

THE FECKLESS FAITH OF INDIANA JONES

Beyond the numerous fisticuffs, explosions, and shocks, the Indiana Jones films make strong moral statements. Their creators, led by George Lucas and Steven Spielberg, are forced to demarcate; that is bad, this is good. The results are sometimes fascinating, always complicated, and the films are entertaining not in spite of the messages, but because of them. A moral framework guides the films, giving the hero a motivating grand purpose while painting the enemy as irredeemably evil, and thus, more threatening and formidable an adversary. But the films could be much better if the moral framework was stronger, less nuanced, more direct, plausible.

Remembering that *The Temple of Doom* is a prequel to *Raiders of the Lost Ark*, let's consider the hero, Indiana Jones, in the former. He dismisses the villagers' account of famine and pestilence commiserate with the theft of the Shankara stone. But when he is told that the children were stolen, he becomes more sympathetic. He decides to undertake a mission to recover the stone because of the "fortune and glory" inherent in presenting the lost Shankara stones to the world. Of the four films, this has the least to do with archaeology.

Soon Jones is captured and converted into a numb adherent of the Hindu goddess of destruction, Kali, said to be able to protect her devotees from fear and grant limitless peace. As unholy wine is forced down Jones's throat, a prerequisite for his conversion, Mola Ram lays out a plan to use his Thugees in a march against the British colonizers with the ultimate plan of destroying "the Hebrew god." Thus, the film frames this limited struggle in India as a component of the ongoing war of God versus Satan (working through the mindless adherents of Kali). Indiana Jones becomes an unwitting emissary of the Lord's work. He is the means by which this encroachment of the Occult may be halted. Because he never willfully converted, Jones is brought to his senses by his youthful counterpart Short Round, who is able to break the spiritual shackles with the grazing burn of a waving torch. This does not make a lot of sense, and seems inconsistent with the involved process of possession. Regardless, Jones takes up the fight with renewed vigor, and emerges victorious by calling down the wrath of Shiva (a rival Hindu god) on Mola Ram for his covetousness, he having exclaimed that the Shankara stones were his. Thus Hindus are not necessarily evil, just those who get violent about it or, like Mola Ram, use religion as a prop to develop a personality cult. Subtext is made explicit in the portrayal of the villagers, Hindus all, as they seem to be good people wanting nothing but their children back. Jones tells the village elder that he now understands the power the stones possess. Indiana Jones is now a spiritualist.

One short year later, Indiana Jones sets out to recover the Ark of the Covenant. Repeatedly warned to fear the Ark's power, Jones refuses to concern himself with anything besides the lethal cunning of his opponents. Jones is a strong and daring adventurer, still stuck on fortune and glory. His rival, Bellocque, is correct in asserting the two men's similarities; we

root for Jones because we are forced to follow him every step of the narrative, and because he is up against Nazis, who cannot be good in anything but a Lesi Riefenstahl film. Near the story's end, the protagonist Jones makes an astute decision—he encourages his female companion, Marion, to close her eyes as the Ark is opened. Indeed, there's no downside to such an action—it is prudent and wise. But it is not grounded in faith. God kills the detestable Nazis, but leaves Indiana and Marion to relate the event to the proper authorities. As the film ends, Jones can be considered quasi-agnostic.

Two years pass, and 1938 finds Indiana Jones up against the Nazis again. The race is on for the Holy Grail, but the familiar structure is enlivened by the introduction of a new character, Henry Jones, Sr., Indiana's father. His voice is the conscience of the film. It is he who has searched for the Cup his whole life, he who takes a dim view of Indiana's gleeful killing, he who denounces blasphemy, and he who reminds his recalcitrant son that theirs is a "race against evil." It is no treasure hunt.

The character of Dr. Jones, Sr. is the most interesting of the film, but it is also the least consistent. He exasperates his son and unearths resentments never seen in the earlier films. His deliberative, cautious approach to overcoming challenges is a humorous contrast to the sledgehammer style of Junior. When he uses seagulls to down an enemy fighter plane and save their lives, his actions engender great respect in his son. Before long, this professor of Medieval literature kills a dozen Germans with one pull of the trigger. When his old friend Marcus protests, Henry rejoins, "It's *war!*"

But his moral voice is clouded by the revelation that he had intimate relations with Dr. Schneider. Though he may dismiss his dalliance as "two ships that pass in the night," his behavior is incompatible with a man of God on a holy quest. George Lucas reportedly had major misgivings about this plot point—Indiana and his father having sex with the same woman. Spielberg prevailed on him. Though the latent humor of such a situation is skillfully exploited in the script, the film ultimately suffers because of it. In *Raiders of the Lost Ark* and *Temple of Doom* Indiana does not have sex. Prior relations between Indiana and Marion are implied, but Jones falls asleep before anything gets started on the steamer. And while he and Willie Scott engage in suggestive banter, they never get around to it either. Perhaps because Indiana's father takes the place of the woman as the partner/foil in the course of this latest adventure, the woman's importance needed to be addressed clearly, early on. Elsa Schneider's character is necessary only for the immediate *frisson* she produces between father and son, and because she greedily hoards the Cup at the film's climax. Her character is irrelevant.

When Indiana is forced to run the gauntlet in order to save his father's life, his decision to take the "leap from the lion's head" is portrayed as an act of great faith. His father intones through parallel editing, "You must believe, boy." Clutching at his heart, Indiana steps forward.

The bridge, heretofore obscured, materializes as his foot makes contact.

Indiana loves his father. If he goes back, his father will surely die. He has no choice but to move ahead, but is his decision grounded in faith or expediency? What is he supposed to "believe" in, God Almighty or the designer of these Middle Aged booby traps? The fear he is working through and the reasons informing his decision are deliberately obscured. Thus, the

fascinating parallel of a strong man undertaking a journey while his soul is undergoing a journey of its own is left to wither in story construction.

Dangling over the fissure, Indiana wisely abandons the Chalice. Outside, his father tells him that Elsa had thought she had found a prize. She did not take seriously the Author behind all the wonders she had seen—Donovan withering before her eyes, Henry restored to perfect health, the earth breaking apart. Indiana asks his father what he found in the temple, to which his father imparts, "Me? Illumination."

This response poignantly echoes a moment from the past. We had seen earlier that in 1912, Henry, copying a stained glass window relevant to the Grail search, said, "May He who illuminated this illuminate me."

Henry returns the question, asking his son what he found inside. We remember an early scene in the film, in father Henry's house. A point of repose and stillness in the ransacked living room, Indiana concentrates on the picture of a faithful knight reaching for the Cup of Christ across a deep chasm into which his enemies summarily fall. Indiana asks Marcus if he believes its powers are a fact. Marcus replies that the search for the Grail is the search for the divine in each of us. Indiana has seen the power of God in the Ark, but he cannot accept the truth and conclude that if the same power of the Ark was invested in the Grail than it would be dangerous. If the Grail lacks that power then it would not be dangerous, but, either way, God is the One with the power. No magic is involved, no mysticism.

So we have Marcus's view of the Cup and Henry Jones's view of the Cup. Both are vaguely humanistic—the Cup has the power to awaken our souls. Knowing Indiana's answer to the question posed by his father, the question of what he found, is critical to resolving the disparity. But instead of addressing this highly relevant, intensely difficult and personal question, he whines about what his name is once again. We never find out if he changed his mind. Working under the assumption that morality is dependent on a single, inerrant arbiter, God, and since the film is intent on drawing lines between Good and Evil, then the film undermines its very story by refusing to go the whole way. Through three films the issue of morality has been paramount, Indiana has become more cognizant of spiritual forces, and a great summation seems due. But we get no answer. All we get is the four buddies riding off into the sunset together. These jaw-dropping events have not changed anybody. Religion has been used, for a third time, as a prop to launch an adventure made more memorable by flavorings of the suspenseful and mysterious.

Lucas crossed into new territory by permitting a shift in sexual mores, but Spielberg, assuming he cares, also acquiesced to a shift. In *Raiders of the Lost Ark* the religious framework is Jewish, but in *The Last Crusade* it is Christian. If Spielberg is a cultural Jew and not a practicing one then making the first film would be just as easy, and hard, as making the third. Lucas, the reluctant Methodist, and Spielberg struck a delicate balance in the third film. It can be viewed from a Christian perspective or a humanist one. Hearing Dr. Henry Jones say at the end, "Me? I found Jesus Christ, the Author and Perfector of our Faith" would be a lot to handle, and could torpedo the film's box office. But how can those four men step out of that temple and not fall on their knees in gratitude and awe before God?

When Indiana Jones is bashing a man's head against the dashboard of a truck, scaling the side of a submarine, hurling a spit of flaming kabobs, crashing through a window to rescue

his father, and cutting the rope bridge, we cheer because the fight is a moral fight. It's not the violence that is inspiring, but heroism, valor, in the face of Evil. Despite the films' internal confusion, Jones is an ambassador against all that is wrong. In *The Last Crusade*, against the backdrop of a Nazi book burning, in response to Elsa Schneider's pleas for sympathy, he rails, "You stood up to be counted with the enemy of everything that the Grail stands for; who gives a damn what you think!?"

It's inspiring stuff and it's what these stories thrive on. Jones is clearly showing progress from where he was a few years previous, but his transformation is left frustratingly incomplete. In the fourth adventure, *Indiana Jones and the Kingdom of the Crystal Skull*, we are denied any resolution on the matter of our hero's quicksilver beliefs. This difficult topic is deftly traversed by avoiding God altogether. Instead, otherworldly excitement comes courtesy of aliens. In this film the search is for knowledge, according to Indiana's reflections after the spaceship has ascended. And while it's all pretty exciting and the movie nicely underlines the importance of marriage, the story is so unbelievable, and the Skull so un-intimidating, that there is no threat beyond surviving the next fight, chase, or battle of wits.

If the Indiana Jones movies are designed as a method for an audience to enjoy a thrill ride, then the thrills are undermined by inattention to the moral framework that makes the thrills compelling, not merely rousing. These are good films that miss greatness not because they are not True, but because they are not true to themselves.