

# Christian worldview in the golden compass

Religion



The Golden Compass is a bold movie in the sense that it tackles a major social malaise - namely religious authority. Although references to Christianity in particular and God, in general, have been removed from the film version, there is no doubt that the sweeping authority of the Magisterium includes these two sources of authority. The clue that religion, especially Christianity is being criticized is evident from the original novel by Philip Pullman that goes on to claim that "The Christian religion is a very powerful and convincing mistake... Every church is the same: control, destroy, and obliterate every good feeling... For all its history [religion] has tried to suppress and control every natural impulse" (Pullman as quoted in Burke 2007). The worldview espoused or promoted by the movie is very different from the Christian worldview. The former suggests the application of rationality and equitable humanism whereas the latter promotes dogma and exclusion on communal lines. What Weitz has attempted to convey in the film is the corruption that is inherent in institutions of power. Under the pressure of marketers to make the film appealing to all, Weitz had to remove explicit references to religion. In their stead, Weitz erects this abstract Omni-authoritative organization called the Magisterium. Weitz (and by extension Pullman's) proposition is that any form of authority should be questioned by those who come under its purview. They encourage even children to question the authority of elders, albeit with proper manners. It is through this freedom to question authority that progress is ever possible. It is through this attitude of free-inquiry that truth is established and marked as such. The Christian worldview is very contrasted to the one conceived by Pullman and Weitz. The Christian doctrine is full of commandments, warnings and graphic descriptions of retributions awaiting the unfaithful. Neither does it allow

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believers to question, verify and modify the set doctrine as demanded by the evidence. The church, the foremost institution that wields Christian religious authority, is a closed and uncompromising institution. It is this rigidity and the attendant abuse of power that *The Golden Compass* seeks to critique. (Scaliger 2007) Director Chris Weitz had a challenging task of watering down the decisive anti-religious stance of the author. But Weitz manages somehow to use the device of the allegory to imply religion without bringing its name. For example, terms like ‘heresy’, ‘oblation’, etc are common in Christian texts. Their use in a contrived secular context does not remove the obvious allusions to the sources. By showing the tendency towards tyranny in any power structure, Weitz is simultaneously showing the alternative way forward, namely, one based on rational and egalitarian public discourse. This is a progressive world view, although it might appear a tad utopian. Through the numerous twists and turns in the plot as well as the several minor and major intrigues through the narrative the director keeps coming back to the central theme of excesses of authority. It is ironic that just as if to prove what the author-director team was suggesting, Christian organizations took a vociferous approach to censor and ban the film. This reactionary and intolerant behavior merely serves to indicate what the movie seeks to expose. Pullman and Weitz could not have dreamed of better evidence for the voices of religious authority than in the manner in which Christian associations across the United States tried to undermine the commercial success of the film. Perhaps, too, it is an indication of the changing cultural currents that many people flocked to the movie theatres despite protests and threats of a ban. (Wood 2008) It should be remembered that *The Golden Compass* was targeted at a family audience. Children and teenagers

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especially would find their fantasy-adventure storyline very engaging. A theme of religious authority would seem an unnatural ally to such a genre.