

The Temple and the Laboratory: The Science and Religion Dialogue in Indiana Jones

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Abstract. Indiana Jones is one of the most iconic figures of the last century. The impact of Jones films on the film industry and popular culture may be inestimable. Despite this fact, few thematic analyses of the Indiana Jones franchise have been completed. At the same time, the dialogue between science and religion is one of the most controversial and important topics in modern society. Yet only a few formal studies have considered how this dialogue between science and religion is portrayed in popular film. The results of a thematic analysis of the Indiana Jones films suggest that popular culture, specifically films, are a viable medium for discussing issues like science and religion.

1. Introduction

The four-film Indiana Jones film franchise has made over \$1.9 Billion dollars in box office sales since 1981. [1, 2, 3, 4] Director Steven Spielberg has been called the most important living figure from the 20th century. [5] The impact of the Indiana Jones films may be impossible to effectively analyze. Despite this, few full thematic analyses of Spielberg's films, or of the Indiana Jones franchise, have been completed.

In addition, few scholars have studied the "science and religion" dialogue in popular film. Not one in a total of 2,600 peer-reviewed articles found through EBSCO host on the topic of "Indiana Jones" connects the films with both religion and science. This provides an important impetus for the research reported on here.

Thus, the thesis of this paper is to suggest that the Indiana Jones films present this dialogue between science and religion; and further that they provide a forum where this discussion can continue. A thematic analysis of the four films was conducted with no beginning "concept" of how this dialogue should look. However, it was found that the films present a specific and interesting view of how this dialogue might occur.

2. Literature Review

Several thematic analyses of the "war" between

science and religion have been published. Douglas E.

Cowan did an analysis of religion and science in Orson Wells' *War of the Worlds*. [6] He concluded that the film is pro-faith in the face of "scientific" communism. Other thematic analyses have focused on film in general and whether it portrays the dialogue in a positive or negative light. Moritz argues that science is being portrayed as over and against religion in most films. [7]

Despite this lack of thematic analyses, there have been a number of films on the subject such as: *Angels & Demons* (2009), *The Da Vinci Code* (2006), *Inherit the Wind* (1960), *The Tree Of Life* (2011) and *Agora* (2009). Documentary portrayals of the issues also exist such as Bill Maher's *Religious* (2008), *The God Who Isn't There* (2005) and Richard Dawkins' *The Root of All Evil?* (2006). There have also been a limited number of reviews that deal with the questions raised in these films. [8]

A number of articles have been published that attempt to outline scientific and religious themes in specific films by Spielberg. Engels argues that *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* is about those things which are beyond nature—i.e. spiritual. [9] Gunn argues that Spielberg uses a persuasive theme of paternalism in *War of the Worlds* with implications for what the state should look like. [10] *Schindler's List* has been questioned by a number of scholars for its portrayal of the Holocaust.

3. Research Questions

Based on the literature review the following question was formulated: How do the Indiana Jones films present the science and religion dialogue?

4. Methodology

A qualitative analytic framework interpretive method was used employing open coding and thematizing.

5. Results

The four films present Indiana Jones as a paradigm of “science,” and the research he is constantly doing as a path to finding the truth. The major theme of these films is Jones’ discovery that his scientific paradigm cannot explain the power that the artifacts have. However, he is presented as a willful scientist who is unwilling to accept the obvious supernatural paradigm shift. Religion is represented by the artifacts. However, the artifacts are *used* in religiously significant ways. Thus, religion is defined as applied metaphysical beliefs.

In *Raiders*, Jones says, “I don’t believe in hocus pocus, the boogeyman.” Jones’ friend, Dr. Baruch tells him, “Archeology is our religion.” However, they state, “The ark [of the covenant]...if it is at Tarras...it is not something of this world.” It is at Tarras. They discover that it can destroy all of the soldiers who lay their hands on it.

This theme is picked up in the second film, *The Temple of Doom*, where Jones tells his companion that the local tale about a sacred stone is “just a ghost story.” However, the Priest later tells Jones, “You will become a true believer.” Jones finds that the rock, when returned, alleviates the famine that began when the stone was stolen. At the end of the film, he admits, “I understand the power of the stone.”

In the *Last Crusade*, Jones is attempting to find the Holy Grail. Jones asks the director of his university, “Do you believe that the Holy Grail exists?” He responds, “It is the search for the divine in all of us. But if you want facts I have none. At this age, I’m willing to take some things on faith.” This is brought to a climax when Jones must take a “leap of faith” to save his father from death. He steps out on “faith” and saves his father’s life.

Finally, in the *Crystal Skull*, Jones is left to find the skull of an alien worshipped by earlier humans. He notes the skull is a piece of “interesting craftsmanship,” but “nothing more.” When he discovers that they truly believe that this alien was god, he says,

“God doesn’t look like that.” However, at the end of the film, he discovers things that defy natural explanation.

6. Conclusions

This research suggests that Indiana Jones should not be viewed as a paradigm of science against religion,

but a paradigm where the two work together to solve problems. Indeed, this paradigm is confounded by the use of Jones’ scientific skills and the power of the artifacts that he discovers. In all cases, science and religion work together to defeat the common villain. One can imagine that Spielberg views this as a way of suggesting that science and religion can and should work together to solve problems. While this dialogue between science and religion occurs in the film, it is undeniable that the films are also quite entertaining. This can lead us to conclude that it is quite possible to have films discuss deep subjects that can relate to both believers and skeptics and still make money.

7. References

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