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## PANDORA'S BOX: RELIGION, ECOLOGY AND POPULAR CULTURE

The paper is devoted to the link between the ecology of religion and popular culture. Recently these fields have become topical for both contemporary cultural discourse and religious studies while environmentalism itself has often been considered as a form of implicit religion. J. Cameron's film "Avatar" being an exemplarily work of popular culture raising environmental issues is in the main focus of the paper. The 'Na'vi' culture and religion invented for the purposes of the film are interpreted in tight connection to Pandora's nature. The methodological approach underling the importance of investigating archaic religions in their coexistence with nature was developed by Å. Hultkrantz whose theory became the basis of the ecology of religion, however here it is applied to the study of a product of popular culture. In "Avatar" one can see a range of religious beliefs starting with a Hindu term used for the title and finishing with "animism" and "pantheism". These religious ideas gave rise to sharp criticism from some Catholics and Protestants who blamed the film for promoting worship of nature turning it into divinity and ecology into religion. On the other hand, Christianity itself has been criticized for its neglect of nature resulting from its fight with paganism. So, in some sense "Avatar" "promoting" an absolutely different attitude to nature returns us to the pre-Christian epoch. The religious beliefs of the Na'vi can be taken as an example of "dark green religion" and the main hero resembles contemporary radical environmentalists. "Avatar" definitely romanticizes the so called "noble savage" but it is hard to deny that in the field of religion, ecology and popular culture Cameron's work is a milestone. Pandora invented by Cameron has opened its box to make us think more carefully of religion and ecology as the means of popular culture which are very easy to understand. Refs 24.

*Keywords:* ecology of religion, popular culture, environmentalism, "Avatar".

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### ЯЩИК ПАНДОРЫ: РЕЛИГИЯ, ЭКОЛОГИЯ И ПОПУЛЯРНАЯ КУЛЬТУРА

Статья посвящена связи между экологией религии и популярной культурой. В последнее время эти направления актуальны как для современного культурологического дискурса, так и для религиозных исследований, а энвайронментализм часто рассматривается как форма имплицитной религии. Картина Дж. Кэмерона «Аватар», будучи показательным продуктом популярной культуры, поднимающим вопросы защиты окружающей среды, находится в центре данного исследования. Культура и религия Нави, созданная в фильме, интерпретируются в тесной связи с природой Пандоры. Методологический подход, подчеркивающий важность изучения архаических религий в их сосуществовании с природой, был разработан О. Хульткранцем, теория которого легла в основу экологии религии, но в данной статье она применяется для исследования продукта популярной культуры. В «Аватаре» можно увидеть целый ряд религиозных представлений, начиная с индуистского термина, использованного для заглавия фильма, и заканчивая своеобразным анимизмом и пантеизмом. Эти религиозные идеи вызвали резкую критику со стороны некоторых католиков и протестантов, обвиняющих картину в пропаганде поклонения природе, которая превращена в богиню, а экология — в религию. Вместе с тем само христианство часто критикуется за пренебрежение природой, вытекающее из борьбы с язычеством. Так «Аватар», продвигающий совершенно иное отношение к природе, в некотором смысле возвращает нас в дохристианскую эпоху. Религиозные воззрения Нави можно рассматривать в качестве "dark green religion", а главного героя — как радикального энвайронменталиста. Образ благородного дикаря определенно романтизируется в картине,

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но трудно отрицать, что в сфере религии, экологии и популярной культуры работа Кэмерона стала ключевой вехой. Пандора, изобретенная им, открыла свой ящик, чтобы заставить нас задуматься о связи религии и экологии посредством доступного языка популярной культуры. Библиогр. 24 назв.

*Ключевые слова:* экология религии, популярная культура, энвайронментализм, «Аватар».

In the history of religious studies religions have been usually considered either in terms of sociological/anthropological approach or in terms of divine-human relations. Yet since the beginning of the 1970-s the discourse of religious studies gradually started shifting to other aspects of investigation, one of which is a field of ecology and religion. This process indicated several tendencies. Partly it came as an answer to the crisis other methods of religious studies were undergoing, primarily — the phenomenological one. On the other hand, it reflected the increasing significance of ecological and environmental agenda.

Ecology of religion ideologist was a Swedish anthropologist Å. Hultkrantz who formulated an ecological approach to the study of religions in his policy paper of the same title (1966) [11]. He particularly stressed the importance of that methodology for archaic religious forms investigation and understanding. Hultkrantz continued to develop his method in later works [12]. Hultkrantz's ideas proved to be rather fruitful as other scholars started researching religion in complex with ecological issues [6; 16; 24; 5].

For Hultkrantz ecology of religion is “the study of the environmental integration of a religion and its implications” and as he carries on he mentions that it is “moderately environmentalistic in the sense that it attributes a decisive influence to environment in the organization and development of religious forms” [12, p. 222–223]. Hultkrantz stresses that by environment he means “natural surroundings, topography, biotope, climate, as well as the demography and the natural resources”. Nevertheless, he opposes reducing ecology of religion to the latest one, to its economic dimension.

However, it must be underlined that nowadays the field of ecology and religion seems to be very different from what Hultkrantz wrote about forty years ago, hoping that being a discipline specializing in a particular sphere (like, for example, psychology or phenomenology of religion) ecology of religion would enrich scientific study of religion. As it is noted by Dell deChant, contemporary “religion and ecology is surprisingly normative and ‘activist’” [9, p. 32], which seriously undermines its scientific value. Obviously, not all the works in the field are corrupted by some ideology whatever fair it may be. DeChant himself, criticizing tendentious approaches, strives to deliver unbiased study of climate change and rather unexpectedly considers climate change debate to be a phenomenon of popular culture. He tries to analyze it in tight connection to American consumption culture which in turn he understands as a kind of implicit religion, not using the term itself. The environmental protection movement can undoubtedly be interpreted as implicit religion which has already been done by John Bartkowski and Scott Swearinge [4].

Ecology and religion field offers various topics for investigation but in this paper it is proposed to return to Hultkrantz's understanding of the field primarily focusing on the importance of nature and ecological context for primitive religions study with that essential difference that the primitive religion in question will be not real, but invented in popular culture. Nonetheless, when discussing religion and ecology in the context of contemporary culture, there is another topical issue that cannot be ignored — the link be-

tween ecology and new religious movements. In recent years we have been able to observe increasing popularity of environmental aspect in New Age religions, the case of Anastasia movement is just one of many good examples of the close bond between some NRM and ecological agenda [1; 3].

Popular culture, and first of all, cinematography, also offers us a broad field for investigation. Definitely, ecology and environment protection themes have been presented in Hollywood films as diverse as the classics such as Chinatown (Roman Polanski, 1974), and cartoons like WALL-E (Andrew Stanton, 2008), environmental protests like Erin Brockovich (Steven Soderbergh, 2000), not to mention numerous disaster-films, for instance, The Day After Tomorrow (Roland Emmerich, 2004) [For more detail look at: 7; 15]. The correlation between religion and ecology can be traced in the cinema as well. Without doubt one of the most exemplary works here is D. Cameron's blockbuster "Avatar" (2009) which can be interpreted as a kind of ecological or anti-colonial manifest. It is also taken as a version of dark green religion — the term introduced by Bron Taylor who explains it as religion "in which nature is sacred, has intrinsic value, and is therefore due reverent care" [19, p. 10] and that rather than rescue from this world "offers an enveloping sense of belonging to the biosphere, which is considered sacred [19, p. 217].

This science fiction movie is set in 2154 on Pandora, a planet inhabited by blue-skinned humanoids Na'vi where humans mine for unobtainium — a valuable energy resource. The Na'vi live in harmony with nature and worship their god-mother Eywa. They are bonded to other creatures of the planet not only figuratively, but also literally as they can psychically connect with them and share feelings and emotions (that is why the film is often used in discussions about empathy) [8]. The central element of their culture and the whole planet is the Tree of Souls — the mystical heart of Pandora. Being a special spiritual centre for the Na'vi the Tree of Souls enables them to contact all the previous generations of Pandora and use their experience. It is a source of inner force and meaning for the Na'vi and they are ready to defend it to the last drop of blood when the humans decide to destroy it for the sake of unobtainium richly laying below it. Together with several humans helping them, first of all — the main hero of the movie, Jake Sully, who is acting through an avatar (a special body which he distantly mentally operates) the Na'vi fight with the military mining for the unobtainium. The war with humans seems almost lost for the Na'vi when Pandora's flora and fauna suddenly start protecting their planet.

Cameron's film contains several aspects interesting for the scholars of religion. To begin with, the title itself is taken from Hinduism and the image of blue-coloured Na'vi's skin and a kind of tilaka marks on their faces resemble us of Vishnu and his avatars Krishna and Rama. Cameron characterized this resemblance as subconscious [18], meanwhile Pandora reminds us of India not only in the appearances of its inhabitants and the wild beauty of its forests. Indian religions have another important similarity to the one of Pandora — respect for all living creatures, not just human, which the Abrahamic religions, especially Christianity, are often blamed to lack. Since 1967 when Linn White noted that "Christianity is the most anthropocentric religion the world has seen" [22, p. 2005] the issue of Christian attitude to nature has become a source of controversy [13; 2, p. 89–113; 19, p. 19].

One of the central messages of the movie is consumer and instrumentalist attitude to nature typical for western culture. So, we can read "Avatar" differently — as a struggle not between the RDA (a mining corporation from the Earth) and the Na'vi but between

so called western civilization with its advanced technologies but abuse of nature and archaic or oriental type of culture which is frequently believed to live in complete harmony with the environment, killing only in need. However, such romanticized view of the latter seems not to take into account the devastating impact on nature and ecosystems some of cultures of archaic type have had, for example, the culture of Easter Island. So, one may argue that unfortunately the harmonized coexistence with nature the Na'vi are enjoying is rather utopian and almost impossible for humanity. We just do not have tsaheylu — a neural connection which happens when two creatures of Pandora connect their queues. “Avatar” obviously expresses critical attitude to militarism, imperialism and colonialism that is why in some sense it can be even called anti-American.

Other significant aspects to consider are so called “animism” and “pantheism” of “Avatar”. Although the religious views of the Na'vi are not quite clear, we can assume that they believe in some kind of souls as they speak to their dead through the Tree of Souls. Several columnists have mentioned that the Na'vi also believe in reincarnation as finally Jake is able to move completely into his avatar leaving his crippled body aside. [14]. Such assumption seems rather strained as there is no other proof of this belief existence — no other soul appears to have resurrected in another body on Pandora so far. However, we have seen only the first of the four parts, so there might be more cases of metempsychoses. Besides, Jake saves his personality — he preserves memories from his previous human life and his human experience which does not exactly look as the classical idea of reincarnation.

The “animism” (or “shamanism”) of “Avatar” can be distinguished in the ability of the Na'vi to “talk” to their ancestors and in the figure of their spiritual leader who is able to interpret Eywa's will and performs special rites trying to “move” Jake's and his colleague Dr. Grace's spirits into their avatars. Taylor characterizes the Na'vi's spirituality as “relational animism” — “respect toward all other organisms, even dangerous prey animals”. Quoting Maris Wilhelm and Dirk Mathison [23, p.xiv.] he claims that the Na'vi's animism is rooted in their “belief that Eywa is the author and origin of the vital interconnectedness of all its living things” [20, p. 15].

The pantheistic ideas in “Avatar” are more distinct. The Na'vi worship their “Great Mother” — Eywa. As Taylor notices “the Na'vi perceive their planet itself as a Gaia-like, organic, bio-neurological network, which they personify as the goddess Eywa. The Na'vi believe that Eywa does not take sides between different species on Pandora but rather promotes the balance and flourishing of the entire natural world.” [20, p.15]. This “pantheism” gave rise to sharp criticism from some Catholics and Protestants who blamed the film for promoting worship of nature turning it into divinity and ecology into religion [21, p. 302–304].

On the other hand, as it has already been mentioned, Christianity itself has been criticized for its neglect of nature resulting from its fight with paganism. As White wrote as back as in 1967, “In Antiquity every tree, every spring, every stream, every hill had its own genius loci, its guardian spirit. These spirits were accessible to men, but were very unlike men; centaurs, fauns, and mermaids show their ambivalence. Before one cut a tree, mined a mountain, or dammed a brook, it was important to placate the spirit in charge of that particular situation, and to keep it placated. By destroying pagan animism, Christianity made it possible to exploit nature in a mood of indifference to the feelings of natural objects.” [22, p. 2005]. So, in some sense “Avatar” “promoting” absolutely different attitude to nature returns us to the pre-Christian epoch.

Whether pantheistic or not, Cameron's message, which definitely can be interpreted on different levels, nevertheless is absolutely clear. "They killed their mother", says Jake praying to Eywa and he means here that people destroyed the Earth. Last but not least, whatever primitive or trite the plot of the film might seem, Pandora's beauty charms us and we cannot help dreading that after all Jake's words can be true if not now than in the nearest future.

It appears that we have every right to follow Taylor and take the religious beliefs of the Na'vi as an example of what he calls "dark green religion" characterizing modern radical environmentalism the same way [19, p. 71–102]. "Religion" here he uses as a "family" term — a concept developed by Benson Saler which enables us to call religion-resembling phenomena "religions" [17]. Indeed, Jake Sully, a human who fights against other humans to protect Pandora's flora, fauna and the Na'vi, resembles contemporary radical environmentalists, while Hultcrantz's methodology emphasizing the link between ecology and religion but once developed for primitive religions study can be now applied to modern society and even popular culture analysis.

"Avatar" definitely romanticizes so called "noble savage" or "ecological Indian", the script does seem not developed enough and the storyline is rather predictable but it is hard to deny that in the field of religion, ecology and popular culture Cameron's work is a milestone — not any other work of popular culture has been that persuasive carrying its environmental message to people of absolutely different cultures, ages and backgrounds. Pandora invented by Cameron has opened its box to make us think more carefully of religion and ecology by the means of popular culture which are so easy to understand.

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