

The Golden Compass: A Film Study Guide for Catholics

By Sr. Rose Pacatte, FSP

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New Line Cinema's latest contribution to the fantasy film genre is director/writer Chris Weitz's (*About a Boy*) *The Golden Compass*, based on the 1995 award-winning book of the same title by Phillip Pullman. New Line was the studio behind director Peter Jackson's interpretation of J. R. R. Tolkien's fantasy trilogy *The Lord of the Rings*, and it may have another hit trilogy on its hands, beginning with *The Golden Compass*.

The Golden Compass is Book I of Pullman's *His Dark Materials* trilogy; Part II is *The Subtle Knife* (1997) and Part III *The Amber Spyglass* (2000.) Over 15 million copies of the books have been sold worldwide. As author Pullman notes, he has borrowed from every book he has ever read to create this best-selling and controversial trilogy and these include the fantasy writings and mythic imagination of C.S. Lewis and J.R.R. Tolkein.

The Golden Compass is a very exciting film about a young girl, Lyra and her animal-shaped spirit companion, Pan, voiced by Freddie Highmore (called a daemon in the film) who guided by a golden compass embark on an odyssey to rescue their friends. It will engage young and old alike (scenes of peril and fantasy violence may scare very younger children.) There are missing children, interesting daemons (in Greek mythology, these are spirit beings who can be

good or malevolent), terrible scientific experiments, great polar bears and witches, and the Authority, or Magisterium, that controls the universe.

The seamless animation and brilliant special effects should attract some awards. Dakota Blue Richards, not burdened by excessive cuteness, plays Lyra with strength and courage. Nicole Kidman is positively chilling as Mrs. Coulter. My favorite character is the great armored polar bear, Iorek Byrnison, voiced by Sir Ian McKellan. Along with Lee Scorsby, an “aeronaut” from Texas, played by Sam Elliott, he is Lyra’s brave and loyal champion.

The Controversy

Phillip Pullman (bn. 1946) is a professed atheist: “Although I call myself an atheist I am a Church of England atheist, and a 1662 Book of Common Prayer atheist, because that’s the tradition I was brought up in and I cannot escape those early influences” (quoted in *Killing the Imposter God: Phillip Pullman’s Spiritual Imagination in “His Dark Materials”*, 2007, JosseyBass).

Some critics believe that Pullman’s fantasy epic is an expression of an atheist agenda. The Catholic League (www.CatholicLeague.org) agrees and has published a pamphlet about the book trilogy and sent it to all Catholic schools in the U.S. The Catholic League’s website states that seeing the film – even if it is not as troubling as the trilogy – will cause children to want to read the novels and this would harm their faith. The Catholic League’s website says that Pullman has twin goals “to promote atheism and denigrate Christianity. To kids.”

Others, such as Donna Frietas and Jason King, admit to Pullman's atheism in their book *Killing the Imposter God: Phillip Pullman's Spiritual Imagination in "His Dark Materials"* but think he employs feminist and liberation critical theology in his writings, and that using these lenses reveals truth rather than denies it. Kurt Bruner and Jim Ware concede Pullman's darkness but also find and explore religious themes in their book, *Shedding Light on His Dark Materials: Exploring Hidden Spiritual Themes in Philip Pullman's Popular Series* (2007, SaltRiver/Tyndale.)

His Dark Materials: Source Material

Phillip Pullman's theological and spiritual source for the entire trilogy of fantasy books, *His Dark Materials* seems to be the epic scriptural/theological poem "Paradise Lost" by John Milton (1608 – 1674.) Milton's influence on the Pullman's worldview as revealed in *His Dark Materials* cannot be underestimated.

Milton wrote passionately against England's monarchy as being head of church and state. In his later years, Milton also rejected Trinitarian Christianity and moved toward a more Unitarian theology. Some critics say that Pullman's vision of Christianity is medieval but it is really the Christianity of Milton's age, framed by the Renaissance-Reformation-and Counter-Reformation centuries that fuel his discourse.

Philosophically, Milton was a monist. Simply put, monists believe that all matter can be reduced to a single substance, a kind of energy that animates everything, even angels. Pullman calls this substance “dust”.

Human free will is the key theme in “Paradise Lost” and *His Dark Materials*. Free will continues to be a point of theological debate between Catholics and Protestants and is contested in the film and books as well.

In the trilogy, Pullman places the headquarters of the church/magisterium (a term used by Catholics that means the teaching authority of the Church) in Geneva, Switzerland, where John Calvin’s (1509 – 1564) religious movement was based. It is interesting that Phillip Pullman does not single out the Catholic Church for his critique but includes all organized religion, including mainstream Protestant churches. There is once brief sequence when the polar bear Iorek Byrnison attacks the Magisterium’s building in the north to retrieve his armor; the building is adorned with icons. To me, this showed that religion was one of the agencies in the film oppressing the characters, not the whole story.

Pullman’s Atheism?

There appears to be no explicit religious content, and therefore no atheism, in film version of *The Golden Compass*.

The book version of *The Golden Compass* is critical of religion and organized religion, though it is difficult to assess how much readers actually engage in the philosophy and theology that underpin his fantasy tale. Pullman

does reject, and ultimately attempts to kill off, a convoluted idea of God in Part III of his trilogy *The Amber Spyglass*. On the one hand he presents a theological image of God as an old man, perhaps cruel and distant. On the other hand, Pullman rids the universe of a philosophical image of God that is uninterested in his creation, a creation that originally created him in the first place.

To believers, God is the author of creation and not subject to it; therefore, the god that Pullman tries to kill through the imposter angel Metatron in *The Amber Skyglass*, is not the God we believe in anyway.

Pullman's image of God reminds me of how Bruce described him in Tom Shadyac's 2003 film *Bruce Almighty*: "God is a mean kid sitting on an anthill with a magnifying glass, and I'm the ant. He could fix my life in five minutes if He wanted to, but he'd rather burn off my feelers and watch me squirm." Although it is not clear if the divine will be part of any subsequent films, should they be produced, perhaps Pullman has done us all a favor by ridding us of many false images of God.

I do think that Pullman's writings ultimately reveal a nihilistic view of life and at the end of the day, shed little light on the meaning of life. *The Golden Compass* film, however, demonstrates the values and virtues heroism, self-sacrifice and courage that transcend the challenges the characters face. If future films are made, we can hope that they will be consistent with this first film.

Media Mindfulness Strategy

As a media literacy education specialist I know that a media mindfulness strategy can be very helpful when analyzing books and films. By simply asking and answering these four questions, families can make an informed decision about seeing the film and once they see it, to talk about it in meaningful ways.

1. What's going on? What's the story? How is the film's reality created and why?
2. What's really going on? Who is telling the story and why? (The film business; the author; the screenwriter).
3. What difference does the film make? Is it really atheistic? Or does it evoke thoughtful conversation about things that matter?
4. What difference can I make? What did the characters in the film learn? How did they grow and change? Did they? What, if any, light did the film shed on how I can live the Christian life in ways that respect human dignity? (See *Media Mindfulness: Educating Teens about Faith and Media*, Hailer/Pacatte, St. Mary's Press, 2007.)

The Golden Compass film challenges believing adults to articulate their faith and values and to brush up on Church history, theology, and literature and literary forms to do so. It is a difficult assignment, but an excellent way to engage in our culture. To "just say no" is not a valid option in today's media world.

The Golden Compass: To Talk About

- What kind of a story is *The Golden Compass*? Do you like fiction and fantasy? Why or why not?
- In one or two sentences only, explain what the movie is *about*.
- What did the movie mean to you?
- Who invented the Golden Compass and why?
- Who is your favorite character in the film? Why?
- What do you think are Lyra's best qualities?
- Does Lyra change and grow on the inside over the course of the film? How?
- What did Lyra do when she was afraid?
- If you could ask Lyra any question, what would it be? What would you ask Mrs. Coulter, or any of the characters?
- Do you think it is a good thing to ask questions? Why?
- Lyra is very curious in the film; what is curiosity? Do you think curiosity is a good thing? Why or why not?
- Why do you think God gave us the ability to ask questions and seek the truth?
- What purpose do the daemons serve in the story? What are they meant to represent?
- What do the scholars - and Mrs. Coulter - seek in the story? What will happen if they get what they want?

- **If you read the book, how were the film and the novel the same or different? Which did you like more? Why?**
- **In the film it says that if a child's daemon is cut away, then the Oblation Board will be able to raise a generation of people that will not ask questions about anything, including about their teachers and government. What do you think would happen in the world if children (or grown-ups) stopped asking questions?**
- **What do you think is the meaning of "dust"? What do you think it stand for in real life?**
- **If you don't know the meaning of the word "Magisterium", look it up. Do you think it is used properly within the context of the story? Why or why not?**
- **At the end Lyra says that "free will" is the most important thing. What does she mean by this?**
- **What does "free will" mean to you as a Christian? What is free will for? How and why do humans have free will? What happens when anyone misuses their free will? Where does our free will come from?**
- **How did the film make you feel? Did you like it? Why or why not?**

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