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From Taylor Swift to Dune: The Religio-Political and Spiritual Agency of Popular Culture

By Ali Hussain

SYNOPSIS

*Taylor Swift, American singer-songwriter, who just finished her concert tour in Singapore, exercises a unique power in American politics as an advocate for the Democratic Party in the upcoming presidential elections, prompting some from the Republican Party to declare a “holy war” against her cultural influence. This religious symbolism surrounding popular culture extends to recent films like *Dune 2* and highlights the agency of art and media as a medium for a society’s spiritual expression.*

COMMENTARY

In *On Religion*, John Caputo mentions that his daughter’s roommate in college hung a poster that says, “All I need to know about life, I learned from *Star Wars*”. Prudently, the author dedicates an entire section in his book under the rubric, “The Religion of *Star Wars*”, wherein he presents Anakin Skywalker as a Christic figure who, like Jesus, was born miraculously, without a father. Anakin’s son, Luke Skywalker, represents the redeemer aspect of Christ who saves his father from the dark side. Of course, the family name “Skywalker” is itself an homage to Jesus’ ascension.

In an interview with [Bill Moyers](#), George Lucas, the creator of *Star Wars*, when asked if the universe he created was about faith, said, “It is less about faith and more about God. If I ask young people on the street, ‘Do you believe in God?’, I’m less troubled when they say, ‘no’ than if they respond, ‘I never thought about it’”. This spiritual agency that Lucas perceives in art is neither new nor uncommon. In 2019, archaeologists discovered 44,000-year-old cave drawings on the Indonesian island of Sulawesi which, they hypothesised, was an early example of [spiritual expression](#).

From the Parthenon to the Sistine Chapel and Islamic calligraphy, various genres of art have always been the medium of choice for a society to express its highest spiritual

ideals. As mentioned, even in our present day and age, cultural epics like *Star Wars* continue to keep this “sacred spark” of art and creativity alive. Given that religion and spirituality are inseparable from other facets of society, many artists and works of art have also been entangled in the world of politics and international affairs, two of which are the focus of this commentary, Taylor Swift and the film *Dune 2*.

Taylor Swift: From American Politics to Singapore

Growing up in Tennessee, Swift was reared in America’s famous “bible belt”, a series of adjacent southern states with a conservative Protestant demographic. While she never publicised her faith, she did weave it into her staunchly liberal political views. For instance, in 2018, Swift [commented](#) on Senator Marsha Blackburn’s vote against legislation that protects women from domestic violence, “I can’t see another commercial and see Marsha Blackburn disguising these policies behind the words ‘Tennessee Christian Values’ ... I live in Tennessee. I’m a Christian. That’s not what we stand for”.

This would not be the end of Swift’s political involvement. Before the 2020 presidential election, she addressed then-President Trump on the X platform (previously Twitter), “We will vote you out!”. Now, the singer-songwriter is once again acknowledging her cultural influence and encouraging her fans to vote in the presidential primary known as “Super Tuesday” (5 March 2024).

Her criticism against Trump and social influence has led some leaders in Trump’s MAGA (Make America Great Again) movement to [declare](#) a “holy war” against Swift, once again tethering the worlds of politics and religion. One preacher from California, Dr Tony Wood, even [positioned](#) Swift in an anti-Christic light when the latter was chosen as *TIME* magazine’s 2023 Person of the Year, “Taylor Swift can never lay her body over that chasm, allowing us to walk over it to get into the graces of a mighty God ... There is only one who ever could, and his name is Jesus”.

Dune 2: The *Mu’addib* and *Mahdi* of Hollywood

Paul Atreides, the protagonist of Frank Herbert’s series, *Dune*, is a messianic figure who represents an amalgam of various facets of the Sufi sage, or wali. He is called *al-mu’addib* (the one who disciplines) and *al-mahdi* (the rightly guided one), a central messianic figure in Islamic thought for both Sufis and Shi’is. Just as the awaited *Mahdi* is expected to return at the end of time to fill the earth with justice after it has been overwhelmed by violence and oppression, so does Atreides, portrayed by Timothée Chalamet in the latest adaptation, lead a rebellion against an unjust and decadent empire that controls his planet Arrakis.

Atreides’ religio-political career overflows outside the film, as some viewers perceived his war cry, “Long live the fighters!”, as a drawing of a subtle [parallel](#) between the world of *Dune* and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, with Atreides’ rebel camp specifically emerging as a representation of Gaza and the Hamas movement. Chalamet himself has become a religio-spiritual icon in Hollywood, as evident in some critics’ rendering of the actor’s portrayal of Roald Dahl’s *Willy Wonka* as a [“milquetoast Christ”](#): “Like an Old Testament God, Roald Dahl’s Wonka giveth and he taketh away – part fairy godmother, part gingerbread-house witch”.

Conclusion

Returning to Singapore, Taylor Swift's performance, as part of the Eras tour, will be her fourth visit to the city-state. The importance of her stop has prompted both Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong and Minister for Culture, Community and Youth, Edward Tong, to acknowledge that Singapore will be the only Southeast Asian station in Swift's tour in the region this time. While some neighbouring countries have complained about this [exclusive](#) arrangement, what emerges here is, yet again, the political agency of a cultural icon like Swift.

As Joanne Waghorne discusses in *Singapore, Spirituality, and the Space of the State*, if, as the walls of the ArtScience Museum ask, "Can a building have a soul?", whence "something of steel ... can have a presence", then perhaps it is also prudent to think critically about artists like Taylor Swift and Coldplay as markers or expressions of Singapore's own cosmopolitan and secular spirituality.

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