

The Golden Compass

There's nothing like controversy to promote a film. A row in the media grabs public attention better than official publicity campaigns ever can. So New Line Cinema and director Chris Weitz must be delighted at the fuss being made over *The Golden Compass*. There was already a great deal going for the film: a glittering cast, a visually rich story giving the publicity department plenty to play with, and it's an adaptation of the first part of Philip Pullman's already hugely popular *His Dark Materials* trilogy.

It's this last point which is the key, of course. Pullman is well-known as an atheist, and while his other books rarely touch on questions of religion, it's right at the heart of the trilogy. Inevitably, his perspectives on the subject don't go down too well in some quarters. The fact that, in the world of the first book (*Northern Lights/The Golden Compass*), the Church power structures (the Magisterium) form a cruel and oppressive totalitarian regime gets up some people's noses right from the start. It may be in a parallel universe, but there are clear connections with pre-Reformation Catholicism, and it is equally clear that these people are the villains. The theological temperature rises when a connection is suggested between original sin and Dust, the mysterious particles which are associated with all humans, especially after the onset of puberty. Things intensify in the second book, *The Subtle Knife*, when it becomes clear that a rebellion is being mounted against God, 'the Authority'. In *The Amber Spyglass*, the Authority is exposed as a fraud and disposed of in a surprisingly anti-climactic moment during a great battle. There is strong criticism of religion from a witch and Christianity is dismissed by a former nun from our world as 'a very powerful and convincing mistake'.

It's hardly surprising that some Christians don't respond to this too well. The arrival on the big screen of *The Golden Compass* means that many new readers, often young ones, will be discovering the books – and that's a prospect which horrifies some groups. Some, like the American Catholic League, which accuses the film of 'selling atheism to kids', have called for people to boycott the film. New Line had wanted to avoid this kind of scenario, so asked Weitz to tone down the religious elements. He had no problem doing so because he sees the story as an attack on totalitarian authority, not on the Church. Daniel Craig, who plays Lord Asriel, agrees: 'These books are not anti-religious. Mainly they're anti-misuse of power – whether it's religious or political.'

The question is, are the film-makers being sneaky or practical? Catholic League President Bill Donahue has no doubt that it's the former: 'The protest is this: It's being done at Christmastime, and when parents don't find the film troubling, they're going to buy the books for their kids as Christmas gifts. They're doing it through the back door, in a stealth fashion, because each book becomes more provocative, more aggressive and more anti-Christian.' Weitz, however, is adamant that they are not trying to sneak under the Christian radar, though he admits that they had to compromise in order to get the film off the ground. He calls the idea that he's pursuing an atheist agenda 'a ridiculous idea'. But he is very aware that the next two films (if they get made) will be far more controversial. He comments, 'Whereas *The Golden Compass* had to be introduced to the public carefully, the religious themes in the second and third books can't be minimized without destroying the spirit of these books.'

Pullman himself insists that, whilst he is an atheist, he is not working to an atheist agenda. He says, 'I am a story teller. If I wanted to send a message I would have written a sermon.' He's also said that he wants to explore the questions which he considers are the 'most important of all': Is there a God? What does it mean to be human? What is our purpose? Inevitably, he comes at those questions from a particular angle. He rejects the idea of God, and he does believe that religion is easily twisted into something very destructive. But such questions are absolutely fundamental and we should neither be afraid of asking them, nor of considering someone else's answers – even when they are profoundly different from our own. If we believe that our answers are true, we should engage through calm, reasoned discussion, not through closing our eyes, blocking our ears and telling everyone else to do the same. Parents do need to think clearly about whether their children are ready to think carefully about these ideas, of course. But we live in a society where there are many radically conflicting ideas about the answers to these fundamental questions. Pullman's perspective on them is very common, though his presentation of them is a masterpiece of literature – and one that deserves to be read and engaged with. The truth can stand for itself, so I am convinced that it is healthier for Christians to listen seriously to what someone else has to say, and then to respond to it positively where we can, critically where we must, and always in a way that is characterised by grace. Knee-jerk reactions, hurling abuse and scare-mongering does no good to anyone, and reflects very poorly on the church.