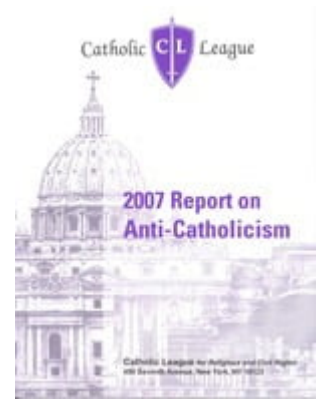


The Golden Compass

Over the summer, the Catholic League started hearing about an upcoming film called “The Golden Compass.” The film was to be based on the first book of a trilogy called *His Dark Materials* written by British children’s author Philip Pullman. Though we were not familiar with the trilogy, we heard whispers in the blogosphere that the books were decidedly anti-Catholic.



We read the books ourselves, and were astonished at the extent to which the series is an assault on the Catholic Church, and religious faith in general. When we examined the press coverage of the books (mostly from the United Kingdom), we learned that Pullman himself had been speaking openly about his anti-Catholic agenda for years. There was simply no question that the goal of the books is to sour kids on the Church while promoting atheism.

Though we read that the anti-Catholic content of the book would be toned-down for the film, which was released by New Line Cinema in cooperation with Scholastic Entertainment on December 7, this did nothing to alleviate our concerns. Indeed, we found this watering-down of the content to be deceitful. We knew that the flick would serve as bait for the books, and unsuspecting parents who took their kids to the theater and were unaware of the books’ content may be impelled to buy the trilogy as a Christmas present. We decided to call for a boycott of the film, and to issuing a consumers alert. To that end, we published a [booklet called *The Golden Compass: Agenda Unmasked*](#). The booklet contained background information on the film, quotes from the author, extensive plot summaries and excerpts from the trilogy.

We made sure that every bishop, Catholic schools

superintendent and director of religious education in the country received a copy. We also mailed copies to approximately 500 members of the press, and made them available to the public, both in printed and electronic additions. We sold over 25,000 copies. American parents were eager to educate themselves on what Hollywood was trying to feed their kids. However, the media, by and large, were not: the Catholic League was subjected to a torrent of criticism just for telling the truth about Philip Pullman and his agenda.

What follows is a summary of some of the busy events surrounding the theatrical release of "The Golden Compass," which proved to be a box-office disaster in the U.S.

DISHONESTY ABOUNDS

As dishonest as New Line Cinema toning down Pullman's anti-Christianity for the film was the role of Deborah Forte, president of Scholastic Entertainment, the media arm of Scholastic Corporation. She was associated with the film from the get-go, acting as producer for New Line Cinema. But unlike her work in producing "The Indian in the Cupboard," a film that had several Indian advisers on set from two different tribes, or her more recent brainchild, "Maya and Miguel," an animated television series which accessed the advice of Latino consultants, no religious leaders were asked for their input in the production of "The Golden Compass."

Scholastic Corporation is the world's largest publisher and distributor of children's books. In making the movie, the mega-corporation expressly violated the tenets of its own Credo, one part of which says, "To help build a society free of prejudice and hate, and dedicated to the highest quality of life in community and nation." Astonishingly, Scholastic also professes a belief in "High moral and spiritual values," and says its stands square against "discrimination of any kind on the basis of race, creed, color, sex, age, or national

origin.” They didn’t stand by this Credo, however, when it came to Christians.

Just as with Pullman (who promoted the film by claiming his real problem was not with the Catholic Church but with “the literalist, fundamentalist nature of absolute power, whether it’s manifested in the religious police state of Saudi Arabia or the atheist police state of Soviet Russia”) the rank hypocrisy of Scholastic was made worse by its glaring deceitfulness. On its website, it featured a short review of each of the three books that comprise *His Dark Materials*, a short biography of the author and a two-plus page interview with Pullman. Not surprisingly, there was not a single hint of Pullman’s in-your-face atheism. In short, it amounted to a sanitized cover-up.

Bill Donohue wrote to Scholastic’s CEO, Richard Robinson, on November 13. Donohue asked him to pledge that in the event that the other two volumes of Pullman’s trilogy come to the big screen, Scholastic will have nothing to do with them. Robinson did not respond.

PULLMAN’S PREVIOUS COMMENTARY

How New Line and Scholastic could get behind making *The Golden Compass* into a film, in light of comments Philip Pullman made for years, was never something addressed by the movie moguls. Choosing instead to spin the story as a family-friendly adventure picture teaching the values of honesty and courage, they refused to acknowledge the blatant anti-Catholicism in Pullman’s books. However, a short sample of what Pullman himself has said about his work reveals, without a doubt, his atheist agenda:

- “I am all for the death of God.” (“Philip Pullman,” www.books.guardian.co.uk)
- “My books are about killing God.” (Tony Watkins, *Dark Matter*, pp. 21 and 152)

- “The trouble is that all too often in human history, churches and priesthoods have set themselves up to rule people’s lives in the name of some invisible god (and they’re all invisible, because they don’t exist)—and done terrible damage. In the name of their god, they have burned, hanged, tortured, maimed, robbed, violated, and enslaved millions of their fellow-creatures, and done so with the happy conviction that they were doing the will of God, and they would go to Heaven for it.” (“Religion,” www.philip-pullman.com)
- “Give them [the Catholic Church] half a chance and they would be burning the heretics.” (“Profile: Philip Pullman: He’s Killed God, Now He’s Off to the Theatre,” *The Sunday Times*, November 23, 2003)
- In a letter to the British Humanist Association: “I am happy to support you and argue for your aims, and pour ridicule on faith schools.” (See the British Humanist Association, “Philip Pullman CBE,” www.humanism.org.uk)
- “Many religious leaders are men who, it’s obvious to anyone but their deranged followers, are willing to sanction vicious cruelty in the service of their faith.” (John Bambenek, “The God Delusion by Richard Dawkins,” www.blogcritics.org)
- “I’m trying to undermine the basis of Christian belief.” (Alona Wartofsky, “The Last Word; Philip Pullman’s Trilogy for Young Adults Ends With God’s Death, and Remarkably Few Critics,” *Washington Post*, February 19, 2001)

PULLMAN’S FANS UNWITTINGLY PROVE US RIGHT

While New Line Cinema and Pullman himself were claiming his stories weren’t about attacking the Catholic Church, Pullman’s long-time fans were alternatively looking forward to the flick and expressing disappointment because the bigotry they’d come to know and love from the books wouldn’t be portrayed on the big screen. The Catholic League credited the enthusiasts for anti-Catholicism, such as those listed below, for their

honesty.

Ellen Johnson, president, American Atheists: "I think that the movies are about questioning authority and I think that's a good thing... I think that if more children were taught to question authority maybe a lot fewer of them would have been sexually molested by priests." (CBS, "The Early Show," November 28)

According to a *USA Today* article written before the film's release, Johnson was troubled "over rumors that the film has been 'watered down' and is not anti-God, anti-Church enough." (November 29)

Movie Reviewer Josh Tyler: Though he admitted the books are "pretty heavily anti-religion" and "strewn with god-hating elements," Tyler wrote that he was "disappointed, but not surprised" that the film was set to "be Hollywoodized to remove any controversial material." ("Anti-God Elements Yanked From His Dark Materials," www.cinemablend.com)

Bridgetothestars.net, Pullman's fan site: "The removal of the religious motivations makes the institution [the Catholic Church] incredibly bland, a mere band of thugs with a domineering power for no apparent reason."

San Francisco Chronicle columnist Mark Morford: Morford agreed that the books are "aggressively anti-Christian" and "ultimately describe, as their grand finale, nothing less than the death of God." However, he expressed disappointment that the same themes would not be as strong in the film, writing "Fans were, appropriately, outraged [by this]. It remains to be seen how much of those vital themes Weitz left intact, but you could argue that the Bible-thumpers have already taken their sad toll..."

Morford did hold out some hope for the movie, however, and suggested, "if 'The Golden Compass' turns out to be even half as wondrous as the book, it will hopefully fuel a massive

surge in sales of the HDM trilogy in America.” (“Jesus loves ‘His Dark Materials,’” November 30)

Terry Sanders, president, National Secularist Society (UK): “We knew from the beginning that the producers of this film intended to leave out the anti-religious references. We think this is a great shame.” (“Golden Compass author hits back,” BBC News online, November 29)

PUNDITS GET IT WRONG ON BOYCOTT

Most pundits predicted that the Catholic League boycott of “The Golden Compass” would backfire and actually entice more people to see the film. The movie, which was supposed to be the new “Lord of the Rings” or “Chronicles of Narnia,” made a mere \$25.8 million its opening weekend and an even paltrier \$9 million the following weekend. Although the film was number one at the box office that first weekend, it brought in less money than the Disney film “Enchanted” (\$34 Million) did its opening weekend (November 21), and was destroyed at the box office by “I Am Legend” (\$77.2 million) and “Alvin and the Chipmunks” (\$45 million), which opened up the weekend of December 14.

In fact, film critic Roger Ebert, who loved the film, said “the box office was wounded by attacks of religious groups.” He added, “The criticism was led by the Catholic League and its talkative president William Donohue.” He concluded, “Any bad buzz on a family film can be mortal, and that seems to have been the case this time.” The buzz was so bad that Hollywood reporters suggested there will not be film versions of Pullman’s second and third books.

Here are some other examples:

- Chris Weitz charged that people were attacking “a film they haven’t seen, often based on a book that they haven’t read” (*Knoxville News-Sentinel*, December 7). Though he also charged, “the people who have been organizing this boycott type

activity are getting it wrong," he welcomed the attention saying that the boycott would make "more people see the film" (*Fresno Bee*, December 7 and WENN Entertainment Newswire Service, November 5).

- Pullman wrote an article in the *Sunday Times* of London in which he questioned the purpose of the Catholic League and downplayed the effect that the boycott would have. In the piece he called the Catholic League a small American group "which seems to be an organization mainly devoted to the self-promotion of its president." A few sentences later Pullman echoes Weitz's sentiments, writing, "The league's activities are having the usual effect, which is that far more people are now going to see the film and read the book than would otherwise have done." (December 2)

- Jeff Mahoney, a columnist for Ontario's *Hamilton Spectator*, assumed that the Catholic League was working in cahoots with New Line Cinema "as part of the carefully machined prerelease publicity." He attributed the large budget of the film to the boycott because "getting groups to boycott your film doesn't come cheap, but it can sure pay off." He likened the public backlash of "The Golden Compass" to that of "The Passion of the Christ" and suggested that the negative publicity drove "Passion's" success. (November 27)

- Melanie McDonagh of *The Times* of London wrote in reference to the Catholic League's boycott, "Christmas has come early for Chris Weitz." McDonagh also stated, "if Mr. Weitz is really lucky, Santa may deliver what every director prays for...a condemnation from the Vatican." In the same article she called Catholic League president Bill Donohue a "Vatican frontman" and said the controversy surrounding the film is what "every film distributor longs for." (November 28)

- In the *Daily Titan*, from the campus of Cal State-Fullerton, an editorial stated that, "The strength of Hollywood's advertising intertwined with a tasty controversy only makes us

more curious,” and, “Sometimes, a boycott is just the right marketing tool that studios or publishers need.” The editorial added, “Tell us not to see something, and...there’s a good chance we are going to see it.” (December 6)

- Harvard University’s *Harvard Crimson* ran an article that called the Catholic League out of touch with reality and the boycott “pointless.” The reporter questioned the faith of the league saying it “should realize it would take more than three fantasy novels to dissuade anyone, even children, from participation in the Church.” (December 6)

USCCB WITHDRAWS POSITIVE REVIEW

Despite the overwhelming evidence of Pullman’s anti-Christian agenda, the Office of Film and Broadcasting, a division of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB), released a positive review of the film on November 29. The review, written by layman Harry Forbes (the Office of Film and Broadcasting’s chief) called it “an exciting adventure story” that “rates as intelligent and well-crafted entertainment.” Forbes’s piece sidestepped the anti-Catholic nature of the books upon which the movie was based.

Forbes dismissed Philip Pullman’s use of the term Magisterium for the evil entity as “a bit unfortunate.” At one point, Forbes congratulated the movie’s producers for promoting Catholic values. “To the extent, moreover, that Lyra [the protagonist] and her allies are taking a stand on behalf of free will in opposition to the coercive force of the Magisterium, they are of course acting entirely in harmony with Catholic teaching.”

To complicate matters, Forbes—and by extension the USCCB—was used by New Line Cinema: the studio posted an exploitative advertisement on the website of Beliefnet. It deliberately, and unethically, juxtaposed two unconnected remarks from the review, leading the reader to conclude that the bishops’

conference had ruled that the movie was “entirely in harmony with Catholic teaching.”

In fairness to Forbes, he never said any such thing. He qualified his remarks about the so-called “free will” components, saying *they* were “entirely in harmony with Catholic teaching.” He never said that the *story* itself was emblematic of Catholic teaching.

It didn’t take long before many bishops weighed in on this issue. Not one sided with Forbes. Every one of them who spoke out was unqualified in his denunciation of the movie. The bishops quickly killed the Forbes review, removing it from their website on December 10.

What follows is a selection of what Church leaders themselves had to say about the film.

Bishop Gregory Aymond, Diocese of Austin: “Catholic schools and religious education programs should not encourage children to read any of these books and they should not be held in their libraries. ‘The Golden Compass’ attempts to devalue religion, especially Christianity. Our children deserve better education than what is in these books and movie.” (in his Nov. 9 Friday commentary).

Archbishop Alfred Hughes of New Orleans: The archbishop circulated a memo to his parochial schools highlighting the problems with the books and movie. He also preached on the topic at St. Louis Cathedral and wrote a column for the diocesan newspaper warning that Pullman’s books “surreptitiously lead children to atheism and pose a special threat to Christianity.” (*Clarion Herald*, November 24)

Website of the Archdiocese of Chicago: Francis Cardinal George’s archdiocese carried a note on its homepage declaring, “Both the movie and the books contain aspects that are deeply troubling to those who profess the Catholic faith.” (December)

Andrew Walton, spokesman for Bishop Joseph Galante's Diocese of Camden: "If a Catholic parent's responsibility is to do their best to bring their children up in the faith, then they will not likely want to make this material available to their children...The public should know that the movie is based on the first book of a trilogy—a trilogy that gets particularly anti-Christian and particularly anti-Catholic." (The Press of Atlantic City, December 7)

Monsignor Paul Showalter, vicar general of the Diocese of Peoria: "As shepherds of the faithful, it is our moral duty to inform parishioners regarding any forms of media that seriously attack our Catholic faith...The books portray the Catholic Church as evil and urges children to join fallen angels in a rebellion against God...Please caution your parents against this movie, and also regarding purchase of the books. We promised at our baptism to reject Satan and all of his evil. May we remain vigilant over the innocence of our children's souls, and diligently protect them from desensitization to evil. Let's continue to promote edifying films and books, and use this premier as a teaching moment for the truths of our Holy Church and the beauty of serving our Loving Redeemer." (in a letter to pastors of his diocese, December 7)

La Crosse Bishop Jerome ListECKi: "Good fruit does not come from a bad tree... It is clear that this movie is the first part of a trilogy that expresses hatred of Christianity and that portrays God, the Church and religion as oppressive and urges children to join fallen angels in a rebellion against God...It is good for all of us to be reminded that it is our duty, especially that of the lay faithful, to form and inform our culture." (Catholic News Agency, December 12)

Baltimore Archbishop Edwin O'Brien: "The Archdiocese of Baltimore is grateful that the conference withdrew the review because it caused much confusion in the Catholic community. From all reports, the review failed to adequately warn parents

about the movie's widely recognized dark themes and anti-Catholic imagery." (*Baltimore Sun*, December 12)

Denver Archbishop Charles Chaput: "The aggressively anti-religious, anti-Christian undercurrent in 'The Golden Compass' is unmistakable and at times undisguised. The wicked Mrs. Coulter alludes approvingly to a fictional version of the Doctrine of Original Sin. When a warrior Ice Bear—one of the heroes of the story—breaks into the local Magisterium headquarters to take back the armor stolen from him, the exterior walls of the evil building are covered with Eastern Christian icons. And for Catholics in our own world, of course, 'Magisterium' refers to the teaching authority of the Church—hardly a literary coincidence. The idea that any Christian film critics could overlook or downplay these negative elements, as some have seemed to do, is simply baffling." (Catholic News Agency, December 13)

St. Louis Archbishop Raymond Burke: "I caution all Catholics regarding the atheistic and anti-Catholic nature of Pullman's writings, upon which 'The Golden Compass' is based...A most defective review of the film was published by Catholic News Service. The review has by now been removed from the website of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops. The review was not based on a viewing of the film by bishops and was not endorsed by the bishops." (*St. Louis Review*, December 14)

Editorial in the Vatican's newspaper, *L'Osservatore Romano*: The Vatican called the film "the most anti-Christmas film possible" and wrote that "honest" viewers would find it "devoid of any particular emotion apart from a great chill." (December 19)