

# The Golden Compass (PG)

## About the film

The first movie based on the bestselling Philip Pullman novels. The *His Dark Materials* trilogy is comprised of *The Golden Compass*, *The Subtle Knife* and *The Amber Spyglass*.

It revolves around a young girl who travels to the far north to save her best friend. Along the way she encounters shape-shifting creatures, witches, and a variety of otherworldly characters in parallel universes.

## Background: the books vs the film

*His Dark Materials* presents a strikingly different kind of tale from the ones told by Lewis and Tolkien; on a certain level, it even opposes them. Pullman, writing in *The Guardian* on the occasion of Lewis's centenary in 1998, said the Narnia books are "one of the most ugly and poisonous things I have ever read," with "no shortage of . . . nauseating drivel." Peter Hitchens, writing in *The Spectator* in 2003, named Pullman "the Anti-Lewis."

While Lewis and Tolkien wrote stories imbued with Christian imagery, Pullman's trilogy—which has sold millions of copies and won numerous literary awards, including the Carnegie Medal and the Whitbread Prize—depicts the death of God and the creation of a "Republic of Heaven" that has no need for a King.

And while Lewis and Tolkien kept the Christian elements fairly subtle—even the Narnia books have no explicit references to Jesus—a key scene in Pullman's trilogy shows a former nun telling two children that she left the Christian faith because it's "a very powerful and convincing mistake, that's all."

In Pullman's story, the God of the Bible is not really the Creator, but simply the first angel who emerged out of what Pullman calls "Dust." When other angels emerged, he lied and said he had created them—and he went on to set up churches in multiple universes, to assert his control over them. But now this angel, who is called "the Authority," is old and weak and faces a rebellion by angels and humans alike.

Writer-director Chris Weitz, a self-described "lapsed-Catholic crypto-Buddhist," said in one interview that the film will not refer to "the church." But the movie's official website indicates that the cruel scientist Mrs. Coulter works for a villainous "dogma"-enforcing entity known as "the Magisterium," a Latin term that, in the real world, signifies the Catholic church's teaching authority.

Nicole Kidman, who plays Mrs. Coulter, told *Entertainment Weekly* the film "has been watered down a little," adding, "I was raised Catholic [and] I wouldn't be able to do this film if I thought it were at all anti-Catholic."

Then again: "If the first film was a film in isolation, I would say it's no big deal," says Tony Watkins, managing editor of the U.K.-based website [www.culturewatch.org](http://www.culturewatch.org) and author of *Dark Matter* (Damaris/IVP), a book that analyzes the trilogy from a Christian framework. "But it isn't in isolation, and it is part of a bigger picture."

However, Watkins, while disagreeing with Pullman's worldview, says he appreciates the way Pullman raises important religious questions, especially in secularized Great Britain, where the books have already been dramatized on radio and in live theater.

"While I don't want to encourage out-and-out attacks on the gospel, obviously, truth can stand for itself if it is given a fair hearing," says Watkins. "And one thing that this story does is it gets the [Christian] story into the public sphere. [In the U.K.], that has often been a bit of a challenge. But when there's some clear opposition, that's often when the Christian voice gets heard."





## Review

“The filmmakers have been at pains lately to say that they toned down the book’s anti-religious content, and that may be true to the extent that the movie never uses words like “church” or “God.” But the word “magisterium” does refer, in the real world, to the teaching authority of the Roman Catholic Church, and the film is still peppered with religiously significant words like “oblation” and “heresy,” as well as a cryptic reference to “our ancestors” who “disobeyed the Authority”—that is, to Adam and Eve and their disobedience against God in the Garden of Eden.

And when lorek breaks into one of the Magisterium’s offices to retrieve his armor, he bursts through walls decorated with Byzantine icons—a potent symbol of how the bear, Lyra, and others are fighting to liberate themselves from church rule. Weitz has said he wants to make the next films more “iconoclastic,” so consider this bit of sacrilege a taste of what is yet to come—assuming New Line gets around to making the next two films in the trilogy.”— *Peter Chattaway - ChristianityToday*

## Discussion Questions

1. When Lyra tries to “read” the alethiometer, Farder Coram tells her, “You mustn’t grasp at the answer. You must hold the question in your mind, but lightly, like it was something alive.” Is this principle applicable in our own lives? How does it compare to, say, the way we pray or seek guidance from God? What does it mean for a question to be “alive”? Is the answer “alive”?
2. What is the nature of “authority” within the Church? What role, if any, is there for pastors, elders, deacons, priests, bishops, etc.? How is the nature of leadership described in, say, the Pastoral Epistles (*1 & 2 Timothy, Titus*)? What should we do when leaders overstep their bounds? How can we know when they have done this?
3. What is the relationship between God’s authority and that of his followers? Why does Lord Asriel oppose the “Authority”—that is, the God—of his world? Many people in our world say they are spiritual or believe in God but they do not believe in organized religion or the Church; does anyone in the film believe in the “Authority” but not in the “Magisterium”? Would it make any sense for them to do so?
4. How does Lyra “master” her fear? How does lorek model courage for her? How does she model it for him? Who has modeled courage in your life?
5. The leaders of the Magisterium say they are doing harmful things to children and others “for their own good.” Does the film really give you the impression that they believe this? Would it be more effective if it did or didn’t? When have you done things for someone else’s good that might not have been so good after all?

*Image courtesy New Line Cinema*