

Criticism of 'Avatar' spiritualism off base

Demetria Martinez | Jan. 20, 2010 NCR Today



I was dismayed to hear of Vatican criticism of the movie "Avatar," based upon the movie's central theme of humans versus nature. *L'Osservatore Romano* said the film "gets bogged down by a spiritualism linked to the worship of nature."

The Vatican Radio said that the film "cleverly winks at all those pseudo-doctrines that turn ecology into the religion of the millennium."

"Nature is no longer a creation to defend, but a divinity to worship," the radio said.

Church critics would do well to see the movie again, this time with some humility -- and a sense of history. The movie is about earthlings who utilize overwhelming technological power to try and conquer the indigenous Na'Vi people, a mission that also results in destruction of the environment.

When I saw the movie I could not help but think of Christianity's complicity in the conquest of the Americas. The Spaniards had gold and God in their eyes as they proceeded with the attempted genocide of New World indigenous peoples. Here's but one example of this murderous crusade: The Spaniards managed to annihilate the Taino Indian population of more than 200,000 on the island of Hispaniola -- this within 30 years of first contact with the Indians in 1493, according to scholar Ramon A. Flores in a recent article about "Avatar" in the *Albuquerque Journal*.

Those of us who are indigenous to these lands were force fed Catholicism. Yes, I know there were enlightened priests who spoke out for decent treatment of Indians. But there is no denying the unhealed spiritual wounding from this encounter with Catholicism. Many of us who are heirs to the New World conquest carry this cultural memory with us to Mass: The God who saves is also the God in whose name the conquerors attempted to remake a continent. We can forgive but we cannot forget.

I urge people to see "Avatar" and to think back on the treatment of Indians on this continent during the past 500 years -- not to mention the ongoing brutalization of indigenous peoples worldwide.

And yes, pay close attention to the theme of nature which has the Vatican in a tizzy. Bolivia's first indigenous president, Evo Morales, has praised "Avatar" for what he calls its message of saving the environment from exploitation. If we come away from the movie inspired to do something good for the planet, "Avatar" will have served an important purpose in these frightening times.

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