Maintaining the Balance in "The Dark Knight Rises": Ra's Al Ghul, Yoda, and the Gospel

Submitted by admin on Tue, 07/31/2012 - 12:13

I saw "Dark Knight Rises" last week. Liked it, for the most part. I liked showing Batman as a very vulnerable, wounded hero (a clear tip of the hat to Alan Moore's brilliant *Dark Knight Returns*). But one thing bothered me: I could not, for the life of me, figure out why Bane wanted Gotham destroyed. It took me a while to put all the pieces together.

[Continue at your own risk: Here be spoilers!]

At first glance, it seems as though, when all is said and done, it's a simple revenge motivation. Miranda (a.k.a. Talia al Ghul) says, "You killed my father, and so, Bruce, I'll kill the only thing you really care about: Gotham." (P.S.: I didn't really feel that the twist ending/reveal of finding out that Miranda was Ra's' daughter, and Bane the "protector" was really necessary. A felt a little too M. Night Shyamalan to me (cf. the end of *Unbreakable*)). So Bane and Talia are just motivated by revenge, right?

But no, Talia and Bane keep going on about their "mission," which somehow was assigned to them (somehow) by a dead Ra's Al Ghul to destroy Gotham, and so restore balance to the universe. As Ra's says to Bruce in the Pit, "All your work is based on a lie. Did you really believe that Gotham deserved saving? This way, balance is restored." (I'm paraphrasing, since the script hasn't seemed to have made its way onto the interwebs yet). If you think about it, Ra's makes some fair points. *If* you believe that balance in the universe involves a balancing of light and dark, good and evil, life and death (mimicking popular Daoism), well then, yeah, killing off a few million (relatively) innocent Gothamites might redress that balance (after all, Batman's been keeping 'em alive for a while now, when if left to their own, they would've died). And again, who's to say that they *deserve* to be saved? Gotham's got a dark side, it's people selfish and insular, comfy and insensitive to social injustice, etc. Why not have a Bane-style revolution that ends in its destruction? Might even be good for the planet and stave off overpopulation.

But we instinctively revolt against Ra's fatalistic vision of the death of millions. Why? Because *they are human beings! And you don't treat humans as disposable things like that!* But, to quote Tim Keller, "Sez who?" Who's to say that the life of a single human is worth getting in the way of balancing the whole freakin' universe? (Quick hint: his name starts with a capital G).

And this is the problem with Hollywood's fascination with Eastern mystical religion: it conveniently overlooks the nasty consequences of these systems stretched out into their logical, anti-humanistic conclusions. Instead, they covertly smuggle in some Christian-inspired ideals, such as justice for the individual (vs. Bane's Marx-inspired justice for classes), mercy ("No guns, no killing," says the Bat), and the responsibility to protect the life of the (relatively) innocent, even if they aren't, strictly speaking, deserving of saving. Batman acts all nihilistic, but in fact, his actions echo the gospel. The Christian gospel of justice *and* mercy to the undeserving provides roots to Batman's actions, even though he's certainly no follower of Christ (he's too obsessed with his own power and responsibility to think of depending upon an outside power, like God).

Eastern dualism simply cannot provide those roots. It sometimes *feels* as if it can, as in Lucas' *The Empire Strikes Back.* While training young Jedi-in-training Luke Skywalker on Dagobah, wrinkly toad-guru Yoda waxes eloquently about "The Force" that binds all life together and maintains balance. From the way Yoda speaks, following the flow of the force means respecting life and confronting evil. But why should it? In the end, why should maintaining the balance mean "You must confront Vader" rather than "You must destroy Gotham"? How are we to choose between fighting the villains and *becoming* the villain? If all there is is the universe's balance to guide you, who's to say which vision wins? Unless you resort to a worldview cheat and smuggle in some Christian-based human rights ideals.

In short, *The Dark Knight Rises* is a great film (not as good as *Avengers* in my estimation, but I have a man-crush on Joss Whedon). But, like *Empire,* it resorts to a sort of worldview smuggling that just begins to ask hard questions about Eastern mysticism, but abandons the search before things get uncomfortable. I wonder if any Hollywood filmmaker is brave enough to go there (I'm looking at you, Joss). If not, it's a handy thing to keep in mind: In this supposedly uber-secular age, even superheros need the gospel to be heroic.

Source URL (retrieved on *11/23/2026 - 23:15*): http://www.turnau.cz/node/52