero's journey, shaping how audiences interpret morality, purpose, and the relationship between earthly existence and a higher spiritual order. Two of the most influential mythic narratives of the modern era, *Journey to the West* (1986) and *Star Wars: Episode IV - A New Hope* (1977), exemplify how cinematic legends are formed through the lens of religious belief, making them both memorable and enduring within their cultures and beyond.

Despite their shared mythic elements, the two films portray heroism through fundamentally different spiritual lenses, in conjunction with distinct geographies, histories, and belief systems. These differences shape not only each narrative's moral structure but also the values embodied by their central heroes. By comparing *Journey to the West* (1986) and *Star Wars: Episode IV - A New Hope* (1977), this paper argues that each film represents its culture's religious worldview through the portrayal of its central hero. Sun Wukong reflects China's blended Buddhist, Daoist, and folk cosmology, while Luke Skywalker embodies a narrative shaped by Western, Christian-inflected ideas of good and evil through the Force. These comparisons reveal how each film transforms religious belief into a narrative framework that resonates deeply with its audience, helping explain why both stories became iconic in their respective cultures.

*Journey to the West* (1986) is set during China's Tang dynasty and presents a mythic narrative centered on the rise, fall, and transformation of Sun Wukong, the Monkey King. The story begins with his supernatural birth from a stone egg, immediately establishing him as a being of extraordinary power. Sun Wukong rapidly acquires immense strength, magical abilities, and martial skill, eventually declaring himself equal to the gods. His refusal to submit to celestial authority leads him to challenge the heavenly order, causing widespread disruption within the divine realm.

As a consequence of his rebellion, Sun Wukong is defeated and imprisoned beneath a mountain for five hundred years, a period that marks a turning point in his narrative. He is later released under strict conditions that bind him to a sacred journey westward. Throughout this journey, Sun Wukong encounters demons, spirits, and supernatural trials that repeatedly test his power, discipline, and obedience. While his physical strength remains central to the narrative, the journey emphasizes restraint, endurance, and moral growth. The progression of the story traces Sun Wukong's movement from unrestrained defiance toward purposeful action, framing his travels as a path shaped by spiritual obligation and personal transformation.

*Star Wars: Episode IV – A New Hope* (1977) is set in a fictional universe described as taking place “a long time ago in a galaxy far, far away.” The narrative centers on Luke Skywalker, a young man living a secluded and uneventful life on the desert planet Tatooine. Raised by relatives and far removed from the larger conflicts of the galaxy, Luke begins the story unaware of his connection to forces beyond his immediate surroundings. His days are defined by routine and longing rather than action or authority.

Luke Skywalker's circumstances begin to shift when he encounters figures tied to the growing rebellion against the Galactic Empire. Through these interactions, he is introduced to the Force, an unseen energy that shapes the balance of the universe. As the narrative unfolds, Luke leaves his home and becomes involved in a series of missions that place him in direct opposition to the Empire. Gradually, through his growing understanding of the cause and his emerging abilities, he participates in efforts to resolve conflict for the greater good through the use of the Force. The film concludes with Luke stepping into a vital role within the rebellion, marking his transition from isolation to purposeful engagement in a struggle that extends far beyond his former life.

The religious worldviews embedded within *Journey to the West* and *Star Wars: Episode IV - A New Hope* emerge most clearly through the moral structures that guide each hero's development. In *Journey to the West*, religion functions as a lived cosmology shaped by the interweaving of Buddhism, Daoism, and Chinese folk belief. Rather than prescribing strict doctrine, this cosmology emphasizes harmony, moral cultivation, and balance between the individual and the universe. Spiritual authority is distributed across an expansive supernatural bureaucracy populated by immortals, bodhisattvas, demons, and celestial officials, all of whom remain subject to moral consequence. Within this framework, spiritual progress is understood as a gradual process achieved through discipline, endurance, and ethical refinement rather than absolute judgment or moral finality.

This belief system shapes Sun Wukong's journey at every stage. Although his immense power distinguishes him from both humans and gods, his lack of discipline repeatedly brings him into conflict with the cosmic order. His punishment and forced participation in the pilgrimage reflect the idea that moral failure is addressed through correction rather than permanent

condemnation. Sun Wukong's suffering is meant to restrain excess, cultivate humility, and redirect his power toward moral purpose. As Timothy Richard notes, *Journey to the West* presents spiritual growth as a process in which the soul moves toward truth through trials that foster mercy, courage, and self-awareness, ultimately leading toward immortality (Richard). In this context, enlightenment is not achieved through conquest or dominance, but through endurance, restraint, and gradual moral refinement.

By contrast, *Star Wars* operates within a moral universe that reflects Western, Christian-influenced ideas of faith and moral opposition. The Force functions as an unseen spiritual presence that binds the galaxy together, but its power depends entirely on how it is used. Characters are consistently pushed to choose between the Light Side and the Dark Side, and these choices carry lasting consequences. Moral struggle in the film is not about gradual correction or restoring balance through suffering, but about resisting temptation and committing oneself to a clear ethical path. When characters give in to fear or anger, their failure threatens not only their own integrity but the stability of the wider galaxy. This emphasis on decisive moral choice creates a sharply dualistic worldview that stands in contrast to the corrective and cyclical moral order found in *Journey to the West*.

These contrasting belief systems become even more evident when examining each hero's origin. Sun Wukong is born from stone, a being shaped by cosmic forces yet unbound by destiny or prophecy. His power is neither inherited nor divinely granted but cultivated through rigorous Daoist practices and personal ambition. Despite his supernatural origins, Sun Wukong must earn spiritual legitimacy, and his early rebellion against heaven reveals the consequences of possessing great power without discipline. His story suggests that spiritual authority cannot be claimed through strength alone but must be justified through moral growth and self-restraint.

Luke Skywalker's origin takes a fundamentally different form. Though he begins as an ordinary, simple boy, his significance is gradually revealed through lineage, destiny, and guidance from spiritual mentors. From early in the narrative, Luke's connection to the Force is presented as innate rather than cultivated, positioning him as part of a larger cosmic plan that exists prior to conscious effort or personal achievement. This structure closely parallels Christian narratives of divine calling, particularly the biblical portrayal of Jesus as the Son of God, whose identity and purpose are established at birth rather than earned through self-discipline. Like these religious figures, Luke is not chosen because of mastery, but because of who he is and what he represents. His journey therefore centers less on the acquisition of power and more on the acceptance of moral responsibility and faith in his calling, reinforcing the idea that spiritual authority is bestowed through destiny rather than attained through self-cultivation.

In *Journey to the West*, demons function as part of a broader system of Chinese folk cosmology in which moral order is maintained through punishment and correction. These supernatural beings are not purely embodiments of evil, but figures whose actions disrupt cosmic harmony and therefore require restraint, discipline, or transformation. Justice is served through suffering, exile, or submission to spiritual authority, reinforcing a worldview in which wrongdoing is addressed through consequence rather than absolute moral condemnation. By contrast, *Star Wars* presents a sharply dualistic moral structure in which the Force is divided into the light and dark sides, often read as analogous to heaven and hell. The dark side, embodied most clearly by Darth Vader, actively seeks to corrupt rather than correct, attempting to lure Luke Skywalker away from the light through temptation and promises of power. This dynamic closely mirrors Christian narratives of moral testing, particularly the biblical account of Jesus Christ being tempted by Lucifer. Like Christ, Luke is confronted with the choice between

spiritual fidelity and moral compromise, and his resistance affirms a destiny defined by sacrifice and moral alignment rather than coercion or punishment.

Mentorship also reflects these differing religious assumptions. Sun Wukong's guidance under Tang Sanzang emphasizes compassion, restraint, and obedience rather than power or authority. Tang's moral influence tempers Sun Wukong's impulsive nature, reinforcing Buddhist values of patience, humility, and self-discipline. In contrast, Luke Skywalker's mentors, Obi-Wan Kenobi and Yoda, function as prophetic guides who encourage faith in an unseen higher power. Their instruction centers on belief, trust, and moral surrender, echoing Christian models of spiritual discipleship.

The contrast between the two narratives becomes most clear through the way each hero transforms over time. Sun Wukong's development is slow and cyclical, defined by repeated mistakes, punishment, and gradual correction. Although his physical strength and supernatural abilities remain largely the same, his understanding of how and when to use that power changes. Early in the story, his strength is driven by pride and defiance, but through suffering, discipline, and repeated instruction, he learns restraint and humility. His journey prioritizes wisdom over rebellion and moral discipline over dominance, ultimately redirecting his power toward collective spiritual purpose rather than personal glory. This pattern reflects Buddhist and Daoist beliefs in self-cultivation, where enlightenment is earned through endurance, self-mastery, and alignment with the cosmic order rather than bestowed outright (Clart).

Luke Skywalker's transformation, by contrast, follows a more linear path shaped by temptation and decisive moral choice. His growth is marked by moments in which he

must actively choose between fear and faith, anger and compassion. Each decision carries lasting consequences, reinforcing the idea that moral failure is not simply corrected over time but can permanently alter one's path. Luke's struggle is less about refining power and more about resisting corruption, particularly the pull of the Dark Side. His transformation culminates not in enlightenment, but in the acceptance of moral responsibility and the burden of choice. This trajectory reflects Western, Christian-influenced beliefs that emphasize purity, faith, and commitment to a righteous path, where salvation is tied to resisting temptation rather than earning spiritual authority through gradual cultivation.

Ultimately, the purpose of each hero reflects the religious worldview from which they emerge. Sun Wukong's journey culminates in enlightenment and restored harmony, emphasizing collective spiritual balance over individual triumph. His transformation serves the broader cosmic order, reinforcing the value of unity and moral cultivation. Luke Skywalker's purpose, by contrast, centers on salvation and restoring balance through moral opposition to evil. His actions underscore the belief that individuals possess both the capacity and obligation to confront darkness through faith and courage. As noted by the United Methodist Church, the phrase "May the Force be with you" closely parallels Christian liturgical blessings such as "Peace be with you," reinforcing the Force's function as a spiritual guide shaped by Western religious language ("Jedi Jesus").

Through their central heroes, *Journey to the West* and *Star Wars* translate deeply rooted religious worldviews into mythic narratives that continue to resonate across cultures. Sun Wukong embodies a tradition grounded in self-cultivation, karmic correction, and harmony, where spiritual authority is earned through discipline and moral growth. Luke Skywalker, by contrast, reflects a moral universe shaped by dualism, faith, and destiny, in which heroism is

defined by moral choice and resistance to evil. Together, these contrasting portrayals demonstrate how religion, when embedded within storytelling, shapes not only narrative structure but cultural understandings of heroism, morality, and spiritual purpose.



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