

THE GOLDEN COMPASS

17 Questions about Philip Pullman's *His Dark Materials*

By Pete Vere

Editor's Note:

The Golden Compass, a fantasy film starring Nicole Kidman and Daniel Craig, is being released this month by New Line Cinema, the producers of the Lord of the Rings trilogy. New Line hopes to capitalize on its previous success by appealing to Tolkien fans—especially younger ones—and implying that they will find similar satisfaction in this new release. But buyer beware.

The movie is based on the first novel in a trilogy by bestselling children's author Philip Pullman, a professed enemy of Christianity. Pullman's works are not widely known in the U.S., but in his native England his books are outsold only by J.K. Rowling's Harry Potter series. Hollywood has invested a goodly sum in the promotion of his cleverly disguised screed against God and his Church. Pete Vere gives the low-down on Pullman, his trilogy, and the movie below.

1. Who is Philip Pullman?

Pullman is a graduate of Oxford University and a leading author of bestselling children's fantasies. He is also an avowed humanist who has actively campaigned against religion as a pernicious force in human society.

2. What are the His Dark Materials books about?

His Dark Materials is Pullman's fantasy-fiction trilogy for young readers, comprising *The Golden Compass* (1995; published in the United Kingdom as *Northern Lights*), *The Subtle Knife* (1997), and *The Amber Spyglass* (2000). Drawing on the scientifically based concept of universes parallel with our own, the trilogy tells the story of Lyra Bevelacqua, a 12-year-old girl who discovers a path between worlds with the help of an "alethiometer," or truth measure. She and her companions engage in a struggle against forces of evil.

3. How has the trilogy been received?

Pullman's books have won several prestigious awards, both in his home country of Britain and in the U.S. Literary critics hail him as a new J.R.R. Tolkien and a better writer than J.K. Rowling.

4. Do Pullman's works have anything in common with other fantasy writers?

Pullman, like literary giants C.S. Lewis and Tolkien, is an Oxonian who writes about imaginary worlds in which good and evil strive to control the fate of mankind. Pullman, however, has expressed significant distaste for the books of his predecessors. (See "For Good and Ill: They Slip Past Watchful Dragons")

5. How is the upcoming film based on *The Golden Compass* being marketed?

The Golden Compass has been adapted into a movie starring Nicole Kidman, Eva Gaëlle Green, Daniel Craig and other Hollywood stars. The movie (to be released on December 7, 2007) is being produced by New Line Cinema, the company behind *The Lord of the Rings*, and is squarely targeted at the same demographic. It has the potential to generate sequels based on the remaining books in the trilogy.

6. Why should parents be concerned about the film and the books?

Because of the film and the wide audience Pullman's books have, Catholic parents should be aware of how Pullman uses the literary genre of children's fantasy to undermine the Christian faith and promote atheism. The major problems fall into these general categories:

- * Blasphemy against the Judeo-Christian concept of God
- * Depiction of Catholic Church as evil, and religion in general as obscurant
- * Promotion of the occult
- * Endorsement of relativism as an acceptable system of belief
- * Heretical portrayal of the human person

7. How does Pullman portray God in the series?

Pullman describes God as the first angel, who evolved out of pre-existing "dust." He calls himself the creator, but this is a lie to increase his power.

He was never the creator. He was . . . the first angel, true, the most powerful, but he was formed of Dust as we are, and Dust is only a name for what happens when matter begins to understand itself. (The Amber Spyglass)

God is referred to as "the Authority" throughout the first two books. Although it is not explicit in the first two books, the reader can deduce that Pullman is speaking of the biblical God because of the presence of "the Church" and the occasional reference to Scripture. In the third book he makes it explicit that he means the Judeo-Christian God by citing most of the names for God the Father used in Holy Scripture:

The Authority, God, the Creator, the Lord, Yahweh, El, Adonai, the King, the Father, the Almighty—those were all the names he gave himself. (The Amber Spyglass)

8. How does Pullman explain Lucifer's rebellion against God and his angels?

Like Lucifer, Lyra and her companions set out to overthrow "God" and his kingdom. One of her companions is Dr. Mary Malone, a former Catholic nun from our world who is now a physicist. Together they finish the rebellion begun by Lucifer and her angels for the benefit of humanity. (The devil is female in Pullman's multi-verse.)

9. How does the Catholic Church figure into the story?

The Church in Lyra's world exerts a major influence on the lives of all the characters. It has a college of cardinals, a college of bishops, priests, nuns, and a magisterium. It even boasts converts from Protestantism. In Lyra's world, Protestant reformers remained within the Church, elected John Calvin as Pope, moved the Church's headquarters to Geneva, and then did away with the papacy altogether.

10. How does Pullman portray the Church?

Pullman caricatures the Church as an oppressive institution. The parallel-universe Church in *His Dark Materials* is obsessed with power. It exerts absolute control over the masses and gives its blessing to all manner of evil action in the name of the Authority.

Characters who have religious vocations in Pullman's world are either rabid zealots or are looking to advance their worldly status. Their victims are often children.

Church officials lie, confiscate property, and engage in petty infighting. They make use of torture. They murder, kidnap, and mutilate children, and they oversee scientific experiments where children are severed from their souls. They even dispatch a priest to murder the main character. Each of these actions is carried out in the name of the Authority, Pullman's code word for the Judeo-Christian God, and with the Church's full blessing.

11. What else does Pullman have to say about Christianity?

Pullman's most dangerous error concerning the Church is probably too subtle for younger readers to spot. Because the trappings of Catholicism have been retained by an essentially Calvinist belief system, the story suggests that theological differences among Christians are meaningless. What matters most to the Church is power and control over the masses. This is Karl Marx's old canard that religion is the opiate of the masses, repackaged for children.

12. What roles do magic and the occult play in the story?

Pullman introduces witches and shamans as the true spiritual leaders of both our world and his alternative multi-verse. These witches and shamans are important supporting characters. Without their assistance, Lyra and her father, Lord Asriel, would not be able to organize the war against the Authority.

13. What real-world elements of occultism does Pullman employ to advance the plot?

Dr. Mary Malone, the nun from our world who loses her faith in God, leaves the convent, and becomes an experimental scientist, discovers the capacity to communicate with dark matter. She turns to a Chinese form of divination known as the I-Ching. Through the I-Ching, the former nun helps rescue the book's protagonist. In the story, the occult can help in doing good, whereas the Judeo-Christian God only disappoints or leads people to do evil.

14. How does Pullman's depiction of magic differ from its use in *The Lord of the Rings*, *The Chronicles of Narnia*, or the *Harry Potter* series?

The magic in *His Dark Materials* is not like the elf-magic of Tolkien. In *The Lord of the Rings*, magic is pure fantasy that belongs to a special race and is used to create objects of value. Similarly, the magic described in C.S. Lewis and J.K. Rowling's stories has no basis in real occult practices. Moreover, their fantasy worlds do not portray any sort of Church and certainly do not pit magic against God and the Church.

15. How does the novel characterize the morality of decision-making?

In one instance, Lord Asriel murders Lyra's best friend in order to open up a portal between worlds. Within the story, the murder of a child was necessary for the greater good, since Lyra's father needed to open this portal to further his war against the Authority. The end justifies the means in Pullman's universe.

16. What is the nature of the soul in Pullman's trilogy?

Every character in Lyra's parallel world possesses something called a daemon (pronounced "demon"). The name daemon is borrowed from the ancient Greeks. The philosopher Socrates described his daemon as a quiet voice inside his head that helped him discern right from wrong. Socrates, therefore, equated his daemon with his conscience.

In Pullman's world, the daemon is a cross between a person's conscience and a person's soul. The daemon is external and attached to a human. It takes on an animal form that best reflects the personality and character of the human to whom the daemon belongs. Its form changes from moment to moment during childhood. However, the daemon chooses a fixed form sometime during its human's adolescence. Thus the individual's personality and character become fixed for life. The daemon dissipates upon death.

17. What does Pullman have to say about gender and the nature of the person?

Pullman ties the daemon to human nature. The reader notices early on that the gender of most daemons is opposite that of the human to whom the daemon is attached. Only one character in the first two books shares the same gender as his daemon, and this is hailed as a rarity.

One character, Dr. Grumman, is an explorer from our world who finds himself trapped in Lyra's world. There he discovers his daemon when she becomes external. "Can you imagine my astonishment," says Grumman, "at learning that part of my own nature was female, and bird-formed, and beautiful?"

Pullman's errors concerning human nature and the soul are a direct attack on the Christian teaching that God created us with a human soul, and he created us male and female.