

Two Different Gospels for The Night before Christmas –“Avatar” and the Manged Messiah

Colleagues,

Two of you readers—one Canadian, one Texan—keep me up-to-date with the New York Times. You sent me this week’s NYT review of “Avatar,” the blockbuster movie released “just in time for Christmas.” I haven’t seen the film, and from the review that follows I’m wondering: Is it such a superb proclamation of an “other gospel” that I’ve just gotta see it, or is the two-word commentary from one of you enough, and I should save my money? “Deus absconditus,” [God (stays) hidden], the Canadian said. Says the NYT reviewer: “[It is] not the Christian Gospel. Instead, ‘Avatar’ is [writer-director James] Cameron’s long apologia for pantheism . . . Hollywood’s religion of choice . . . because millions of Americans respond favorably to [it].”

I don’t have to go to Avatar for evidence that the Gospel of pantheism is widespread in America. It’s alive and (sob!) well in the Schroeder clan and has been known to surface when conversation gets around to “what do you really believe?”

For today’s Christmas posting, I’ll pass on to you the NYT review of Avatar, and then hand on to you some selections from Martin Luther’s Christmas sermons. You’ll divine the difference.

Peace and Joy!

Ed Schroeder

<http://www.nytimes.com/2009/12/21/opinion/21douthat1.html?emc=eta1>

THE NEW YORK TIMES

Heaven and Nature

By ROSS DOUTHAT

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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.

Excerpts from Christmas Sermons by Martin Luther

1. Deus Revelatus (God revealed). 1522 "And she brought forth her firstborn son, and wrapped him in swaddling clothes, and laid him in a manger; because there was no room for them in the inn." Luke 2:7

Behold, how simply these things happen on earth, and yet they are so highly esteemed in heaven. On earth it happens thus: there is a poor young wife, Mary, at Nazareth, thought nothing of and regarded as one of the lowliest women in the town. No one is aware of the great wonder that she bears. And she herself keeps silent, does not pride herself, and thinks she is the lowliest woman in the town. She goes up with Joseph, her mate. They have probably neither man-servant nor maid-servant, but he is master and servant, and she is mistress and maid. Perhaps they left their homestead to look after itself, or they may have given it into a neighbor's care.

As they are thus drawing nigh to Bethlehem, the Evangelist presents them to us as the most wretched and disdained of all the pilgrims, being forced to give way to everyone, till at last they are turned out into a stable, and made to share shelter, table, and bedchamber with the beasts, while many a wicked man sits in the inn above and is treated like a lord. Not a soul notices and knows what God is doing in that stable. He leaves empty the manors and stately chambers, and leaves the people to their eating and drinking, and their good cheer. But this comfort and great treasure remains hidden from them.

O, what a thick, black darkness was over Bethlehem then, that she failed to apprehend so great a light! How truly God shows that He has no regard for the world and its ways, and again, how the world shows that it has no regard for God, for what He is, and has, and does.

2. Joyful Exchange (aka Sweet Swap). 1522 "The Word was made flesh." John 1:14

Christ has a holy birth, immaculate and pure. Man's birth is unclean, sinful, and accursed, and man can only be helped through the holy birth of Christ. Yet Christ's birth cannot be shared out to us, nor would it help; but it is offered spiritually unto every man wherever the Word is preached. He who firmly believes and receives it will not suffer harm because of his own sinful birth.

That is the way we are cleansed of our wretched Adam's birth, and that is why it was Christ's will and pleasure to be born as man, so that in Him we might be born again. "Of His own will He brought us forth by the Word of truth, that we should be reborn unto a new creation." Behold, in this manner Christ takes our birth away from us and sinks it in His own birth and gives us His birth, that we may be made new and clean, as if it were our own birth. Therefore shall every Christian man rejoice in this birth of Christ, and glory in it, as if he too were born of Mary. He who does not believe that, or doubts it, is no Christian.

O, this is the great joy of which the angel speaks. This is God's comfort and His surpassing goodness, that man (if he believeth) may glory in such a treasure, that Mary be his very Mother, Christ his Brother, and God his Father. For all these things have truly happened that we might believe in them.

See, then, that thou make this birth thine own and dost exchange with Him, so that thou mayest be rid of thy birth, and mayest take over His, which comes to pass when thou believest. Thus dost thou surely sit in the Virgin Mary's lap, and art her darling child. But thou must learn to have such faith and to exercise it throughout thine earthly life, for it always need strengthening.

3. Fear Not! 1531 "Fear not!" Luke 2:10

Thereby is shown that this King is born unto those who live in fear and trembling, and such alone belong to His Kingdom. Unto them shall be preached, as the angels preached unto the poor, affrighted shepherds: "Behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy." And, of a truth, such joy is offered to all men, but only those can receive it who are affrighted in their consciences, and troubled in their hearts. These are they who belong to me and to my preaching, and unto them shall I bring good tidings. Is it not a wonderful thing that this joy is nearest to those whose conscience is the most restless?

The world is happy and of good cheer when it has loaves and fishes, means and money, power and glory. But a sad and troubled heart desires nothing but peace and comfort, that it may know whether God is graciously inclined towards it. And this joy, wherein a troubled heart finds peace and rest, is so great that all the world's happiness is nothing in comparison. Therefore should such good tidings be preached to wretched consciences as the angel preaches here: Harken unto me, you of a sad and troubled heart, I bring you good tidings. For He hath not come down to earth and been made Man, that He might cast you into hell, much less was He for that end crucified and given over unto death for you. But He has come, that with great joy he might rejoice in Him. And if thou wouldst truly

define Christ and properly describe who and what He is, mark well the angel's word, how he defined and describes Him, saying that He is and is called: "Great Joy." O, blessed is the man who can well understand the meaning of this word, and hold it truly in his heart; for therein dwelleth strength.

4. For You. 1544 "Fear not: for behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, which is Christ the Lord." Luke 2:10-11.

The little word "you" should make us joyful. For unto whom does He speak? Unto wood or stones? Nay, verily, He speaks unto men; and not unto one or two, but unto all the people. How then shall we understand these words? Shall we yet doubt the grace of God and say: "St. Peter and St. Paul may well rejoice that their Savior is come, but I may not, I am a wretched sinner; the dear and precious treasure is not for me!"? My friend, if thou wilt say: He is not mine, then shall I say: Whose is He then? Has He come to save geese and ducks and cows? Thou must look here who He is. If He had come to save another creature, yea, of a truth, He had assumed the likeness of that creature. But now He hath been made the Son of Man.

And who art thou, and who am I? Are we not likewise sons of men? Yea verily, we are! Who, then, but men should receive this child? The angels do not need Him. The devils do not want Him. But we need Him, and for our sake was He made Man. Thus it behooves us to receive Him joyfully, as here the angels say: "Unto you is born a Savior." Is it not a great and marvelous thing that an angel should come from heaven with such good news? and that afterwards so many thousands of angels are filled with overflowing joy, which makes them desire that we should also be glad, and

should receive such grace with thankful hearts? And therefore we should write this little word (with flaming letters) in our hearts: "For You!" and should joyfully welcome the birth of this Savior.

—These citations come from "Day By Day We Magnify Thee: Daily Readings for the Church Year. Selected from the Writings of Martin Luther," tr. by Margarete Steiner, Philadelphia, Fortress Press, 1982.