

It looks at though “The Golden Compass” will be going down without much of a fight. The \$180 million dollar epic, based on the first novel in a trilogy of young adult fantasy books, has grossed a mere \$41 million in its first two and a half weeks of release. In a short amount of time the Golden Compass will disappear entirely from theaters, and with it, most likely, goes New Line’s hope of adapting the entire “His Dark Materials” trilogy on which its based.

There are, of course, any number of reasons why “Golden Compass” is flailing. It could be because the mythology seems dense and confusing to moviegoers who’ve never read the novels by British author Phillip Pullman, or perhaps because the film starred an unknown child actress, or just had one too many talking animals. In all likelihood, though, this failure had an awful lot to do with religious controversy.

If you’ve never read them, the novels take place in a world where the Christian church is now known as the Magisterium, and it has become corrupt and obsessed with the idea of trying to quash free will (which, in the novels, is synonymous with “original sin”).

Much has been made of the novels’ atheistic attitude, but that’s not entirely correct – there *is* a God in “His Dark Materials,” but He has become fragile and insignificant, practically forgotten as the church grows fanatical about stricter and stricter control of its subjects. In the books, the Magisterium is trying to obliterate free will, and the heroine, Lyra, is the only hope for preserving it.

Because of these views present in the novels, certain Christian religious organizations, particularly William Donahue and the Catholic League, have been protesting the new “Golden Compass” movie for months now; on the grounds that it will, I guess, encourage children to become atheists.

Let me back up a moment and explain a very simple fact about filmmaking: Christian iconography and themes are everywhere. I’m not just talking about the obvious stuff – references to God in movies like “Bruce Almighty,” or “The Da Vinci Code.” I don’t even just mean the much-talked-about analogical storyline of “The Chronicles of Narnia.” References to Christian theology can run through even your everyday superhero blockbuster.

Think, for a moment, about the 2006 “Superman Returns.” A much longer-for hero arrives on Earth to do good works. He’s ‘killed’ by an evildoer, but his body is collected by two of his followers and hidden until his ‘resurrection’ a few days later. There are even a couple of shots of Superman falling through the sky, wounded, with his arms spread out and his eyes closed. It doesn’t get a lot more iconic than that.

That’s just one example. Christian themes and ideas have representation all over the history of cinema. Which is part of what makes the protests against “The Golden Compass” so unjust. Christians have long seen their ideas represented in film, either openly or symbolically, and now that someone is presenting a counterview, suddenly many groups are arguing that religion has no place in kids’ movies – a hypocritical viewpoint if there ever was one.

Furthermore, in attempting to keep people – particularly kids – away from the “Golden Compass” movie and novels, the Catholic League is doing *exactly* what the Magisterium does in the books: trying to command thought and free speech. The protesters are operating under the assumption that any Christian who reads the “His Dark Materials” trilogy is automatically going to renounce their faith. (Which, incidentally,

really sort of implies that they think all Christians are easily-persuaded idiots without much faith to begin with.)

Still, despite all the opposition from certain religious groups, it's possible that the "Golden Compass" film could have been a huge success. Between the free publicity from the Catholic League and the not-to-be-overlooked legion of Pullman fans, a great script and loyalty to the novel could have still saved the movie.

But, facing pressure from many religious organizations, the filmmakers responsible for "The Golden Compass" caved. They scrubbed the film as clean as they could, omitting any references to the Bible or God, chopping the ending off, and never associating the Magisterium with any church.

But the plan backfired - trimming the film's controversial moments didn't appease the Catholic League - they continued to protest on the grounds that if the movie was too good, children would go out and get the books. But the edits did get a reaction from the other camp, alienating the Phillip Pullman fans who had actually been crazy excited about the movie.

What we are left with, after the Dust settles (pun intended), is a tragedy: not just because filmmakers have allowed religious opinion to crowd their creation of art (the very thing that books are definitively AGAINST), and not just because a great story has been wasted on a not-that-great movie.

No, this situation is tragic because tonight, all over the world, dinner tables are being deprived of a really great conversation. At the end of the day, that's what art is all about: provoking ideas, asking questions, debating the answers. And in this regard, "The Golden Compass" is some of the best, most accessible art that anyone can get a hold of. An opportunity has been lost here, and we are the ones missing out.

If it matters to you, if you're interested, I am a Christian, too. I've also loved Phillip Pullman's books for nearly as long as I can remember. And maybe the truth is that questioning your faith, examining its boundaries and expanding them, can only make you a better Christian. In the words of Christian author G.P. Taylor, "My God is big enough to defend himself against Phillip Pullman." If art is one of the world's great catalysts for intelligent discussion, then religion must be at least its equal. And there's nothing immoral or sacrilegious about that.