

The Golden Compass, by Philip Pullman

What you need to know...

On December 7, 2007, theatres worldwide will release the much anticipated movie *The Golden Compass*. The movie has generated a great deal of discussion, especially among Christians, because it is based upon Philip Pullman's first novel in his controversial trilogy titled *His Dark Materials*. Critics contend that the trilogy is "anti-Christian" and "atheism for kids" ("Pullman Not...", 2007), but *Today* on NBC and other media outlets contend that Pullman is "**not** promoting atheism" ("Pullman Not...", 2007, emp. added). When interviewed on the *Today* show a month prior to the movie's release and asked to respond to those who say *The Golden Compass* is anti-Christian, Pullman stated:

I always mistrust people who tell us how we should understand something. They know better than we do what the book means or what this means and how we should read it or whether we should read it or not. I don't think that is democratic. I prefer to trust the reader. I prefer to trust what I call the democracy of reading. But everybody has the right to form their own opinions and read what they like and come to their own conclusions about it ("Pullman on...", 2007).

If there ever was a politically correct statement, this was it. The question was, "What is your response that this book is anti-Christian?" Is it or isn't it? Pullman evaded the question altogether and indirectly attacked his critics by painting them as untrustworthy know-it-alls.

Fortunately, Pullman elsewhere has addressed his thoughts concerning God and Christianity more directly, allowing the public to see beyond the politically correct answers he gave on the eve of *The Golden Compass's* release in theatres. In 2001, he penned an article titled "The Republic of Heaven." It appeared in *The Horn Book Magazine*—a bi-monthly journal of children's and young adult literature (see "About Us," 2007). Those familiar with Pullman's trilogy know that his republic of Heaven represents the antithesis of the biblical, celestial heaven of Almighty God. The republic is the "here and now," which supposedly is all there is, and is ruled by men, not by a King in Heaven. In addressing his "republic of Heaven," Pullman wrote: "[W]e must find a way of believing that we are not subservient creatures dependent on the whim of some celestial monarch, but free citizens of the republic of Heaven" (2001). He pointed out early in the article that the children's books he loves "are saying something important about the most important subject...which is the death of God and its consequences." He continued: "I take it that there really is no God anymore; the old assumptions have all withered away. That's my starting point: that the idea of God with which I was brought up is now perfectly incredible" (Pullman, 2001).

Despite Pullman's attempt to skirt questions about the anti-God, humanistic ideologies in his writings, his anti-Christian sentiments as portrayed through his imagined republic are very clear. He hails a republic as the "antithesis" of a celestial realm ruled by God. "This world is where the things are that matter.... [T]his earth is our true home, and nowhere

else is.” How do humans function in such a world? What about right and wrong? According to Pullman, “It’s no good to say, ‘X is good and Y is evil because **God** says they are’; **the King is dead**, and that argument won’t do for free citizens of the republic.... Satan; he’s dead, too. There’s no one responsible but us. Goodness and evil have always had a human origin” (2001, emp. added). Of course, Pullman’s ideology is also pro-evolution. In seeking to answer “Why does the world exist?” he contended that there is “overwhelmingly powerful evidence for evolution by natural selection. The neo-Darwinians tell us that the processes of life are blind and automatic; there has been no purpose in our coming here” (2001).

But, one might ask, are Pullman’s personal ideologies really played out in his books for young people? Pullman actually hinted that there is no better place to spread one’s ideas. He suggested:

[W]e need a story, because it’s no good persuading people to commit themselves to an idea on the grounds that it’s *reasonable*. How much effect would the Bible have had for generations and generations if it had just been a collection of laws and genealogies? What seized the mind and captured the heart were the *stories* it contains.

So if we are to see what a republic of Heaven might look like, we must look for evidence of it, as I’ve been suggesting, in the realm of stories. And one of the few places we can be certain of finding stories, these days, is in books that are read by children (2001, italics in orig.).

Pullman knows that a good story can impact the world—for good or bad. Sadly, the story of a great republic that he has been selling in *His Dark Materials* trilogy is anti-God, anti-Creation, and anti-Christianity. Perhaps the directors and producers of the movie *The Golden Compass* chose to downplay the deeper meaning of Pullman’s writings, but parents would be wise to pass on both the movie and the book on which it is based.

-Information gathered by Jason Obert