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Indiana Jones and the Power of God?
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[Warning: Contains spoilers.]

Indiana Jones, the adventurer-archaeologist is back in the new film, "Indiana Jones and the Kingdom of the Crystal Skull." Once again, he is on the trail of a powerful religious object, this time a crystal skull worshiped by a South American tribe. The film is set in the 1950s and Indy is opposed by a Russian scientist and her army of henchmen who use violence, kidnapping and murder to get possession of the skull.

With the skull as the central attraction, the film actually constitutes a meditation about the nature of belief, particularly belief in god, or in this case, gods. The Indians believe the skull is a sacred object, made holy as a symbol of divine beings worthy of their worship. The Russians see the skull solely as an object of power; they do not believe in the existence of any gods, but see the object as a source of knowledge and mental powers, which they can use for world domination.

Indiana Jones portrays the scientific skeptic; he does not believe in magic, gods or religion. To him, the skull is important because the Indians considered it important. It should be shared with all humanity by being displayed in a museum and studied.

Once the chase is on, Indy and the Russians head deep into the South American jungle, discovering ruins like those of the Mayans. Upon reaching the temple's inner sanctum, they discover that the crystal skull is the actual skull of a space alien. When they place the skull on a headless alien skeleton, power is triggered. The skeleton reanimates, along with the nearby alien skeletons, the Russian scientist receives the psychic knowledge she desires, and then, as in the earlier films, Jones and his friends run for their lives.

The film's climax indicates the Russians' belief was correct. There were no gods. Instead, there were only space aliens. The Indians had mistaken the aliens for gods, and the aliens had taken advantage of that error. Jones' skepticism was also mistaken, for the skull had power; not that of magic, but of the advanced technology of a star-traveling people.

The notion that the gods were actually space aliens visiting Earth is not new. In the late 1960s and 1970s, this idea was popularized by Erich von Daniken, whose book "Chariots of the Gods?" sold millions of copies around the world. In this and later writings, he propounded the notion that the technology of the ancient world was given by visiting space aliens. Whether it was the building of the pyramids, Ezekiel's vision of the heavenly chariots, the statues on Easter Island or Babylonian stories of heavenly travel, Von Daniken sees them as evidence of visiting aliens.

But Von Daniken's favorite body of evidence are the Mayan, Incan and other Central and South American sites of massive temples and pyramids. From the Mexican site of Palenque, Von Daniken identifies a pictorial carving of a human sacrifice on an altar as a spaceman sitting in a space capsule. A picture of a priest in an elaborate headdress becomes for him an astronaut with a space helmet.

So this new Indiana Jones film taps into Von Daniken's ideas, even the fascination with South American ruins, and identifies gods as space aliens.

Gods are not divine, supernatural beings, but flesh-and-blood creatures (or rather flesh-and-crystal-skull beings) with advanced technology. It suggests we poor superstitious humans have mistaken technology for divinity.

This message stands in sharp contrast to the three previous Indiana Jones films. In them, the powerful sacred object reinforces the presence and potency of the divine. At the end of "Raiders of the Lost Ark," the Ark of the Covenant's power is revealed as that of God. The closing scenes of "Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom" show that the village's stone lingam still brings Shiva's blessing to the village and the cup of the Holy Grail in "Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade" remains imbued with the power of Jesus' blood. And in each film, Indy the skeptic is shown to be the only one who understands and respects the object's divine power and the divinity responsible for it, even though he does not believe in them.