

The Golden Compass

Thoughts on The Golden Compass: C.S. Lewis and His Anti-Self

by Dr. Joel D. Heck

Imaginative writing to steal some anti-God ideology past watchful Christian dragons? Can an anti-Lewis do what Lewis did? Surely the answer is yes, which makes Philip Pullman Lewis's anti-self. And that is the major problem with *The Golden Compass*, both the book version and the upcoming film, the latter set for release Dec. 7th.

Philip Pullman, author of the book, is one of four authors whose fantasy writings are loved by many children and adults. Most readers know the names of the other three—C. S. Lewis, J.R.R. Tolkien, and J.K. Rowling. Each of these three writers, however, claimed or claim Christianity as their creed. Pullman claims to be an atheist, or at least an agnostic. When Terry Brooks writes in his introduction to *The Golden Compass* of an epic fantasy story in the tradition of writers such as Madeleine L'Engle, C.S. Lewis, and J.R.R. Tolkien, he is referring to their fairy-tale format, not their theological content. Pullman once wrote of Lewis's Narnia series, "I hate the Narnia books, and I hate them with deep and bitter passion." But what he hates the most about Narnia is Lewis's Christianity. Many a review of *The Golden Compass* movie is available on the Internet to warn readers of the potential danger, but let me quote a few phrases and cite a few sections from the book version.

In the book, the Pope had moved the papacy to Geneva, and since then "the Church's power over every aspect of life had been absolute." After the abolishing of the papacy, courts, colleges, and councils, "the Magisterium had grown up in its place." Mrs. Coulter, the villain of the story who is played by Nicole Kidman in the movie, said of the archbishop, "He's the most hateful old snob." Mrs. Coulter is the chief proponent of the General Oblation Board, a modern version of a Middle Ages church board that gave their children to the church to be monks and nuns, except that the General Oblation Board now kills children by separating them from their souls. It is with the help of the "police and the clergy" that the General Oblation Board snatches children for their evil purposes. Of the Church, it is said, "There's talk of reviving the Office of Inquisition." Although Roman Catholicism seems to be Pullman's primary target, all of Christianity is considered by one character, a lapsed nun, to be "a very powerful and convincing mistake." Pullman himself is said to have stated, "My books are about killing God," and that's what happens in the last book in the trilogy.

So what does one do? Boycott the movie? Because an old dictum says that any publicity, even negative publicity, is good publicity, what do we do? Ignore it and hope it goes away, even though the trilogy has sold more than 15 million copies worldwide? When the movie comes out on Dec. 7th, I recommend that Christians respond in several ways.

First, in conversation, use the release of the movie as an opportunity for Christian witness. While many people will be unaware of anti-Christian

sentiment in the movie (the movie has allegedly toned down the anti-church sections that I cite above), the film still raises the issues of good and evil, the matter of alternative or parallel worlds, and the power of story (the ultimate story being the God-story of the resurrection of Jesus Christ, to which all good stories point and from which all stories derive their power).

Second, if you choose to attend the movie (many parents will decline), do so with eyes wide open, fully aware of Pullman's perspective. Nicole Kidman is supposed to have stated that she was raised Catholic and wouldn't participate in a film that was anti-Catholic. Furthermore, some people, such as Catholic religion scholar Donna Freitas of Boston College, claim that Pullman has stated, "My agenda is not to convert anyone to any point of view."

Third, attending such a movie with advance preparation, discussion of the movie's good and bad points, and comparison of the movie with Walden Media's "The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe" can actually serve in some homes as a teaching opportunity during which a parent can contrast two worldviews. The problem with this, however, is the alleged removal, or toning down, of the subtle anti-church and anti-Christian phrases that appear occasionally in the book. (As I write this, I have not actually seen the movie, although I have tried to gain access to it.)

Because *The Golden Compass* is the first of a trilogy, one must ask what will happen in the next book (and in the likely next movie). The trilogy, known as *His Dark Materials*, a phrase taken from John Milton's *Paradise Lost*, ends in the death of God, slain by the new Adam and Eve. The first book appears to be the hook, while the third book and movie may well serve as the knock-out punch, at least for those who identify with the plot and its key character, the 11-year-old Lyra Belacqua.

At the end of the third book, *The Amber Spyglass*, Lyra and her friend Will, the new Adam and Eve, find God as a senile old man, resting in a crystal litter. He doesn't know what He has been doing, and they help him disappear. God is now dead. The achievement of the written Pullman trilogy is that it succeeds in making atheistic materialism imaginatively appealing to the reader and viewer, unlike the feeble attempts of many of the atheists of the past to encourage us to come to grips with the meaninglessness of life.

We won't know exactly how parts two and three of the trilogy will be portrayed in movie form, but my best guess is that the movie series won't depart very far from the written series. The first one certainly doesn't, judging from the trailers that appear online. Though imaginatively more powerful than atheistic or agnostic creeds of the past, *The Golden Compass* still pales in comparison to Him who is the Way, the Truth, and the Life, the One who is at the same time compass, vehicle, path, and destination, the risen Lord Jesus Christ.

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