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Religion & Society

AN EMBOLDENED 'COMPASS'

By Tom Gilson

11/16/2007

Anti-God, Anti-Church at School

Last week, a local school counselor loaned us material from the Scholastic publishing company, promoting curriculum resources based on the upcoming movie and the already-published book, *The Golden Compass*. The materials were impressive—a gorgeously designed 31-by-21-inch poster of the movie, including an invitation for students to take part in an “Amazing Student Sweepstakes,” and on the back of it, a set of curriculum resources based on the book, all at completely no charge to schools or teachers. (The [poster](#) and [teaching materials](#) are on Scholastic’s website.)

If it seems somewhat unusual for a curriculum company to be promoting a movie, that’s not the strangest thing about it. *The Golden Compass* is the first book in Phillip Pullman’s *His Dark Materials* trilogy. And what are these “dark materials”? The reader can get a very quick overview of the series through the (quite accurate) plot summaries at [SparkNotes](#) online.

There, for example, we learn about “intercision,” a plot feature of the *The Golden Compass*. What is this “intercision?” The answer really can’t be quoted on this page. You may go to SparkNotes to find out, but be sure no young children are looking over your shoulder. (Note that SparkNotes draws its interpretation on that point from the second book as well as the first.) Yet Scholastic wants schools to teach this material to our children.

And they surely don’t want them to stop at the first book. The [second book](#) is entitled *The Subtle Knife*. That happens to be the name of the one weapon that can kill God. The [third book](#) tells us that God is relieved to be killed. He’s a rather pathetic character, tired of all the responsibility, “half-crazed with age and infirmity,” in SparkNotes’ words. He had been rather mixed up about things all along, though. The Satan figure in the trilogy was the one who brought freedom to humans. God—and the dominating, violent, fearful church—fought against this freedom. Pullman cheers for their downfall. He has said it not only in his fiction, but also in interviews. The books, he says, are “about killing God.”

Pullman’s God is fictional, and we must hasten to note that the actual God is not concerned about death threats that might be made against him. The real concern is for students who will have this dark material forced on them in schools.

Scholastic is by far the top source of reading materials for American schools. What they market, schools buy. One might wonder what they stand to gain from giving these expensive materials away.

Well, it’s not *really* all that hard to figure out. The poster says the materials



are “generously sponsored by New Line Cinema.” Generous indeed, that they would co-opt an educational company to advertise their film for them? But it’s not entirely a co-optation—for Scholastic co-produced the film. It’s all bound to sell a lot of books, of course, and Scholastic will gladly handle that transaction for your child, too, thank you very much. Does this smell like a company that has students’ and schools’ best interests at heart?

There is word on the Web that the anti-God theme has been toned down for the movie; and that theme is expressed much more strongly in the second and third books than the first, anyway. So is there any reason to make a fuss over this first book, and the movie? Yes, because the first book in a trilogy, if it is at all interesting, is (among other things) the strongest possible advertisement for the second and third. It’s impossible to promote *only* the first. Who could stop reading *The Lord of the Rings* just when the Fellowship separated, at the close of the first book?

Moreover, the anti-Church, anti-Biblical elements of even the first book are plenty strong. The Church is presented as highly controlling and evil; and this is not some other-world, purely fantastical church with no connection to our own world. In Chapter 16 we learn of its “Vatican Council.” In Chapter 19 a character speaks of being “baptized as a Christian” in Geneva. Chapter 2 tells us the last Pope in this world was John Calvin, which in another context would be knee-slapping hilarious, but here contributes to the strength of the connection this fictional world has to our real one.

One of the prominent themes of the book is “Dust,” a mysterious “charged particle” from the sky. In the closing chapters of the book the protagonist, Lyra, finally learns that Dust is “the physical evidence for original sin;” and Dust is what powers her “alethiometer” (the golden-colored, compass-looking device for which the book is named). From the Greek, *alethiometer* means “truth-measurer” It is a device she consults, through a kind of clairvoyant process, to learn secrets and discover truths; and it never lies or misleads. Dust and the alethiometer—central symbols in this book—together send the clear message that truth is measured by the power of original sin. In the very closing pages of the book, Lyra decides that Dust is a good thing after all, and she determines to go on and defend this original sin against the Church. Thus we are ushered into the second book.

This is certainly not a message we want our children to take to heart. Still, we cannot lose sight of the fact that Pullman is working on our turf when he tells his tale. I’ll gladly stand up our story against his! The story of Christ has drama, it has strong characters, it has relevance, it has a truly stupendous surprise ending—in short, all the elements of great story. Best of all, it’s not fiction. It happened! So we need not respond defensively, or with anger, or by picketing the movie, or with any of the worldly methods Paul warned against in 2 Corinthians 10. This is the time—especially since the movie is coming out at Christmastime—for us to tell the true story of Jesus Christ, in love and with a positive tone.

Yet there is a limit, and Christian parents ought to stand guard on behalf of the next generation. *The Golden Compass*—book or movie—does not belong in our schools.

Tom Gilson is director of strategic processes in the Operational Advisory Services team for Campus Crusade for Christ. He maintains a blog at www.thinkingchristian.net.

For Further Reading and Information

Tom Gilson’s [Discussion on The Golden Compass](#), *Thinking Christian*.

Tom Gilson, “[Coming Soon To Your Child’s School: Hostility Toward God and Church, Heavily Promoted](#),” *Thinking Christian*, 30 October 2007.

Gina Dalfonzo, “[Tone Matters](#),” *The Point*, 2 November 2007.

Gina Dalfonzo, “[Whitewashing the ‘Compass’](#),” *The Point*, 24 October 2007.

Gina Dalfonzo, “[Pied Piper of Atheism](#),” *The Point*, 15 November 2007.

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