

11-25-07 - God in the dust: What Catholics attacking [movie]'The Golden Compass' are really afraid of
By Donna Freitas, The Boston Globe

ON DEC. 7 New Line Cinema will release "The Golden Compass," starring Nicole Kidman and Daniel Craig, the first movie in a trilogy with the massive budget and family blockbuster potential of "The Lord of the Rings."

Yet, even before it opens, "The Golden Compass" finds itself at the center of a controversy. The Catholic League, a conservative religious organization, launched a campaign on Oct. 9 calling on all Catholics to boycott the film. The group also published a lengthy pamphlet attacking the story and distributed the pamphlet to Catholic schools across the country. Other groups have joined the fray, including the evangelical nonprofit Focus on the Family, whose magazine *Plugged In* urged parents to keep kids out of theaters showing the film. And the Christian blogosphere is alive with warnings not only about the movie trilogy, but also about the series of books it is based on.

Bill Donohue, president of the Catholic League, charges that the books, known as the "His Dark Materials" trilogy, are deeply anti-Christian. Donohue says he fears that the film will inspire parents to purchase "His Dark Materials" for their fantasy-hungry kids on Christmas, unaware that the third book of the series, "The Amber Spyglass," climaxes in an epic battle to destroy God. Some of the book's villains are referred to as the Magisterium - a term used to refer to the Catholic hierarchy. The British author, Philip Pullman, has said openly that he is an atheist, and Donohue charges that his books are designed to eradicate faith among children.

But this is a sad misreading of the trilogy. These books are deeply theological, and deeply Christian in their theology. The universe of "His Dark Materials" is permeated by a God in love with creation, who watches out for the meekest of all beings - the poor, the marginalized, and the lost. It is a God who yearns to be loved through our respect for the body, the earth, and through our lives in the here and now. This is a rejection of the more classical notion of a detached, transcendent God, but I am a Catholic theologian, and reading this fantasy trilogy enhanced my sense of the divine, of virtue, of the soul, of my faith in God.

The book's concept of God, in fact, is what makes Pullman's work so threatening. His trilogy is not filled with attacks on Christianity, but with attacks on authorities who claim access to one true interpretation of a religion. Pullman's work is filled with the feminist and liberation strands of Catholic theology that have sustained my own faith, and which threaten the power structure of the church. Pullman's work is not anti-Christian, but anti-orthodox.

This emerging controversy, then, is deeply unusual. It features an artist who claims atheism, but whose work is unabashedly theistic. And it features a series of books that are at once charming and thrilling children's literature, and a story that explores some of the most divisive and fascinating issues in Catholic theology today.

Pullman wasn't always "the most dangerous man in Britain" as he has been called by columnist Peter Hitchens. Pullman studied literature at Oxford, went on to become a schoolteacher, and then discovered he had a knack for drawing middle-school-aged children to the edge of their seats over classics like "Beowulf." Pullman began to write stories of his own in the early '80s.

It wasn't until Pullman married his talent for epic adventure with the genre of children's fantasy in "His Dark Materials" that he reached a wide audience. The book the movie is based on, "The Golden Compass," came out in 1995 and won the Carnegie Medal, awarded for an outstanding book of children's literature. The sequel, "The Subtle Knife," was released in 1997, and the final installment, "The Amber Spyglass," was published in 2000 to wide acclaim, including the prestigious Whitbread Prize, the first given for a children's book. The series has sold some 12 million copies worldwide.

In interviews, Pullman has gone on record as an atheist, not only doubting God's existence but charging that organized religion has been an instrument of evil in world history. He has criticized C.S. Lewis's Christian allegory "The Chronicles of Narnia," because Pullman sees in "Narnia" a world in which innocence is so prized that Lewis never allows his heroines and heroes to grow up.

But to reduce Pullman to these few juicy sound bites is to ignore the whole of a complex, exuberantly curious intellectual who has infused his writing with a complex, crisply rendered theology.

The trilogy is a retelling of Milton's "Paradise Lost," the classic epic poem from which Pullman borrowed a line, "His Dark Materials." Milton tells of the battle between Lucifer's army of fallen angels and God's rule in heaven. In "Paradise Lost," God prevails. But in Pullman's book, the two child protagonists help to defeat the rule of the Authority and the Authority dies.

When critics say that Pullman's series advocates killing God, this is what they mean. But that is the most literal possible reading, and misses the point of the books.

The "God" who dies in "The Amber Spyglass" is not a true God at all. Pullman's Authority is an impostor, more like Milton's Lucifer than like a traditional conception of God. In the novels, the universe's first angel tricked all other angels and conscious beings created after him into believing he is God, and has spent an eternity building a corrupt empire for the purpose of hanging on to absolute power.

Readers of the trilogy know that the Authority is a tyrannical figure who uses his power to deceive, to conceal, and to terrorize. His death not only liberates all beings, but reveals the true God, in which and in whom all good things - knowledge, truth, spirit, bodies, and matter - are made. The impostor God has spent an eternity trying to wipe out all traces of the divine fabric of the true God - what Pullman calls Dust - because it is so threatening to his rule.

Most Christians are taught to imagine God through the first and second parts of the Trinity, through the Father (God) and the Son (Jesus). Pullman's vision of God is much closer to the third part of the Trinity: the Holy Spirit. Dust is the Holy Spirit.

For Christians, then, perhaps the most important concept of all in the story is that divinity isn't just a being, but a substance that loves us and animates us, yet has a mind of its own. In the books, Dust's love for humans is unconditional, even though they often do things to hurt and deplete Dust's influence and presence. Dust has many names in "His Dark Materials": Wisdom, Consciousness, Spirit, Dark Matter.

Dust also has a distinctly female cast. When Pullman personifies Dust, and he does on occasion, he uses the pronoun she. Evoking the third person of the trinity as female is nothing new - in fact it's biblical. Wisdom (Sophia in Greek) is the feminine aspect of the Holy Spirit. One finds God spoken of as she in both Proverbs and the Psalms (among other places). Framing the divine through Spirit-Sophia is nothing new either - this is a move made famous by the work of revered Catholic feminist theologian Elizabeth Johnson, a professor at Fordham, in "She Who Is: The Mystery of God in Feminist Theological Discourse," now a classic text among Christian feminist scholars.

God is not dead, then: A false God has died and the true God - a feminine divine - is revealed.

The universe of "His Dark Materials" is far from atheistic or anti-Christian, but to understand why, we must allow ourselves to open up to a theological vision that exceeds the narrow agenda set by some Catholics.

Pullman's Dust certainly moves beyond orthodox Christian ideas about God. Dust is a "spirit" that transcends creation, but all living beings are made of Dust, so Dust is a part of creation. While Dust is indeed the divine fabric of the worlds of "His Dark Materials," Dust is not all-powerful, all-knowing, and immutable. Dust is as dependent on creation for its sustenance as we are dependent on Dust for ours.

This view of Dust echoes many of the theological ideas that the Catholic Church finds threatening today. The most obvious thread is liberation theology, the Marxist and socially progressive rereading of the Gospels born among Catholic theologians in Latin America in the 1960s. Liberation theology teaches that Jesus is a political

revolutionary who loves all that God has created and wants all creation to flourish on this earth, not just in heaven. Liberation theology also holds that believers should disregard doctrine that leads to oppression.

This is not an idea in favor with the current leadership of the church. In placing the common welfare above the dictates of church authorities, this movement has sparked a long running battle with the Catholic hierarchy. The Church has issued high-profile attacks on liberation theologians, both in official Vatican documents and, perhaps most famously, in the reprimands issued to the former Brazilian Franciscan priest Leonardo Boff by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, a Vatican office led by then-Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger. The cardinal is now Pope Benedict XVI.

Dust also reflects strains in feminist theology that reframe the divine as feminine and hold that Christians' relationship with the divine is mutual, not hierarchical: We make ourselves vulnerable to God as God makes God's self vulnerable to us. Many see this feminized God as a kind of heresy - a rejection literally embodied in the fact that women are forbidden to represent Jesus through the Catholic priesthood.

Pullman's characters who discover the true God fall so deeply in love with the divine that they will sacrifice everything - even the bonds of first love. They are willing to hold on to this God even if it requires that they wage war with the powers that be, the authorities called Church and Magisterium - those who rule by secrecy and serve a false God who takes the form of the old man in the sky.

It is a beautiful story, and a Christian story. It is a story that could prompt believers to reflect on their faith. It is just not a story that everyone may want you to read.

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