From Jesus Christ to Jedi Knight
Changing paradigms in the study of religious affiliation

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Abstract:
The religious beliefs, affiliation and participation of individuals can have a far-reaching impact on the wider community. Understanding and planning for future changes are vital for community and infrastructure development. Religion, once doomed to obscurity by secularisation theory, continues to play a vital role in community planning.

The continued vitality and social relevance of religious affiliation in secular, globalised late modernity has resulted in the questioning of secularisation theories and the appositeness of the Sacred Canopy metaphor that has framed much of the study of religious affiliation for more than thirty years. Contemporary scholars have suggested that the religious marketplace may be a more apt metaphor to describe the changing conditions of religious affiliation in fragmented, globalised consumer driven western societies.

My intention in this paper is to illustrate the relevance of the use of the marketplace metaphor to describe contemporary religious affiliation. Jediism, a belief system popularised by the Star Wars series of films, and its involvement in a prank that grew to international proportions, will be used to demonstrate the proposition.

Introduction
The religious beliefs, affiliation and participation of individuals can have a far-reaching impact on the wider community. Understanding and planning for future changes are vital for community and infrastructure development. After government, religious organisations are the largest providers of social support structures such as “schooling, health services, aged care services, and community support facilities and […] statistics are highly useful for planning these services” (Olsen cited in ABS 2001). Religion, once doomed to obscurity by secularisation theory, continues to play a vital role in community planning.
Peter Berger’s seminal metaphor of a *Sacred Canopy* framed much of the sociological study of religion from the late 1960’s (Kurtz 1995), describing an environment where a dominant, monopolistic religion blankets society and provides a “sheltering fabric of security and answers for both the profound and the mundane questions of life “ (Kurtz 1995: 12). Berger’s (1967) assertion was that unless a religion operated in a monopolistic, state supported role its plausibility would eventually decline, leading to fragmentation and fragmentation to social irrelevancy.

The continued vitality and social relevance of religious affiliation in secular, globalised late modernity has lead to the questioning of secularisation theory and the appositeness of the *Sacred Canopy* metaphor (Hadden 1987; Iannaccone 1995; Sherkat and Wilson 1995; Warner 1993). It has been suggested that the metaphor of a religious marketplace more appropriately describes the changing conditions of religious affiliation in fragmented, globalised consumer driven western societies (Iannaccone 1995; Kurtz 1995; Sherkat and Wilson 1995; Warner 1993).

My intention in this paper is to illustrate the relevance of the use of the marketplace metaphor to describe contemporary religious affiliation. Jediism, a belief system popularised by the Star Wars series of films, and its involvement in a prank that grew to international proportions, will be used to demonstrate the proposition.

**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 *(Information on Religion, 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: 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 2004; 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).

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 changes in society that are being wrought by these factors are producing scenarios that would have been inconceivable as little as fifty years ago. One such scenario involves a religion which was born in popular culture and, through the agents of globalisation, late modernity and consumerism, tested the limits of what should be counted as a religion affiliation.

**Jediism and the Census**

In May 2001 the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) released a statement responding to media reports that it might fine people who, in response to a global email campaign, indicated ‘Jedi’, - a religion conceived by director George Lucas and popularised in the *Star Wars* series of films - in answer to the question of their religious affiliation in the 2001 National Census (ABS 2001; Mikkelson and Mikkelson 2001; Natchers 2001).

The email campaign, which started as a prank (Mikkelson and Mikkelson 2001), drew similar responses from the *Office for National Statistics* in Britain, and *Statistics New Zealand* (Mikkelson and Mikkelson 2001; ONS, 2003). The ‘call to action’ resulted in 390,000 (0.70%) Britons (ONS, 2003), 71,000 (0.37%) Australians (Bouma 2002), and 53,000 New Zealanders (Perrott 2002) stating a religious affiliation to Jediism.

Despite the number of ‘Jedi’ responses in Australia and internationally, the three governments refused to recognise Jediism as a religion. The reason cited by the ABS
was that the Jediism did not fit within the definition of a religion that was established in a landmark case in 1993 when the High Court of Australia 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: 4)

Testing the legal validity of Jediism is beyond the scope of this paper but is investigated in *From Jesus Christ to Jedi Knight – validity and viability of new religious movements in late modernity* (McCormick 2006).

While the majority of people claiming affiliation to Jedism in the 2001 National Census’ probably did so in a spirit of fun and/or rebellion, evidence suggests there are members of society who take the religion quite seriously; the *Temple of the Jedi Order* is one such group. The group, a registered non-profit corporation in Texas, USA, describe themselves as

a community united in discovering the nature of The Force of Creation of the Universe and using our powers, mental, physical, spiritual and mystical for the good of ourselves and others. We are not the fictional Jedi you have seen in Star Wars but are Real Jedi, in this Galaxy, in this Universe (John 2006).

The religious validity of *Jediism* is defended by adherents:

[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” (John 2006).

In an interview with Time Magazine, George Lucas stated that it was never 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).
While it may not have been Lucas’s plan to instigate a new religion, the development of Jediism and the events surrounding the 2001 National Census’ are evidence that intentional or unintentional religious references in popular culture can have the effect of solidifying beliefs.

In a religious marketplace focussed on niche products designed to fit individual lifestyles and identities, popular culture provides currency and identity 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 by Giddens who describes the ways in which time, space and social relations are affected by both the ‘disembedding’ and ‘interconnectedness’ of modernity and globalisation:

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 (1991: 2)

Along with mass migration, one of the driving forces in the changes to religious affiliation has been brought about by globalisation; the issues and effects of which are complex and multifaceted (Bouma 2002). Post or late modernity is often paired with causes and effects of globalisation however as Beyer (1998: 82) explains, “although globalisation is not simply another word for modernization (…) it is about the consequences of modernity and therefore about its nature as well”.

The end of World War II was a harbinger of globalisation; the developments of international travel and trade, global social networks, and advances in telecommunications have resulted in changes to the ways we conceptualise time and space. Kurtz (1995: 4) states that “by the time Marshal McLuhan introduced the term global village into our vocabulary, a new awareness of the interconnectedness of ours lives was emerging”.
The ‘interconnectedness’ described by Kurtz (1995) is exemplified in a description of ‘The Force’; a Jedi belief that has become part of the vernacular in the form of “May the Force Be with You”. The quote, from the Star Wars film series, was recently judged eighth in the most recognisable movie quotes of the past 100 years by the American Film Institute (AFI’s 100 Years...100 Movie Quotes, 2005) The Force is described on a Jedi website (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.

While ‘The Force’ describes a global (or even universal) connectedness it is telling that Jediism exists mainly in the virtual world of the World Wide Web. The conditions that facilitate these types of meaning systems are described by Hammond (cited in Warner 1993: 1075) as a “growing shift from collective-expressive church membership in the past to individual-expressive religious involvement - voluntary and independent of other social ties”. Hammond’s assertion of ‘voluntary and independent’ religious affiliation is added to by Bouma (2002: 22) who states that

a secular post-modern 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 post-modern sentiment, ‘I believe but I do not belong’.

The Religious Marketplace

Secularisation theorists such as Durkheim, Weber and Parsons (Thompson 1993) predicted modernity would result in a dire future for religion. Their postulations are perhaps best summarised by Hadden (1987: 598) who provides a distillation of secularisation theory “in three short sentences” that are extracted from C. Wright Mills translation of Talcott Parsons’ The Social System (Mills 1959):

Once the world was filled with the sacred – in thought, practice, and institutional form. After the Reformation and the Renaissance, the forces of modernisation swept across the globe and secularization, a corollary historical process, loosened the dominance of the sacred. In due course, the sacred will disappear altogether except possibly, in the private realm.

Peter Berger’s (1967) seminal work The Sacred Canopy asserted that unless a religion operated in a monopolistic, state supported role its plausibility would eventually decline leading to fragmentation and fragmentation to social irrelevancy (Berger 1967).
The inductive theories of secularisation, and the Sacred Canopy metaphor 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 (What is Enlightenment? 2006). A defining aspect of late modernity is that the only certainty is that we are uncertain about a lot of things.

The Sacred Canopy metaphor, in use for more than thirty years, has become less pertinent due to difficulties in applying its static nature to the multicultural character of pluralistic nations and the changing conditions brought about by globalisation (Kurtz 1995). Warner (1993: 1074) cites the strength of religious affiliation in western countries as evidence. Using the United States as an example he asserts that “religion in the United States is, and has long been a) disestablished, b) culturally pluralistic, c) structurally adaptable [and], d) empowering” yet both affiliation and participation are flourishing.

While Berger also refers to the religious marketplace and religion as a commodity, however his proposition is that religion is disposable rather than recyclable (Berger 1967; Warner 1993).

Continuing religious vitality amid globalisation, consumerism and cultural diversity has caused academics to begin questioning the appropriateness of secularisation theory and the Sacred Canopy metaphor (Hadden 1987; Iannaccone 1995; Sherkat and Wilson 1995; Warner 1993). Bryan Turner (2005: 304) predicates that the “secularization theory has proved the least relevant component of the sociological theory of modernization”. This view is elaborated by Hadden (1987: 597), who adds that secularisation theory was mostly unresearched until the mid-twentieth century and cites, what he believes are, four challenges to the theory:

First a critique of secularization theory itself uncovers a hodgepodge of loosely employed ideas rather than a systematic theory. Second, existing data simply do not support the theory. Third, the effervescence of new religious movements in the very locations where secularization appears to cut deeply into established institutional religion suggests that religion may really be ubiquitous in human cultures. Fourth, the number of countries in which religion is significantly entangled in reform, rebellion, and revolution is ever-expanding. This reality challenges the assumptions of secularization theory that would relegate religion to the private realm.

Assertions that the effects of modernisation - pluralism, disestablishment and fragmentation - would see the decline of religion have not eventuated. Rather than
evidencing the inevitable secularisation as proselytised by early theorists, late modernity and globalisation has witnessed a decline in ascriptive religion in favour of chosen affiliations; the mechanisms and benefits of which are explained by Warner (1993: 1078)

The breakdown of ascription may be welcomed when [...] its beneficiaries are convinced that they have been freed to acknowledge their true nature. What the new religious voluntarism amounts to is a centrifugal process, sorting elemental qualities on the basis of which identities are constructed.

The nations who have the most currency in this marketplace of freely choosing individuals and competitive organisations (Sherkat and Wilson 1995) are predominantly western in character and capitalist in economic ideology. A defining feature of capitalism is that it requires “commodification of goods and services – including religion” (Beyer 1998: 85). A by-product of globalisation is a rise in the production and consumption of goods and services, including culture and religion. Sherkat and Wilson (1995: 997-998) posit what they believe are reasons for changes in cultural consumption and how those changes can affect religious affiliation

People may change their preferences for cultural goods because of new information about consumption alternatives, and without such information they will be unlikely to alter choices. 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.

Increased choice and competition within existing and emerging religious beliefs has resulted in rational choice theorists suggesting the ‘religious marketplace’ (Iannaccone 1995; Kurtz 1995; Sherkat and Wilson 1995; Warner 1993) or the ‘religious economy’ (Miller 2002) may be more apt metaphors to facilitate an understanding of the changes in religious affiliation that are occurring in western societies. Sherkat and Wilson (1995) further 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: 993).

The appropriateness of the marketplace metaphor is evident in the hybrid belief choices being made by religious consumers. The innocuous nature of the requirements for Jedi membership makes it, for some, a guilt free addendum to other religions, providing them with an articulation of aspects of spiritual fulfilment they may not be
getting from traditional religions. A posting by a Jedi ‘apprentice’ on the Temple of the Jedi Order blog (How can you be Christian and Jedi?? Would one not be lost to the other? 2006) illustrates how one religious consumer rationalises her religious choice:

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 correlate (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)

Conclusion

The Jedi incident, I suggest, typifies a religious association that is representative of the religious marketplace - both “self-selected and adapted to present circumstances” (Olsen cited in Warner 1993: 1060); their doctrine is a composite of philosophies ‘borrowed’ from an amalgam of ancient religions and; the archetypal characters and the values they espouse provide universal appeal to a generation looking for answers not necessarily found in traditional religion but offered in a ‘ready-to-wear’ package from the minds of Hollywood.

The international occurrence of the Jedi census incident and the reaction of authorities suggest currency is being found in hybrid religious movements such as Jediism. The ideas espoused by neo-religious movements like Jediism, often with mediated culture as their basis, are being adopted by members of a global society in which a growing number of people accept popular culture as source information and authority that is both credible and relevant. Although the legitimacy of Jediism was rejected by officials in all countries, the events surrounding the incident and the public interest both before and after the event support the use of the religious marketplace as a metaphor that frames the understanding of contemporary attitudes that are shaped by the globalisation of ideas, consumerism and post modern attitudes.

An analysis of the Jedi incident in relation to religious participation would be an interesting topic of future research.
References


