



The Golden Compass

Tony Watkins

Heading in the wrong direction

Author: Tony Watkins

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Tagline(s): There are worlds beyond our own - the compass will show the way

Director: Chris Weitz

Screenplay: Chris Weitz, based on the novel by Philip Pullman

Starring: Dakota Blue Richards, Nicole Kidman, Daniel Craig, Eva Green, Jim Carter, Sam Elliot, Ian McKellen

Distributor: New Line (USA); Entertainment (UK)

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[Image]

Few films have excited such strong feelings in the run-up to their release than *The Golden Compass*. Fans are always concerned about how well a book they love will be transferred to the big screen, but much of the discussion revolves around how anti-religious the film is, as I've discussed elsewhere. We've had enough comments from director Chris Weitz, leading actors and even Philip Pullman himself to know that the religious aspects have been toned down significantly. The key question for enthusiasts of Pullman's *His Dark Materials* trilogy is what impact this has had on the film itself.

We knew that the Magisterium (which in the book has connections with pre-Reformation Roman Catholicism) would be a non-specific totalitarian regime in the film, but religious references are still there. It's more subtle than the book, but that is all to the good. It is easy for film as a medium to be too direct, rather than subtle. If some of the book's dialogue concerning the Magisterium had been used unchanged on screen, it could well have felt very heavy handed. As it is, there are both verbal and visual clues to its nature. The term 'Magisterium' is, of course a religious term (it refers to the teaching authority of the Roman Catholic Church). Magisterial bigwigs have a somewhat clerical appearance, especially with the medallions bearing an 'M' insignia and the clothing of the High Councillors (Christopher Lee and Edward de Souza) and Magisterial Emissary (Derek Jacobi), though less so with Fra Pavel (Simon McBurney). More significant are references to the need to deal with 'freethinkers and heretics'.

The Authority, which in the books clearly refers to God, is not often spoken of, but there are at least a couple of references which would imply God to most people with some religious awareness, though they would probably go over the heads of others. The most obvious of these is when Mrs Coulter explains to Lyra why 'just a little cut' is necessary. 'A long time ago,' she says, 'some of our ancestors made a terrible mistake. They disobeyed the Authority, and ever since then we have been sick with Dust.' The phrase 'original sin' is not used, but it clearly refers to the first human rebellion against God. The reference to the Garden of Eden is made by Lord Asriel in the book, in one of the three chapters from the end which have been held over to the beginning of the second film.

The biggest impact comes not from these compromises, but from making a comparatively short film (113 minutes is well below what we've come to expect of such films in recent years) of a breathtaking novel which is packed full of excitement, adventure and intrigue. Changes from the book are inevitable in a film adaptation, of course. Film and literature are very different media, and what works in print doesn't necessarily work on screen. Shortcuts must be made in order to condense the story into the time-frame, so fans of the books will find many scenes springing small

or large surprises. Most of these make very good film-making sense, even if they are sometimes frustrating, but some seem bizarre. Why, to take a very trivial example, was it necessary to change the name of the king of the armoured bears? More substantial is the reversal of major events towards the end of the film. Lyra (Dakota Blue Richards) is taken to the king of the armoured bears by Samoyed hunters before she ever gets to the Bolvangar experimental station. The purpose is evidently so that the climax of the film is the battle at Bolvangar, but there is no apparent reason why the hunters would take Lyra as a gift to King Ragnar (voiced by Ian McShane). Having events happen without motivation is breaking one of the key principles in creating a narrative that viewers can follow. Nevertheless, overall the film works well: it looks fabulous, and the performances are almost all very strong.

The film opens by giving some background in voiceover: 'So many worlds, but common to them is Dust.' Dust, we're told, was here before any intelligent life. The nature of this Dust, and the struggles to either discover its source or to eliminate its effects are what provides the central narrative tension. It is soon clear that the Magisterium does not like Dust or anybody who investigates it, or even speaks of it. It is also apparent that something sinister is going on to prevent children being 'infected' by Dust. One supporter of the move justifies it by saying, 'If we can protect our children from the corrupting effects of Dust before their dæmons settle, we will produce a generation at peace with itself. We owe it to the young.' In this climate, when Lord Asriel (Daniel Craig) suggests that Dust comes from another world entirely, the idea is dismissed as heresy. The Master (Jack Shepherd) of Jordan College, Oxford, where Lord Asriel announces his ideas to the assembled scholars, is urged by the Magisterium's representative, Fra Pavel, not to support Asriel. But the Master insists that he 'will not abandon the traditions of tolerance and free enquiry' – a pointed reference to the common, but utterly mistaken, ideas that Christianity is intolerant of anyone who thinks differently, and that 'free' enquiry is only possible when one abandons the framework of religion and any ideas of revelation.

The film finishes with the nature of Dust far from

clear, as does the book, though we don't see Lyra's realisation that if bad people think Dust is bad, then it must really be good. But then, viewers will already have drawn this conclusion for themselves. There is a growing sense that the Magisterium's concerns about it are somehow linked to their determination to rule everyone. Serrafina Pekkala (Eva Green), the queen of a witch clan, tells aeronaut Lee Scoresby (Sam Elliott) that a war is coming about 'nothing less than free will. The Magisterium not only seeks to control everyone in this world, but in every world.'

Freedom is the central concern of the film. Lyra wants to be free to do her own thing, without being ordered around by Oxford scholars and made to learn particle metaphysics; she wants to be free to run around with servant boys and fight with the Gyptian children, to roam the roofs of the college and spit plum stones on the heads of scholars. When she first meets Mrs Coulter (Nicole Kidman), she is enthralled immediately by the glamorous woman's declaration that she too wanted to do her own thing. Some, at least, of the scholars and Lord Asriel want to be free of the control of the Magisterium. Iorek Byrnison, the armoured bear (voiced by Ian McKellen), wants to be free from the miserable life in which he finds himself, free to take his rightful place as king of the bears. And, of course, there is the desperate need to free children from the clutches of the Bolvangar Experimental Station.

Most of these expressions of a longing for freedom are in opposition to authority, whether legitimate but perhaps not wisely used (in the case of the scholars), or repressive and cruel (as in the case of the Magisterium). This is why Weitz talks of the story as being about authority generally, not religious authority in particular. And as far as this first part of the trilogy goes, he's absolutely right (though in the second and third parts, the religious nature of the ultimate authority becomes increasingly vital to the plot). The message that we should struggle against authoritarian regimes and mis-used power is an important one. When power is abused, and where authority is used to exploit and control, rather than to enable a community to live at peace with itself, it must be challenged. As Pullman often points out, history contains many examples of religious authorities that have functioned in such a way, and there are examples in today's world, too. There have also

been terrifying examples of secular authority being used in the same and even worse ways within the last century. Pullman likes to claim that these examples, like Stalinism, are still religious in nature because they have a special book and a 'priesthood'. But his definition of religion is so inadequate at this point that it renders his argument extremely weak.

The problem is always human beings. Religion should never be used to wield authority over others, and those examples of times when it has been are a cause of shame for the church (or for other religions). They have always been examples of power-hungry human beings grasping after power and wielding it to serve their own ends. The key to it is not, as Pullman suggests, that religion inevitably lends itself to such abuse, but rather that for much of the world's history, it has been religious institutions which have been a major aspect of society and thus are vulnerable to misuse. Once secular institutions became the major players, they became more vulnerable. Any institution is made of people, and there are always some people who thirst for power. The problem goes right back to the first rebellion against God – the first attempt to grasp after more freedom than we had. The first humans had plenty of freedom, plenty of responsibility, and all the wisdom that they needed. But they wanted more, and the wrong kind. Rather than freedom within guidelines set by a perfectly wise, good and loving God, human beings wanted absolute autonomy; we wanted authority to rule our own lives. In other words, we all want power, though some of us want power over others too. The resolution to the problem, though, does not come through continuing to grasp after complete autonomy – that way lie increasing struggles for power – but in being willingly subject to the right, beneficent authority.

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Author: Tony Watkins

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