

THE GOLDEN COMPASS

The release of The Golden Compass as a major motion picture represents a new challenge for Christians -- especially parents. The release of a popular film with major actors that presents a message directly subversive of Christianity is something new. It is not likely to be the last.

Having seen the movie at an advance viewing and having read all three books of His Dark Materials, I can assure Christians that we face a real challenge -- one that will require careful thinking and intellectual engagement. Why is this movie such a challenge?

First of all, The Golden Compass is an extremely attractive movie. Like the book on which it is based, the movie is a very sophisticated story that is very well told. The casting was excellent. Nicole Kidman and Daniel Craig (the latest James Bond actor) are joined by others including Sam Elliott and newcomer Dakota Blue Richards, who plays the central role of 11-year-old Lyra Belacqua. Kidman is chilling as the beautiful but evil Marisa Coulter and Craig is perfect as Lord Asriel. Actor Ian McKellen (Gandalf in the Lord of the Rings trilogy) is the voice of Iorek Byrnison, the armoured bear.

The movie is very well done and will be very attractive to audiences of all ages. The special effects are superior to any previous movie of the type, including the Lord of the Rings trilogy (also released by New Line Cinema). Everything is in place for this to be a blockbuster at the box office.

Second, the movie is based in a story that is captivating, sophisticated, and truly interesting. Philip Pullman is a skilled writer and teller of tales. His invented worlds of The Golden Compass and the entire His Dark Materials trilogy are about as good as the fantasy genre can offer. His characters are believable and the dialogue is constant -- largely due to Pullman's brilliant invention of a companion for each character -- a "daemon."

The bottom line is that these books and this movie will attract a lot of attention and will captivate many readers and viewers. So, what's the problem?

This is not just any fantasy trilogy or film project. Philip Pullman has an agenda -- an agenda about as subtle as an army tank. His agenda is nothing less than to expose what he believes is the tyranny of the Christian faith and the Christian church. His hatred of the biblical storyline is clear. He is an atheist whose most important literary project is intended to offer a moral narrative that will reverse the biblical account of the fall and provide a liberating mythology for a new secular age.

The great enemy of humanity in the three books, The Golden Compass, The Subtle Knife, and The Amber Spyglass (together known as His Dark Materials) is the Christian church, identified as the evil Magisterium. The Magisterium, representing church authority, is afraid of human freedom and seeks to repress human sexuality. The Magisterium uses the biblical narrative of the Fall and the doctrine of original sin to repress humanity. It is both violent and vile and it will stop at nothing to protect its own interests and to preserve its power.

Pullman's attack on biblical Christianity is direct and undeniable. He once questioned why his books attracted little controversy even as the Harry Potter books attracted so much. He told an Australian newspaper that what he is "saying things that are far more subversive than anything poor old Harry has said. My books are about killing God."

Will viewers of the movie see all this?

The direct attack on Christianity and God is toned down in the movie. But any informed person will recognize the Magisterium as representing the Church and Christianity. Of course, in our world the Magisterium is the authoritative leadership of the Roman Catholic Church. In Pullman's world it represents Christianity as a whole.

Indeed, Pullman's tale tells of John Calvin assuming the papacy and moving the headquarters to Geneva, thus combining the Catholic and Reformation traditions into one. In the movie, the Magisterium appears to be located in London. In any event,

the point is not subtle.

The most direct attacks upon Christianity and God do not appear until the last book, *The Amber Spyglass*, in which Lyra and Will (a boy her age who first appears in the second book) eventually kill God, who turns out to be a decrepit and feeble old imposter who was hardly worth the killing.

Is Pullman's attack on Christianity exaggerated by his critics?

No -- his attack is neither hidden nor subtle. The entire premise of the trilogy is that Lyra is the child foretold by prophecy who will reverse the curse of the Fall and free humanity from the lie of original sin. Whereas in Christian theology it is Jesus Christ who reverses the curse through His work of atonement on the Cross, Pullman presents his own theology of sorts in which the Fall is reversed through the defiance of these children. As Pullman insists, Eve and Adam were right to eat the forbidden fruit and God was a tyrant to forbid them the fruit of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil.

The supernatural element of Pullman's story is "Dust," which is seen by the Magisterium as original sin but is presented by Pullman as the essence of life itself. In *The Golden Compass*, Lyra is given an "alethiometer" or "golden compass" which is filled with Dust and tells the truth to one qualified to operate it. Readers are told that a great battle is coming in which forces fighting for human freedom and happiness will confront (and destroy) the Magisterium and God. In the last volume of the trilogy, a character known as Dr. Mary Malone explains her discovery to Lyra and Will: "I used to be a nun, you see. I thought physics could be done to the glory of God, till I saw there wasn't any God at all and that physics was more interesting anyway. The Christian religion is a very powerful and convincing mistake, that's all."

Is there more to the larger story?

Yes, and it has to do with sex. Surprisingly graphic and explicit sex. Pullman believes that the Christian church is horribly repressive about sex and that this is rooted in the idea of the Fall. As he told Hanna Rosin of the *Atlantic Monthly*, "Why the Christian Church has spent 2,000 years condemning this glorious moment, well, that's a mystery. I want to confront that, I suppose, by telling a story that the so-called original sin is anything but. It's the thing that makes us fully human."

Puberty is a big part of Pullman's concern. Coming-of-age stories are one of the most common forms of fiction, but Pullman's packs a punch that readers cannot miss. He wants to celebrate the adolescent's arrival at sexual awareness. Remember that the child's daemon can change forms until puberty. At that point it is fixed as a single creature that reflects the personality and character of the young adult. Puberty means the coming of sexual feelings. The Magisterium would prefer that children grow up without experiencing sexual temptation, so it is conducting an experiment in order to separate children from their daemons before puberty, when their daemon can no longer change. This procedure, known as "intercision" makes the child a "severed child" who has no daemon -- and thus no soul. The Magisterium has assigned Mrs. Coulter the job of abducting the children and taking them to the North for this experiment.

As Mrs. Coulter explains to Lyra (who is revealed to be her own daughter) in the first book: "All that happens is a little cut, and then everything's peaceful. Forever! You see, your daemon's a wonderful friend and companion when you are young, but at the age we call puberty, the age you're coming to very soon, darling, daemons bring all sorts of troublesome thoughts and feelings, and that's what lets Dust in. A quick little operation before that, and you're never troubled again."

In *The Golden Compass*, Lyra and her companions free the children held at this experimental station in the North and destroy it. In *The Amber Spyglass*, Lyra and Will reverse the story of the Edenic Fall by consummating a sexual act in the garden.

Again, Pullman is not subtle. Keep in mind that this is a series of books marketed to children and adolescents. Lyra puts a red fruit to Will's lips and Will "knew at once what she meant, and that he was too joyful to speak." Within moments, the 13-year olds are involved in some kind of unspecified sexual act.

"The word love set his nerves ablaze," Pullman writes of Will. "All his body thrilled with it, and he answered her in the same words, kissing her hot face over and over again, drinking in with adoration the scent of her body and her warm,

honey-fragrant hair and her sweet, moist mouth that tasted of the little red fruit." Just a few pages later, Will and Lyra will dare to touch each other's daemon. That passage is even more sexually charged and explicit than the first. The adolescents now know "that neither daemon would change now, having felt a lover's hands on them. These were their shapes for life: they would want no other." What is it about Pullman and C. S. Lewis?

Put simply, Pullman hates C. S. Lewis's work *The Chronicles of Narnia*. He told Hannah Rosin that Lewis's famous work is "morally loathsome" and "one of the most ugly and poisonous things I ever read." *Narnia*, he said, "is the Christian one And mine is the non-Christian." When the first *Narnia* film was released in 2005, Pullman described the books as "a peevish blend of racist, misogynistic and reactionary prejudice." Indeed, Pullman's *His Dark Materials* is intended as an answer to Lewis's *Chronicles of Narnia*. What Lewis (and J. R. R. Tolkien) did for Christianity, Pullman wants to do for atheism.

So, what should Christians do?

A good first step would be to take a deep breath. The Christian faith is not about to be toppled by a film, nor by a series of fantasy books. Pullman has an agenda that is clear, and Christians need to inform themselves of what this agenda is and what it means. At the same time, nothing would serve his agenda better than to have Christians speaking recklessly or unintelligently about the film or the books. This is about the battle of ideas and worldviews. While Christians will not celebrate the release of this film, we should recognize the mixture of challenge and opportunity that comes with millions of persons watching this film and talking about the issues it raises. When the movie is mentioned in the workplace, in school, on the playground, or in the college campus, this is a great opportunity to show that Christians are not afraid of the battle of ideas.

We should recognize that the Christian Church has some very embarrassing moments in its history - moments when it has failed to represent the truth of the Gospel and the love of Christ. Authors like Philip Pullman take advantage of these failures in order to paint the entire Christian Church as a conspiracy against human happiness and freedom. Of course, that charge will not stand close scrutiny, and we can face it head-on with a thoughtful response.

Some Christians have also held very unhelpful views of human sexuality. These, we must admit, would include figures as great and influential as Augustine and, alas, C. S. Lewis. But these figures, rightly influential in other areas of the faith, are not representative in this case of biblical sexuality. We can set the record straight.

Should we be concerned that people, young and old, will be confused by this movie? Of course. But I do not believe that a boycott will dissuade the general public from seeing the film. I am very concerned when I think of so many people being entertained by such a subversive message delivered by such a seductive medium. We are responsible to show them, in so far as we are able, that the Magisterium of *The Golden Compass* is not a fair or accurate representation of the Christian Church. I can only wonder how many parents and grandparents will allow children and young people to see the movie and then buy them the books -- blissfully unaware of what is coming in books two and three.

The Gospel of Jesus Christ has enemies; this we know. Christian parents must be informed about *His Dark Materials* and inform others. We must take the responsibility to use interest in this film to teach our own children to think biblically and to be discerning in their engagement with the media in all forms. We should arm our children to be able to talk about this project with their classmates without fear or rancor.

Philip Pullman has an agenda, but so do we. Our agenda is the Gospel of Christ -- a message infinitely more powerful than that of *The Golden Compass*. Pullman's worldview of unrestricted human autonomy would be nightmarish if ever achieved. His story promises liberation but would enslave human beings to themselves and destroy all transcendent value.

The biblical story of the Fall is true, after all, and our only rescue is through the Gospel of Jesus Christ. The curse of sin was not reversed by adolescents playing at sex in a garden, but by the Son of God shedding His blood on a cross.

So let's get our bearings straight as we think and talk about The Golden Compass. This movie does represent a great challenge, but a challenge that Christians should always be ready to meet.

This article was written by Dr. Albert Mohler, President of Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, Kentucky, host of "The Albert Mohler Program", a nationwide radio program. Dr Mohler's articles and essays may be found on www.albertmohler.com. This article is reprinted with permission.