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A Christian Communicator's Response to The Golden Compass: Don't Boycott: Explain & Engage



On the extremely rare chance that you have not received one of the many warning emails making the rounds of cyberspace, on Dec. 7 The Golden Compass movie will be released. Based on the children's fantasy series by Phillip Pullman, the emails warn that the movie is a "dumbed-down" version of a series of books that is about killing God and that Christians should boycott it. Rather than boycotting it, I think the movie provides a challenging opportunity for Christian communica-

tors to explain and engage—here's how:

Explain the book, the plot, and themes honestly

We all experience the frustration of endlessly forwarded emails. When the email topic is a web-worn chain letter, a warning about bad guys in parking lots, or a bandwidth hogging download picture of puppies and angels—we know to immediately delete. But when an email with high-moral sounding seriousness advises boycotting a movie based on a best-selling children's fantasy series, starring major stars (Nicole Kidman and Daniel Craig), we ought to take time to at least get our facts straight.

Hysterical, incorrect explanations about the books, from people who admittedly have never read them, do little to advance the Christian faith. A site often linked to the emails, www.snopes.com, is hardly the epitome of literary or religious insight. It correctly records that the author of the book series, Phillip Pullman is an atheist, but from that to assert that the whole plot of the books (and by implication, the movie) is about "killing God" and that the "dumbed down" version presented in the movie is an intentional ploy to lure children to the evil of the books is simply silly.

Pullman is a skilled writer; the books magical; his characters memorable. Pullman obviously has huge issues with the church, but to be precise, his books have nothing to do with "killing God." As Pullman has stated repeatedly, he does not believe God exists. In the books, the enemy as perceived in the books is a religious authority gone very wrong and the Pullman carefully describes the spiritual heads of this religious authority as "not the creator" but his regents. There is no Creator God or Jesus in the books, the spiritual powers are transformed humans, (a key one is Enoch, described in a rather odd angelic history) who are weary of ruling; or as angels with barely super-human powers who can be vanquished by human power.

The real enemy in the books is the Magisterium, an obvious reference to the church and his descriptions of it are obviously one-sided. Burning witches, the Inquisition, the repression, abuse of power and people are issues many within the church would agree are evil—no big surprises or shocks here. More than anything, I found myself won-

dering if Pullman had ever met a kind or caring Christian and chastened as I wondered how I come across to those with whom I disagree.

In addition, some of the web-criticisms of themes in the book (again, by those who admit they have not read them) are embarrassing in their ignorance, which does little to advance the credibility or honesty of the Christian faith. The confusion between daemons and demons for example—in the book series the daemons are the animal manifestations of the soul of a human and have nothing whatsoever to do with the Christian definition of an evil spirit. The following definition from Wikipedia may prove useful here:

The words daemon, dæmon, are Latinized spellings of the Greek δαίμων (daimon),[1] used purposely today to distinguish the daemons of Ancient Greek religion, good or malevolent "supernatural beings between mortals and gods, such as inferior

divinities and ghosts of dead heroes" (see Plato's Symposium), different from the Judeo-Christian usage demon, a malignant spirit that can seduce, afflict, or possess humans.

To confuse the two terms, without reading the books, is not moral indignation, but sloppy thinking and incorrect criticism.

These clarifications aside, there are many other things in his books that are non-Christian in subject matter: lying as a useful way of interaction; the shifting and confusing definitions of witches and angels, and other topics which well worth exploration and explanations, but is boycotting the answer to dealing with them?

I don't think so.

Intelligent, thoughtful engagement as an alternative

When the Apostle Paul (Acts 17) arrived in Athens, a city filled with pagan idols, which were obviously repulsive to his monotheistic background, he did not organize an idol boycott. He walked around and studied them and then when the time came for him to share his message, he could stand up and say, "I see you are a very religious people...." and he took what was personally repulsive to him and used it as a bridge to share the gospel message.

That is Christian communication at its finest—taking the popular media of his day (the pagan idols) and using them as an opportunity to share the Christian message.

Jesus' disciple Peter has similar advice for us: 1 Pet. 3:15: But in your hearts set apart Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect.

When the Da Vinci Code debates were raging a few years back, I found it was a time to communicate deeply and effectively about historical Christianity, how we got our Bible, if we can trust it now, and related topics.

To deeply consider challenging topics presented in the books and upcoming movie, to evaluate honestly them from a biblical perspective and then to communicate clearly and kindly the truth of the Christian message in a way that helps our people and gives them tools to share with their children and friends is a tremendous amount of work, but that is our core task as Christian communicators.

For some specific examples of how I'm doing that that you can reproduce and for additional ideas and resources, please go to my website: www.thelionsvoice.com.

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