

GOLDEN COMPASS

I saw the movie “The Golden Compass” this week at a “sneak preview”. If I had not read the book from which the movie is taken nor had done research on the author, I would have judged the movie a well-done sci-fi fantasy, with plenty of action, fine acting, beautiful scenery, and an engaging plot. The heroine is a 12-year old girl who lives in a parallel world, like ours but different. The movie although based on a children’s book is also appealing to adults. The only jarring note for me was the reference to the “Magisterium”, the evil group in the movie, since the word is such a Catholic term. However, for most people the word probably does not evoke any relationship to religion.

However, I did read the book a few days before I saw the movie and I did research on the author, Philip Pullman. Pullman, a British writer of children’s books, is an atheist and promoter of atheism. In one interview, he stated: “I am trying to undermine the basis of Christian belief”. In another: “When you look at organized religion of whatever sort—whether it’s Christianity, in all its variants, or whether it’s Islam or some forms of extreme Hinduism—wherever you see organized religion and priesthoods and power, you see cruelty and tyranny and repression. It’s almost a universal law”.

He has written award-winning children’s books, particularly a trilogy he named “His Dark Materials”. The first volume of the trilogy was “Northern Lights”, which for the American public was re-titled “The Golden Compass”. In it the evil people are bishops, priests, nuns and affiliated lay people who are part of the nefarious organization called “The Magisterium” (a word which today commonly refers to Catholic bishops and the Pope). The world of Pullman in “The Golden Compass” is filled with witches, talking animals, people with visible souls (“daemons”, which appear as animals), no Supreme Being, and a complete distortion of “original sin”. Reviewers have consistently noted that the following two books of the trilogy (“The Subtle Knife” and “The Amber Spyglass”) are even darker and more insidious in trying to undermine religious beliefs.

The producers of “The Golden Compass”, in order to make the movie acceptable to a general public have sanitized the anti-religious and anti-Catholic elements. (A number of atheists have complained about this sanitizing). The Magisterium is composed of evil men and women but they are not presented in the movie as clergy, nor does the discussion on original sin take place. However, what is the danger of the film, as pointed out by a number of Catholic reviewers, is that through the movie, children and young adults will be introduced to the “Dark Materials” books of Pullman, seek them out to read, and be exposed in a very subtle way to their attempts to undermine belief.

What should parents do? First of all, there will be intense propaganda for the film. It is reported that the film cost \$180 million dollars to produce and the financiers will want their money back. Already, plans have been made to prepare scripts for production of the two other books in the trilogy. It will be hard for parents perhaps to tell children “no” about seeing the film. Much to the consternation of a number of Catholic commentators, the Catholic Bishops’ Office for Film gave the film an approval rating even for

adolescents. The movie, in my opinion, is not quite what one Catholic commentator said: “One of the most dangerous movies ever made in regard to a blatant attack on the Faith geared expressly to impressionable youth”. But still I think that parents should not take their children to this movie; they should find another one, rather than expose them to Pullman’s books and to contribute to the financial success of the movie (which will assuredly bring the other books to the screen). If young adults see it and talk to their parents about it, this would be a “teaching moment” for parents to explain why the book is not a good one to read, how it is a distortion of the truth. Some Catholic groups have called for a boycott of the movie, but this would give the film more publicity than it deserves.

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