

# *The Great Disappointment* *A Review of Star Wars* *Episode I, The Phantom Menace*

By Marilyn Glaim

The week before *The Phantom Menace* made its first appearance, our Friday evening reading group gathered to discuss *Time* magazine's "Of Myth and Men: A Conversation between Bill Moyers and George Lucas on the meaning of the Force and the True Theology of *Star Wars*" (Apr. 26, 1999, 90-94). *Star Wars*' fans shared strategies for getting into the first showing and brought trailers of the new movie or clips from the original series. As our group discussed theology according to Lucas, several students commented that their parents had refused to let them see these movies when they were younger because the content was not specifically Christian. Others had gone with their parents for a "fun and wholesome" family outing. Everyone—even those interested in the theological implications—agreed that they had gone to see these movies for their entertainment value—not for their philosophical worth. Therein lies the problem with *The Phantom Menace*. The familiar Lucas theology is still there, but the story line and character development are too weak to carry the theological implications.

Lucas makes the battle between good and evil the basis of his theology:

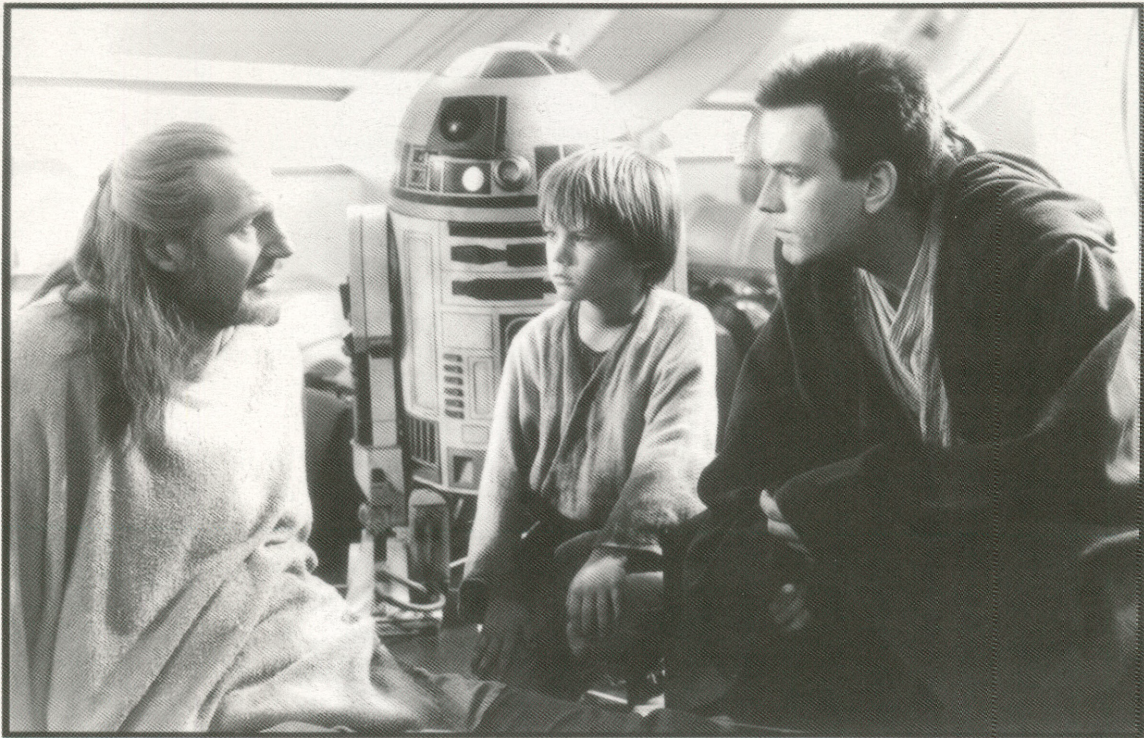
"The film is ultimately about the dark side and the light side and those sides are designed around compassion and greed. The issue of greed, of getting things and owing things and having things and not being able to let go of things, is the opposite of compassion—of not thinking of yourself all the time. These are the two sides—the good force and the bad force. They're the simplest parts of a complex cosmic construction" (90).

This excerpt reveals the deeply moral, spiritual view of Lucas as artist and modern-day theologian. Lucas promotes his views with the urgency of an Old Testament prophet warning Earth's greedy inhabitants of "the evil within us" (90), and it is clear that, in his framework, we must not only recognize this evil but understand its connection to the spiritual world beyond.

Central to the spiritual world of *Star Wars* is the Force, to which we can attach through our intuition and through the practice of consciously choosing good over evil. The Force is powerful and everywhere at once. Though Lucas refuses to identify the Force as God, he sees its connection to God. "I put the Force into the movie in order to try to awaken a certain kind of spirituality in young people—more a belief in God than a belief in any particular religious system. I wanted to make it so that young people would begin to ask questions about the mystery" (92). This refusal to name God as the Force has the contrasting effects of making it unacceptable to some conservative Christians while making the spiritual ideas accessible to people of any culture.

Because Lucas envisions a dualistic universe, his characters tend to be all good or all evil; however, good people can choose evil if they do not access the Force. Thus we know that though the good child Anakin Skywalker knows how to "feel the Force" (in this case for the very practical reason of winning a pod race over the evil contenders), we also know that he will at some time in Episodes II or III reject the Force, because he becomes the evil Darth





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**Jedi Master Qui-Gon Jinn (Liam Neeson), left, tells young Anakin Skywalker (Jake Lloyd) and Jedi Apprentice Obi-Wan Kenobi (Ewan McGregor) about a near deadly encounter as droid R2-D2 looks on in STAR WARS: EPISODE I THE PHANTOM MENACE. Photo by Keith Hamshere**

Vader in Episodes IV through VI, second only in power and evil to the Emperor Palpatine in Episode VI. Yoda, the oldest member of the Jedi Council, hints in Episode I at the reason for his coming fall. He tells the young Anakin that he senses in him “fear, which leads to anger, which leads to hate, which leads to the Dark Side.” Yoda’s intuition will be overridden. Anakin will be trained as a Jedi Knight, the most powerful force for good, and thus will be an even more powerful foe when he chooses evil.

There is also a possibility, albeit a minute one, that an evil character can move to the Light Side. Lucas leaves his audience with that specific hope when Darth Vader’s son, the Jedi Knight Luke Skywalker, in Episode VI makes the conscious decision not to kill his father and thus not to join the Dark Side and the Evil Emperor. This choice allows Darth Vader to die a redeemed man. Though there is no Christ in Lucas’s universe, good characters can help to redeem evil ones who are willing to act on this goodness. Choice is powerful in the *Star Wars* universe.

The problem with *The Phantom Menace* is that, though Lucas maintains theological vision in this first of three prequels to Episodes IV-VI, he loses his focus on the meaning of good entertainment—a strong story line with characters that we believe in and care about. The bad side is predictably evil and one-dimensional.

The characters, including Darth Maul, the horned red and black devil figure, and Senator Palpatine, who will become the Evil Emperor, seem cartoon-like in their flatly evil personalities.

The good characters, Jedi Knights Qui-Gon Jinn and Obi-Wan Kenobi, are woeful, humorless, and predictable. The audience is supposed to feel the pain when Darth Maul kills Qui-Gon Jinn, but some teenagers in the audience actually cheered—perhaps because Darth Maul is at least more interesting *looking* than Qui-Gon and manages to overcome Qui-Gon even though he has to contend with two Jedi Knights. The outcome of the battles is foreordained, and we absolutely know that when little Anakin takes refuge in one of the enemies’ starships during a battle he will nearly single-handedly thwart their plans to destroy the good people of Naboo.

Thus, in spite of the technological wonder of the weapons, the starships, the mechanical creatures, as well as the breathtaking speed of all things that move, the movie draws to an agonizingly slow and predictable conclusion in which good at least temporarily triumphs over evil, and the Force is with us all.

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