

# The Golden Compass Has Lost Its Way

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On the day of the premiere of *The Golden Compass*, Terry Sanderson, president of the National Secular Society (of which Philip Pullman is an honorary associate), commented:

“We knew from the beginning that the producers of this film intended to leave out the anti-religious references. We think this is a great shame – the fight against the Magisterium (Pullman’s thinly-disguised version of the Catholic Church) – is the whole point of the book. Take that away and the most original and interesting element of the story is lost.

The director, Chris Weitz, has said that he needed this initial film to be financially successful in order to be able to make the next two in the series. It is the next two that would be the real problem if the scripts were to be true to the books, because it is the later books that bring the anti-religious themes to the fore. However, if the franchise takes off, perhaps the makers of the subsequent movies can be a little braver than they have been with the first one.

Religious objections to the film seem to be completely manufactured. They are the latest in a series of such reactions – *Harry Potter* was condemned for promoting witchcraft, *Elizabeth: The Golden Age* for being anti-Catholic; *The Da Vinci Code* for being blasphemous etc etc. The Catholic Church must feel very weak and vulnerable if it feels it has to control absolutely everything that is said about it – which rather makes the point of the books.

The real objections from the Catholic League are not against the film itself, but an attempt to stop the stories becoming popular, which might lead children who haven’t already done so to read the books. Its previous campaign against *The Da Vinci Code* was a complete flop – that film became the biggest grossing movie of 2006.

The American audiences are portrayed as very conservative when it comes to religious matters, but I think they would have coped with Pullman’s pop at authoritarian religion. Certainly British audiences would. When the same books were dramatised at the National Theatre in London every performance was sold out and no parent thought it beyond the wit of their child to deal with the themes of a fight against sinister religious power.

In the end, the film will stand or fall on its merits, not on whether some extremist group has organised a boycott. If it fails to engage the imagination of its audience with a strong plot and sympathetic characters, then it will disappear without trace.

We call on the producers of the next film to be courageous and trust their audience to make of its message what they will. Audiences flock to stimulating, exciting and character-driven films. It is these qualities that cause some films to endure and the lack of them that make other films fall into obscurity.”

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