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THE GOD WHO WASN'T THERE

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Defending The Golden Compass

Posted November 16, 2007 | 04:21 PM (EST)

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New Line's movie The Golden Compass starring Nicole Kidman and Daniel Craig opens on December 7, bringing an acclaimed best-selling fantasy trilogy by author Philip Pullman to its widest audience yet.

The attack, such as it is, is being led by William Donohue, the blustering, bigoted head of the far-right political group Catholic League. This group poses as a defender of the Catholic faith but devotes itself to partisan political attacks against anyone opposed to a right-wing, Republican agenda.

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First, let's look at the charge that the books are anti-Catholic and then question whether Donohue is a reasonable spokesperson for the Catholic Church that should be given legitimacy by the traditional media.

The Golden Compass is the first book in a trilogy by Pullman entitled His Dark Materials. It is easily the most acclaimed fantasy work in many years and looks set to take its place alongside landmarks like The Lord Of The Rings and The Chronicles Of Narnia...

Pullman was greatly inspired by Milton's Paradise Lost, another work that has been alternately

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praised and condemned over time but is now one of the landmarks in epic poetry. *Paradise Lost* features the Devil as its central, sympathetic protagonist, mixes in pagan symbols with religious icons, and grapples mightily with sexuality. It is also taught in virtually every academic institution in the Western world and any serious student of theology or literature must grapple with it at one point. If Donohue objects to *His Dark Materials*, he must object to its equally scandalous inspiration and immediately call for a ban on Milton's *Paradise Lost* and insist that anyone who reads it or teaches it is an anti-Catholic bigot.

But is *His Dark Materials* full of hate for Catholicism or Christianity in general? Pullman himself is most certainly an atheist and **no fan organized religion in general**. But his books are most scathing towards dogmatism and unquestioned authority, not any one faith. There are brave (gay) angels in later volumes -- which must have thrown Donohue into convulsions if he got that far -- not to mention the death of a God-like figure, and a church that is kidnapping and torturing children in an obsessive desire to rub out the "sin" of sexuality. It's bold and compelling and ultimately very challenging indeed - just like most great literature. As a practicing Catholic, I found them enthralling, fascinating and have shared them with friends, neices and nephews and their parents.

Among the many people of faith who have found the book's serious grappling with issues of sexuality and belief worthwhile is no less than **Rowan Williams, the head of the Anglican Church** and that religion's equivalent to the Pope. If the head of one of the world's major religions can champion these books, along with countless other people of faith, literary critics, scholars and mere fans of excellent fantasy fiction, then clearly it cannot be denounced out of hand as evil or inappropriate to read and discuss. Parents are always responsible for deciding what books are appropriate for their children at what age. But anyone who would ban or denounce *His Dark Materials* and try to keep it and *The Wizard of Oz* and the Harry Potter books and *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* and *Catcher In The Rye* and *Are You There God, It's Me Margaret* and countless other classics from everyone else and insist these books are dangerous or evil is just foolish and ignorant.

It all comes down to how you practice your faith. If, like Donohue, you want people to unthinkingly accept whatever they are told, then anything that encourages thought and debate is dangerous. If you believe that an unexamined faith is meaningless, if you believe that in fact it is your duty to question your faith and yourself and how to practice that faith in the world today, then no movie, no book, no CD will be anything other than an opportunity to talk, discuss and contemplate what it means to be a person of faith.

William Donohue would have none of that. **An angry, bullying, bigoted figure**, he resembles nothing so much as the notorious **anti-Semite Father Charles Coughlin**. Donohue has denounced Hollywood as "controlled by secular Jews" and says "Hollywood likes anal sex." He calls homosexuality the "gay death style," spews venom and hate at anyone who talks about the horrific child abuse scandals that continue to rock the Church, blaming it mostly on gays and the media and deep-pocketed lawyers and even accuses people of lying about being abused to cash in. Check out **the *Today show* clip where he is so angry and nasty** and unhinged compared to the calm, reasoned guests also on the air.

It's remarkable that Donohue is still invited on TV after so many blow-ups on air. But whatever you think about his politics, Donohue simply doesn't comport himself in a Christian manner. He bullies, he yells, he mocks, he spews hate - he does everything in fact except behave with Christian humility and compassion. TV producers who keep booking him because he "makes good TV" should be ashamed of themselves.

If you want to know more about why Donohue hates *The Golden Compass* so much, **he'll gladly sell you a copy of his 23 page booklet for only \$5 each**. (If it's so dangerous, why not simply post his pamphlet online for free?) Or you could simply buy the entire **"His Dark Materials" trilogy on sale at Amazon for \$13.50**. Since the United States is not yet a theocracy, happily the choice is still yours.

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I hadn't heard of the movie before, but the very fact that Bill Donahue doesn't like it makes me want to see it and read the books as well. Is there a list of movies and books opposed by the Catholic League? It might make for some interesting reading and viewing.

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My family have greatly enjoyed Phil Pullman's series. A riveting story, really. It's fair to point out that Pullman is not respectful to religion, to put it mildly. This is not a Christmas story, by any means. If anything, just the opposite, if that's possible. But, \*millions\* of readers around the world adore these books.

There's an interesting analysis in this month's Atlantic:

'Pullman's books have sold 15 million copies worldwide, although it's difficult to imagine adolescent novels any more openly subversive. The series, known collectively as His Dark Materials, centers on Lyra Belacqua, a preteen orphan who's pursued by a murderous institution known as "the Magisterium." Or to use the more familiar name, "the Holy Church." In its quest to eradicate sin, the Church sanctions experiments involving the kidnap and torture of hundreds of children"experiments that separate body

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from soul and leave the children to stumble around zombie-like, and then die.'

<http://www.theatlantic.com/doc/200712/religious-movies>

The animosity toward 'Magisterium' occurs in a parallel universe inhabited by Lyra 'Silvertongue' (& her inseparable 'daemon' Pantalaimon), not in ours, where the Church is seemingly more malevolent than our own. Perhaps the American church has trouble with the likelihood of multiple universes, which is at the heart of what Pullman's works are about.

The 3 novels in the series tell a truly amazing story. And one can only hope the movie(s) will tell the story as well as Phil Pullman conceived it.

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Read Pullman's trilogy when I was over forty. Imaginative, provocative, impressive, just the type of challenge in which young minds can immerse and older ones can revel. Just the type of thing that would rile Donohue's ilk.

If the screenplay is anywhere near the quality of the books, it (they) will be block busters.

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