

'Avatar': A theological movie

Maureen Fiedler | Feb. 15, 2010 NCR Today



With snow piled high, and a movie theater nearby, I headed out yesterday to see "Avatar." It's been praised for cinematography (and that definitely *is* great), but I also found it a deeply theological movie.

First impression: it's one of the best anti-imperialist films I've ever seen. Whether one believes in the "just war theory" or not, this shows a clearly unjust war waged by earthlings in search of a precious mineral on the planet Pandora. And the crude earthlings leading the military assault are ready to destroy the civilization of Pandora to get what they want.

All this provides a thinly veiled analogy for U.S. wars in the Middle East, and it's not just because of a quest for mineral resources. "Avatar" portrays Pandora natives as having a "strange religion." For some Americans, Islam is a "strange religion." On Pandora, the strange faith is "tree worshipping." And except for a couple characters who cross over between the two worlds, there is no "interfaith dialogue," or anything close to it.

"Avatar" is also an adventure in ecological theology. The natives of Pandora explain the beauty of their creation to an earthling who eventually becomes one of them. They revere creation as a system, and they see themselves as part of that whole. The death of any creature brings sadness. (This might sound familiar to readers of Thomas Berry).

At one point, we are told that the earthlings had destroyed their own planet and came in search of others. And those earthlings are pursuing mineral wealth on Pandora with an openly-admitted greed that any moral theologian would condemn.

"Avatar" is far more than a movie; it's a theological adventure.

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