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## Misogyny Under the Dome?

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## Misogyny Under the Dome?

### Abstract

This is a review of *Avatar* (2009).

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Like thousands everywhere, in the early weeks of the film's opening, I joined the lineups at the theatre to see *Avatar*, Canadian James Cameron's blockbuster 3-D movie that quickly drew both kudos and criticism from various quarters. While it is reminiscent of movies of a certain genre where the great white saviour/hero joins the ranks of the oppressed and saves the world, it was a visual treat replete with special effects, beautiful animation that presented a world we could only hope to enter, and an appealing storyline that presented nature, not as a resource to be exploited – although the antagonists were surely attempting to do so – but as a holistic, living, interconnected creation.

It was an entertaining cinematic experience that contained enough parallels to earth's own challenges with the environment and indigenous peoples, that I saw the film as having both relevance and social merit.

Perhaps that's what the Vatican fears the most. Shortly after the film opened in February 2010, L'Osservatore Romano said the movie "gets bogged down by a spiritualism linked to the worship of nature." Vatican Radio said it "cleverly winks at all those pseudo-doctrines that turn ecology into the religion of the millennium", where "Nature is no longer a creation to defend, but a divinity to worship."

I suspected the Vatican media weren't being honest with their real objections; the divinity of the world portrayed in *Avatar* is a feminine deity – Eywa,

and the Na'vi tribe's spiritual leader Mo'at also happens to be female. What a concept! And what risk to the Church's comfortable patriarchy that continues to deny ordination to women, and that refuses to portray its anthropomorphic concept of a Creator in anything but masculine terms.

We can see through your dismissive critique of the film *Avatar*, L'Osservatore! We can sense your fear of the generative, creative powers of the feminine. We can see you hiding under the dome and barricading your doors against the onslaught of equality among the genders and the potential collapse of the Church's male-only hierarchy.

Misogyny is a dangerous evil when it is as institutionalized as it is within the Catholic Church. When Pope Benedict XVI addressed the Diplomatic Core earlier in January on the theme of protection of the creation, he couldn't resist stating that “. . .the problem of the environment is complex . . . one such attack comes from laws or proposals which, in the name of fighting discrimination, strike at the biological basis of the difference between the sexes.” Just another rebuke to remind women to know their place.

But far worse is the hypocrisy that issues from the mind and mouth of someone who likes to regard himself as the green pope. He may profess to have concern for the environment, but in his same message on the environment to the

Diplomatic Corps, his reference to ecology only in the context of “human ecology” restates the Church’s belief that humans were the sole point of creation -- the centre of the universe. That’s precisely the attitude that landed the earth in its current environmental crisis.

Not surprisingly, the Pope’s message also included a warning against a “new pantheism tinged with neo-paganism”. *Avatar* would most certainly push the buttons of those in the Church who sometimes are tempted to paint environmentalists with the brush of pantheism; on the planet Pandora, all life forms are imbued with spirit, unlike earth where only humans are considered by the Church to have souls. In the film, the human protagonist Jake Sully is reminded gently over and over again of this by the Na’vi heroine Neytiri. The Na’vi’s Great Mother does not take sides; she protects only the balance of life, Jake is told when he appeals to Eywa for help defeating the antagonist humans. All living things, Neytiri explains, must pass through the eye of Eywa when they die where they will receive and give new life. By example, she teaches Jake the appropriate and prayerful ritual to undertake whenever a creature is killed or taken in the hunt – a ritual expressing both gratitude for the gift of life shared by the creature and a promise that the “Great Mother Nature” Eywa will save it.

Cameron appears to deliberately challenge the common notion that the afterlife is reserved for humans, and why not? Since all life on earth emerged and

evolved from the same primordial slime, why wouldn't this notion of salvation of all life forms – if salvation is an ideal we feel obliged to cling to – make more sense than our anthropomorphic idea that only humans are worthy of being saved or received to some form of eternal life? For those of us who love earth's wondrous and magnificent diversity, Pandora's afterlife sounds much more complete and interesting! A heaven populated only with humans? Not so much.

On Pandora, all life – plants, animals, fungi, the Na'vi – are connected in a single web via a complex electrical or chemical communication system that possesses more connections than the human brain, explains the lead scientist to the quasi-military mining corporation exploiting Pandora's rare and highly-sought-after resource, unobtainium. Cameron's visually-delighting animation of a planet covered in lush vegetation is pulsating and alive, shimmering in sparkling iridescence, responsive to touch, linked root to root, vine to vine, in one flowing and connected sea of vegetation. Jake Sully is mesmerized, and as we watch, we can't help sharing his awe. Later, when Jake addresses the Na'vi people as the exploiters and their monstrous machines draw near and the threat to the Na'vi home tree and planet looms, Cameron has scripted a none-too-subtle warning to the viewers. The character Jake says of the earth of his day, "There is no green there. They killed their mother, and they will do the same here."

Perhaps if we humans understood the sacred to be part of creation rather than as some Father-Sky-God separate from the world dwelling in some remote heaven, the earth's environment wouldn't be under the duress it is in today. If humans understood that the earth and all its inhabitants dwell within God, are infused by God, and are interconnected with all of creation, then we would certainly be far more reverential, more appreciative of the earth and of each other. We would be more likely, as Exodus 3.5 enjoins us, to take off our shoes, for the place where we stand is holy.

As the post-Vatican II pendulum continues its swing to the conservative right, creation spirituality has fallen into disfavour or is regarded with suspicion. Some creation theologians were even tossed out of the Church altogether. But the Church's continuing to cling to a post-agrarian, 13th century notion of nature as a dangerous place that needs to be controlled and exploited – or even saved by humans for humans – is out-of-step with reality today. That position is about as big a denial of God's presence within creation – or God's capacity to determine the earth's destiny with or without human help – as one can possibly take. When I grew up, my Catholic catechism taught me that God is, indeed, everywhere – omnipresent. Yes, it may have been a teaching dished out to remind us to be good little boys and girls because God would be watching us, but why wouldn't it more importantly mean that our world – our precious earth – is also filled with the sacred?

And please, in case someone from L'Osservatore Romano reads this, pantheism is not the same as omnipresence. If you stop to think about it, would either neo-pantheism or nature worship be all that bad given the current state of affairs of our environment right now? Maybe these are questions worth exploring. Perhaps *Avatar* will nudge us to do so.

At the same time, one criticism with Cameron's portrayal of nature on Pandora is that he also portrayed it as a place of danger, with charging dinosaur-like creatures, snarling hyena-like beasts, and dragon-like flying creatures that were wrestled into submission to serve the Na'vi as a means of transporting them through the air. The difference, however, between the Christian post-agrarian view of dangerous nature on earth versus the Pandoran view of nature was that if the Na'vi respected life forms on their planet, including the dangerous ones, they had nothing to fear. Further, they could rest in the assurance that Eywa the Great Mother would preserve the balance of nature. While one could criticize this aspect of the film because on first sight this appears to absolve the Na'vi of taking personal responsibility for protecting the balance of nature, it must be remembered that the Na'vi, and indeed all of Pandora's life forms are connected to, and thus a part of, Eywa. They are one and the same and inseparable. What a wonderful understanding of our relationship to the sacred!



Cameron may not have been original when he fashioned his imaginary Eywa out of the existing notion of Mother Nature, but when he dipped his hand into the well of human yearning and collective human consciousness from which all creative endeavour springs, he retrieved something refreshing and thirst-quenching – the feminine sacred and a world able to heal and save itself through its interconnectedness. It was nice to inhabit such a beautiful world for a while.