

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 in the box office that first weekend, it brought in less money than "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.

While we fought to practice our First Amendment right, there were some who believed that the boycott would have an opposite effect on the public and encourage people to see it. In various media reports it was said that the boycott would do nothing but heighten the anticipation of the film, making more people attend the movie than would have before. Following the old adage that, "Any publicity is good publicity," many jumped on the bandwagon to denounce the Catholic League's boycott.

"Golden Compass" director Chris Weitz cried that people were attacking "a film they haven't seen, often based on a book that they haven't read." Weitz however welcomed the attention saying that the boycott would make "more people see the film." Despite Weitz's best efforts to water-down the anti-Catholic elements of the books, people saw right through the mirage and stayed away from the film.

While Mr. Weitz was claiming "the people who have been organizing this boycott type activity are getting it wrong," papers in our northern neighbor echoed his thoughts. In the *Hamilton Spectator* in Ontario, columnist Jeff Mahoney was

certain that the boycotts would work in favor of the film. According to his column, he assumed that the Catholic League was working in cahoots with the New Line Cinema (the producers of the film) "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 its success.

In the *Calgary Herald*, Sean Meyers reported that the *His Dark Materials* trilogy would be jumping off the shelves because of the exposure the film was getting. In his interview with a University of Calgary professor, George Melnyk, Meyers said that the professor believed these sort of attempts to "censor" usually backfire. Professor Melnyk stated that "Censorship produces publicity, and the more high profile it becomes, the more interest is generated." Somebody needed to inform both Meyers and Melnyk that the Catholic League was exercising its right to boycott and never wanted to have the film censored.

Across the pond in the United Kingdom, Melanie McDonagh, of the *London Times*, followed in the footsteps of her Canadian peer and wrote that, "Christmas has come early for Chris Weitz." This, of course, was in reference to the boycott. 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 Bill Donohue, a "Vatican frontman" and said the controversy surrounding the film is what "every film distributor longs for."

We cannot leave out the publications of America's higher education. 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.” Instead of an educated student, the editor sounded like an insolent child who would do something just because he is told not to, saying, “Tell us not to see something, and...there’s a good chance we are going to see it.”

At the prestigious Harvard University, the *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.”

In the December 2 *London Sunday Times*, Philip Pullman wrote an article in which he questioned the purpose of the Catholic League and downplayed the effect that the boycott would have. In the article 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 made the same mistake that the director of his film did. Pullman wrote, “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.” If only the box office would have cashed in on his optimism.

Our “small American group” stood directly in the path of the big-budget New Line Cinema, Philip Pullman, and Chris Weitz. In the end, despite the criticism and “free publicity” we were giving the film, our boycott worked. It looked like Christmas may have come early for the Catholic League and those who supported us.