

Hearing Pullman's Prophetic Voice

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Let me begin with a confession: I am a Christian. I believe the gospel and seek to follow Jesus.

Let me begin with a second confession: I enjoy and admire Philip Pullman's *His Dark Materials*. Pullman's engaging fiction satisfies my desire for a well-told story and my need for poignant questions that illuminate what we used to call "the human condition."

The arrival of a film version of Pullman's *The Golden Compass* at the beginning of this advent season has been accompanied by a fuss over the possibility that this film or Pullman's novels will entice children to embrace atheism.

My elder daughter read Pullman's trilogy in her early teens, about the same time I first read Pullman. My younger daughter, age eleven, read *His Dark Materials* this past summer, and she frequently revisits these novels by listening to the dramatized audio version. Like most Christian readers of Pullman's books (including many of my students at Messiah College), we didn't lose our faith or find ourselves tempted to embrace atheism. Why not?

I suspect we didn't experience this because we didn't find our Christian faith under attack in Pullman's trilogy. The god served by the Magisterium in Lyra Belacqua's world is not the God incarnated in the Jesus presented by the gospel writers. In the gospels, Jesus rejects the kingdoms of this world and their political power in order to live the "perfect Love which casts out all fear."

In contrast, the god killed off by Pullman's protagonists is all about exercising political power and establishing a kingdom of this world—Pullman's god is one who takes the bait Satan vainly offers to Jesus in the wilderness temptation. This god is essentially POWER, and those in his service desire power more than love and the free-will necessary for living love. This god has no Son who embodies his love for humanity—this god only wishes to control human behavior and perpetuate the power of “the Church.”

Followers of Jesus know that such a god is an idol and worthy of being destroyed. Followers of Jesus can only rejoice when Pullman kills off this god, for the death of this God creates more room for LOVE to thrive. Followers of Jesus realize that Pullman's story threatens and exposes only those religious and political leaders who desire and seek the very political power Jesus rejects.

Of course, this isn't what really interests the kids when they're in the middle of reading Pullman's story. But Pullman's fiction, in its destruction of a false god, does offer its young readers a critical resource for resisting the seductions of prominent religious and political leaders who will entice them to give themselves over to POWER, to bow down and worship an idol who offers them the kingdoms of this world. That's one of the successes of Pullman's book.

The film, unfortunately, will not give us this atheist author's surprisingly Christian critique of idolizing power. The timidity of Hollywood has cut away the daemon that animates Pullman's fiction, opting instead to sell us the same pablum it typically offers in order to secure the bottom line.

This is a shame, really, as Pullman's prophetic voice—like the voice of one crying in the wilderness—opens the way for the advent of the Christ-child in a world dominated by the will to power, including those who assert their power in the name of that Christ-child.

Pullman's favorite poet, William Blake, once remarked about Pullman's other favorite poet, John Milton, that he was “of the devil's party without knowing it.” Echoing this, I suggest that in *His Dark Materials*, Pullman is of Jesus' party without knowing it. Why? Because Pullman insists that the force of love surpasses the force of power—and that is the heart of the gospel, precisely what we followers of Jesus learn from our Lord.

Note: This essay was published by *The Patriot-News* (December 7, 2007): A15, under the title “Pullman's Film Destroys a False God”