

PULLMAN IMAGINES JESUS

Philip Pullman's new book, *The Good Man Jesus and the Scoundrel Christ*, is available in the U.S. on May 4; it is published by Canongate U.S. Catholic League president Bill Donohue comments on it today:

The publisher was kind enough to send me an advance copy of Pullman's new book, no doubt hoping I would give it some free publicity by hammering it. They may be disappointed: it's an interesting fable.

My beef with Pullman's trilogy, *His Dark Materials*, and more specifically with the movie based on the first book, "The Golden Compass," centered on the attempt to seduce young people into thinking that atheism is the answer and the Catholic Church is the problem. But this book has no hidden agenda—it's a fanciful account of the Gospel story, one that displays the author's fervid imagination. Pullman's fairy tale sees Mary giving birth to twins: Jesus, a figure who bears resemblance to the Son of God known to Christians, and Christ, a less admirable character who is preoccupied with institutionalizing his legacy.

The most important statement about the book is not its contents, rather it is the decision to write it in the first place. Why would England's most famous atheist storyteller find it necessary to repair to the Gospels to write this book? What is it about Christianity that Pullman can't live without? And why does his fascination with religion not extend to other religions? To be sure, had Pullman taken liberties with Islam, he would have been a marked man. So much easier to deal with those Christians, most of whom are very nice.

The real issue remains. Christian novelists are not known for finding material in atheistic accounts of human existence—they simply ignore them—but the contra is not true. Perhaps Pullman

can write another story explaining why.