

Heaven and Nature (and Avatar)

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Note from Pastor Kevin Lea follows this article.

It's fitting that James Cameron's "Avatar" arrived in theaters at Christmastime. Like the holiday season itself, the science fiction epic is a crass embodiment of capitalistic excess wrapped around a deeply felt religious message. It's at once the blockbuster to end all blockbusters, and the Gospel According to James.

But not the Christian Gospel. Instead, "Avatar" is Cameron's long apologia for pantheism — a faith that equates God with Nature, and calls humanity into religious communion with the natural world.

In Cameron's sci-fi universe, this communion is embodied by the blue-skinned, enviably slender Na'Vi, an alien race whose idyllic existence on the planet Pandora is threatened by rapacious human invaders. The Na'Vi are saved by the movie's hero, a turncoat Marine, but they're also saved by their faith in Eywa, the "All Mother," described variously as a network of energy and the sum total of every living thing.

If this narrative arc sounds familiar, that's because pantheism has been Hollywood's religion of choice for a generation now. It's the truth that Kevin Costner discovered when he went dancing with wolves. It's the metaphysic woven through Disney cartoons like "The Lion King" and "Pocahontas." And it's the dogma of George Lucas's Jedi, whose mystical Force "surrounds us, penetrates us, and binds the galaxy together."

Hollywood keeps returning to these themes because millions of Americans respond favorably to them. From Deepak Chopra to Eckhart Tolle, the "religion and inspiration" section in your local bookstore is crowded with titles pushing a pantheistic message. A recent [Pew Forum report](#) on how Americans mix and match theology found that many self-professed Christians hold beliefs about the "spiritual energy" of trees and mountains that would fit right in among the indigo-tinted Na'Vi.

As usual, Alexis de Tocqueville saw it coming. The American belief in the essential unity of all mankind, [Tocqueville wrote](#) in the 1830s, leads us to collapse distinctions at every level of creation. "Not content with the discovery that there is nothing in the world but a creation and a Creator," he suggested, democratic man "seeks to expand and simplify his conception by including God and the universe in one great whole."

Today there are other forces that expand pantheism's American appeal. We pine for what we've left behind, and divinizing the natural world is an obvious way to express unease about our hyper-technological society. The threat of global warming, meanwhile, has lent the cult of Nature qualities that every successful religion needs — a crusading spirit, a rigorous set of 'thou shalt nots,' and a piping-hot apocalypse.

At the same time, pantheism opens a path to numinous experience for people uncomfortable with the literal-mindedness of the monotheistic religions — with their miracle-working deities and holy books, their virgin births and resurrected bodies. As the Polish philosopher Leszek Kolakowski noted, attributing divinity to the natural world helps “bring God closer to human experience,” while “depriving him of recognizable personal traits.” For anyone who pines for transcendence but recoils at the idea of a demanding Almighty who interferes in human affairs, this is an ideal combination.

Indeed, it represents a form of religion that even atheists can support. Richard Dawkins has called pantheism “a sexed-up atheism.” (He means that as a compliment.) Sam Harris concluded his polemic “The End of Faith” by rhapsodizing about the mystical experiences available from immersion in “the roiling mystery of the world.” Citing Albert Einstein’s expression of religious awe at the “beauty and sublimity” of the universe, Dawkins allows, “In this sense I too am religious.”

The question is whether Nature actually deserves a religious response. Traditional theism has to wrestle with the problem of evil: if God is good, why does he allow suffering and death? But Nature is suffering and death. Its harmonies require violence. Its “circle of life” is really a cycle of mortality. And the human societies that hew closest to the natural order aren’t the shining Edens of James Cameron’s fond imaginings. They’re places where existence tends to be nasty, brutish and short.

Religion exists, in part, precisely because humans aren’t at home amid these cruel rhythms. We stand half inside the natural world and half outside it. We’re beasts with self-consciousness, predators with ethics, mortal creatures who yearn for immortality.

This is an agonized position, and if there’s no escape upward — or no God to take on flesh and come among us, as the Christmas story has it — a deeply tragic one.

Pantheism offers a different sort of solution: a downward exit, an abandonment of our tragic self-consciousness, a re-merger with the natural world our ancestors half-escaped millennia ago.

But except as dust and ashes, Nature cannot take us back.

Note from Pastor Kevin Lea: It should be obvious to all who are watching and praying (as Jesus commanded us to) that the powers of spiritual deception are getting stronger with every Hollywood blockbuster.

Investors were willing to plop down nearly \$300 million dollars to make Avatar, knowing the movie audiences of the world would be scrambling to call this bid and raise it to record heights.

Why? - Because they knew Avatar’s religious message is what people around the world are wrapping their lives and currency around: the worship of nature and Gaea (the earth goddess). Mixing this message with unprecedented special effects and 3D animation was a sure winner - with Avatar now standing alone as the biggest blockbuster ever.

Ross Douthat accurately concludes his article with, “But except as dust and ashes, Nature cannot take us back.” However, the God of the Bible so loved fallen man that He

*sent Jesus, who took our place in judgment, thus making a way for God to **take us back** into a heavenly relationship with Him.*

Millions have left their Avatar movie theater experience yearning for a utopia-like Pandora. But James Cameron's Pandora is a mirage which will only lead those who put their hope in it into deeper despair as the realities of this fallen world continue to slap them back into reality.

*Only when sin is dealt with can a real utopia (heaven) be hoped for. Jesus (and only Jesus) came to deal with this root cause of human suffering, and only repentance from sin and a faith-based hope in Jesus as our Savior will bring true satisfaction of soul and spirit. The world can have Avatar, Pandora, and all the other lying mirages that Satan has deceived the masses with. As for me, "Just Give Me Jesus" – **because Jesus is real!***

Jeremy Camp – Give Me Jesus

In the morning, when I rise
In the morning, when I rise
In the morning, when I rise
Give me Jesus

Give me Jesus
Give me Jesus
You can have all this world (or Pandora)
Just give me Jesus

When I am alone
When I am alone
Oh, when I am alone
Give me Jesus

When I come to die
When I come to die
Oh, when I come to die
Give me Jesus

Ross Douhat repeated: Pantheism offers a different sort of solution: a downward exit, an abandonment of our tragic self-consciousness, a re-merger with the natural world our ancestors half-escaped millennia ago. But except as dust and ashes, Nature cannot take us back.

Romans 1:20-25 For since the creation of the world His invisible attributes are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, even His eternal power and Godhead, so that they are without excuse, because, although they knew God, they did not glorify Him as God, nor were thankful, but became futile in their thoughts, and their foolish hearts were darkened. Professing to be wise, they became fools, and changed the glory of the incorruptible God into an image made like corruptible man-- and birds and four-footed animals and creeping things. Therefore God also gave them up to uncleanness, in the lusts of their hearts, to dishonor their bodies among themselves, who exchanged the truth of God for the lie, and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever. Amen. (NKJ)