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Does "Compass" point kids to atheism?

By Heather Donckels

The holiday season means it's time for another Hollywood wintry blockbuster with a cast of talking animals, witches and an earnest child to point the way to truth and justice.

But some Christians who applauded the Christian allegory in *The Chronicles of Narnia* or *The Lord of the Rings* now worry that *The Golden Compass*, the recently released silver screen adaptation of Philip Pullman's book, will poison kid's minds with atheism.

Kiera McCaffery, a spokeswoman for the New York-based Catholic League, says the film is a hook to lure kids into a series of what she calls deeply anti-Catholic books.

"Once parents know about the books ... they're going to want to keep their children away from reading the books," McCaffery said.

*The Golden Compass*, the first installment in avowed atheist Pullman's *His Dark Materials* trilogy, follows a young girl, Lyra, through a world dominated by a governing authority Pullman calls the Magisterium—the same name Catholics use to refer to their church's teaching authority.

Although New Line Cinema has said it watered down the anti-religious themes in the movie, *Plugged In*, the entertainment-review sector of Focus on the Family, said there still is reason for concern.

"Even if they were (watered down), the theatrical celebration of Philip Pullman's *His Dark Materials* stories will likely introduce many more viewers to a worldview that's wholly opposed to the gospel message of Jesus Christ," a *Plugged In* statement said.

Several critics base their concern on Pullman's books since they had not yet seen the film. Ted Baehr, president of Movieguide, which uses "biblical principles" to rate about 20 films every month, is one of them.

"Since we haven't seen it, we won't boycott it," a Movieguide statement said. "But since it's based on a book ... that can only demean, devalue and diminish life, we do urge people of faith and values not to bother to corrupt their children with this odious atheistic worldview."

Pullman has said his books "are about killing God," but he talks about the value of "the religious impulse" on his website. However, he goes on to condemn organized religion that has "burned, hanged, tortured, maimed, robbed, violated and enslaved millions" in the name of God.

“That is the religion I hate,” Pullman writes, “and I’m happy to be known as its enemy.”

It’s the same type of religion Pullman sets up as the bad guy in *The Golden Compass*. The General Oblation Board of the Magisterium is responsible for kidnapping children and cutting away their souls, outwardly manifested as animals called daemons.

So is the film specifically anti-Catholic? Nicole Kidman, who was raised Catholic and plays the role of the sinister Mrs. Coulter, the head of the General Oblation Board, doesn’t think so.

“The Catholic Church is part of my essence,” she told *Entertainment Weekly* in an interview. “I wouldn’t be able to do this film if I thought it were at all anti-Catholic.”

Donna Freitas, professor of religion at Boston University, agrees. In fact, she said reading the trilogy “reinvigorated” her concepts of God, salvation and the soul.

“This trilogy is actually responsible for helping me stay Catholic,” she said.

Freitas, who recently wrote *Killing the Imposter God: Philip Pullman’s Spiritual Imagination in His Dark Materials* with Jason King, interprets Pullman’s books quite differently than other Catholics. In her mind, it isn’t God who’s killed in the end, but an angel who has set himself up as a false god.

Freitas doesn’t see Pullman’s books as dangerous for children either, because “kids read things very differently” than adults. Earlier this month, she had the chance to watch children ask Pullman about his series. Not a single kid asked why he killed God in his books, she said.

Opposition to the movie and books coming from the religious community makes her sad, Freitas said. It’s one thing to express your point of view, she said, but quite another to get people to boycott or ban books and ideas.

“Secrecy is a terrible thing, especially in the context of the church,” she said.

Atheist groups, including the New Jersey-based American Atheists, have mixed feelings about the film. They say Hollywood should make more films that aren’t afraid to challenge religion, but also chide New Line for watering down some atheist themes in *The Golden Compass*.

Ellen Johnson, president of American Atheists, thinks the religious community made a strategic error in coming out against Pullman’s books and the movie.

“Now people want to read what’s in there,” she said. “What’s the forbidden message, and why is it forbidden?”

For his part, Pullman seems equal parts puzzled, amused and saddened by all the critics, especially Bill Donohue, head of the Catholic League.

“To regard it as this Donohue man has said—that I’m a militant atheist, and my intention is to convert people—how ... does he know that?” he asked in an interview with Newsweek. “Why don’t we trust readers? Why don’t we trust filmgoers? Oh, it causes me to shake my head with sorrow that such nitwits could be loose in the world.”