

The *Star Wars* Films : Moral and Spiritual Issues

By Jimmy Akin

George Lucas's popular *Star Wars* films have much to commend them, as is made clear in the above reviews. Yet there are a number of moral and spiritual issues connected with these films that may make them unsuitable for some viewers, especially some children. Because these issues **deserve special attention** beyond what the limitations of a review would allow, and because they are common to all of the films, they are **treated at length** in this article.

Moral and spiritual issues raised by the *Star Wars* phenomenon range from certain of its themes and visual considerations to the **theological problems** associated with the concept of the Force. Any of these issues may be a reason why some parents might wish their children not to see the films. However, none of them makes the films inherently objectionable or unsuitable for children generally, nor do they negate the films' positive aspects.

This article is intended to help clarify and illuminate the issues for parents and other interested readers, to help them decide for themselves regarding the propriety of the *Star Wars* films for themselves and their families.

1 – Violence and death

As any action-adventure films, the *Star Wars* movies contain a significant degree of violence — both in the form of military battles and individual fights. As a result of this, characters do die. For those reasons, parents of children who are especially sensitive to such situations may not wish their children to see them. HOWEVER :

- **The violence tends to be stylized** — that is, its effects usually are not portrayed realistically. There is **no blood and gore**. Either we do not see the wounds at all or, if we do, the wounds tend to be cleanly cauterized by the action of the lasers.
- **The violence tends to be fantasy violence** — that is, it cannot be *realistically* imitated. It involves **weapons that do not exist** — lightsabers, laser pistols, laser artillery. This does not mean that the violence cannot be *unrealistically* imitated — but since these weapons don't exist, serious injuries from such play are unlikely.

- **The good guys do not use violence gratuitously.** They resort to violence only when they are attacked first or when a pre-emptive strike is the only way to guarantee safety. They do not relish using violence, and they **seek alternatives** before it breaks out. When violence is used, they bring it to a close as quickly as possible and try to take prisoners rather than kill their opponents.
- **There is a strong anti-aggression message in the movies.** No matter how much fantasy violence the films contain, the anti-aggression point is worked throughout all the films. It is part of the Jedi **code of ethics**, and is made most explicit in *Episode V — The Empire Strikes Back*, when Jedi master Yoda tells Luke Skywalker that a Jedi uses the Force only for information and self-defence — never aggression.

2 – Lying and mental reservations

The use of arms or deadly force can be morally licit in at least *some* real-life circumstances. However, lying is different. It is *never* morally licit. Under certain circumstances, it *can* be licit to make **potentially misleading statements** while employing a **mental reservation** — an unstated qualification about the sense in which or extent to which the statement can be regarded as true — though even a mental reservation, if unjustified by the circumstances, can be morally equivalent to a direct lie.

Most films that are made today are completely oblivious to this fact, and the good guys in most films **regularly lie with no moral censure** from the film-makers. In this regard, the *Star Wars* films are not an exception yet they are still better than many films :

- With one major exception, the lies tend to be **tactical lies** — that is, the kind of lies that are told in wartime tactical situations : for example, to sneak into an area in order to pull off a rescue, as when Luke and Han rescue Leia in *Episode IV* or when they try to get past the imperial fleet and land on Endor in *Return of the Jedi*. They are not told for fun.
- **The one major exception concerns the deception of the hero** — Luke Skywalker — in order to avert a potential tragedy of galactic proportions. This deception is perpetrated by **Luke’s mentors** — his uncle and aunt initially and then later by Ben Kenobi and Yoda. When Luke finally discovers that he has been deceived by those closest to him, he confronts Kenobi with the fact, and the latter is forced to acknowledge the deception, though he argues that it was a form of **mental reservation** — that is, what he told Luke was true ‘*from a certain point of view*’. Luke is not impressed by this qualifier, nor should

he be. The mental reservation hereby employed by Kenobi is *not* morally licit — but cinematically inherent and of vital importance to the plot as designed by George Lucas. Tricky situation for a writer !

- In addition to the lie just mentioned, **two specific deceptions** are particular causes for concern:
 - In *Episode V — The Empire Strikes Back*, when Yoda first meets Luke he pretends that **he is not Yoda**. Cinematically, the motive for this is to highlight the unexpected and unpredictable nature of mentor figures in mythology. Yet the incident remains troubling because, setting aside its cinematic rationale, there may not be significant justification for what Yoda does.
 - In *Episode VI — The Return of the Jedi*, the main characters are in danger from a tribe that is inclined to regard the droid C-3PO as ‘*some sort of god.*’ C-3PO objects that ‘*It’s against my programming to impersonate a deity*’ — as well it should be. Unfortunately, Luke orders the droid to perpetuate this impression and augments the effect by using his Jedi powers to make it seem as if 3PO has magical abilities. While the **life-threatening circumstances** are a mitigating factor, the film does not explore possible alternatives, and the relevant scenes are played for comedy, without censuring the manipulation of others’ religious beliefs.

Because of the **restrained nature** of the deceptions in question, *Star Wars* films cannot be placed in the morally objectionable category of most contemporary films — including most children’s films. Still, the deceptions are cause for concern, and parents may wish to discuss these with their children.

3 – Jedi mind tricks

Morally problematic as well is the use in the film of ‘*Jedi mind tricks*’ — instances where the Jedi knights give certain characters a mental push that leads them to **believe or act in a desired manner**. Sometimes mind tricks are used to accomplish a deception as in ‘*These aren’t the droids you’re looking for*’ — when in fact they are — or to get a character to do something he is otherwise disinclined to do — e.g. ‘*Take me to your master, now*’. Still :

- The Jedi code of ethics appears to contain **restrictions** on when mind tricks can be used. In *Episode I* Qui-Gon remarks to Obi-Wan that they cannot use mind tricks to affect a

political decision. Also, the Jedi use mind tricks rarely and only when there is a significant good to be achieved, such as personal survival through self-defence.

- Mind tricks don't work on everyone in the *Star Wars* universe. In fact, Ben Kenobi says that they affect only the 'weak-minded' ; certain races such as Toydarians and, apparently, Hutts, aren't affected by them at all. What constitutes 'weak-mindedness' is not clear, but it may mean that those who are strong-minded in the sense of having a strong resolve *not* to do something will be invulnerable to a mind trick. If so, a person who complies with the suggestion of a mind trick would be at least partly responsible for his actions in that he wasn't doing something he was strongly opposed to in the first place.

4 – Illicit romance

a) [Luke and Leia](#)

For some viewers, one troubling aspect of the series is that, in the original trilogy, there is a fleeting romantic entanglement involving two characters who turn out to be too closely related to each other (brother and sister) for a romance to be morally licit. However, the romance never gets farther than some goo-goo eyes and two (quite innocent) kisses. Most importantly, neither character is aware of their relationship at the time. By the point either character is aware of their relationship, **any question of a romance is long gone** — one of the two characters now being romantically involved with another, and the other having chosen the chaste living of the Jedi. Anyway, because of the subdued nature of the whole issue, few children will pick up on it.

b) [Anakin and Padmé](#)

More troubling is the romantic entanglement of the new trilogy, involving senator Amidala and Jedi-to-be Anakin. Anakin wasn't supposed to marry Padmé. In doing so, in the outmost secret, he not only **broke the rule of his order** — Jedi knights having sworn to live in a priestly condition of chastity and entire availability to their mission — but he most of all **deceived those closest to him**, including his fatherly master Obi-Wan. And all the moralizing babble of Padmé during the corny declaration-scene-near-the-fireplace of *Attack of the Clones* seem to vanish into thin air under the pressure of unrestrained passion...

5 – The Force

Among all the moral and spiritual problems of the *Star Wars* series, this is the *big* one. More Christians will object to the series on this ground than on any other.

According to the rules established in the films, the Force is an energy field generated by all living beings; it binds the galaxy together. For at least some gifted individuals, the Force is a source of both **power and guidance**, by which properly trained adepts can achieve startling effects. Objects can be made to **levitate** or fly through the air, and distant locations or the **future can be seen**. More problematically, the Force appears to be morally polarized. The *light side* (connected with **good, peace, and self-defence**) is the power of the Jedi, and the dark side (connected with **evil, anger, and aggression**) is the power of the Sith. On a couple of occasions, the study of the Force is referred to as a '*religion*'.

In interviews George Lucas has explained that the Force is a symbol for all that is **unseen in the universe**. The *light side* is essentially a symbol for God — the unseen Power of good — while the dark side is a symbol for the forces of evil. According to Lucas, the Jedi exhortation to use the Force essentially means '*Trust God*'. The phrase '*May the Force be with you*' of course, is clearly evocative of '*May God be with you*'. The connection between God and the Force was even strengthened in *The Phantom Menace* with the introduction of concepts such as 'the *living Force*' and even 'the *will of the Force*'.

On the other hand, certain aspects of the way the Force is presented make an application to God more **remote and difficult**. In *Episode IV*, Ben Kenobi tells Luke that the Force partially '*controls your actions*' but also '*obeys your commands*' — neither of which literally applies to God's interactions with us. Anyway, while the connection may be obvious to scholars of mythology and to literary critics, it is **not to the average audience member**.

Most unfortunately of all, the films do not establish the light side as **intrinsically stronger than nor different in origin from** the dark side — so good and evil can come across as equal in strength and origin. As a result, many people reasonably regarded the Force as a **New-Age mystical energy field** balanced between good and evil, as in **Taoism**. Still, many of these elements are subtle and ambiguous enough that they will not pose a problem for young viewers, and Christian parents may reasonably allow their children to watch the films. In such cases, parental guidance in understanding the films in a Christian way will be needed when kids pick up on the problematic elements.