"Every Church Is the Same: Control, Destroy, Obliterate Every Good Feeling": Philip Pullman and the Challenge of Religious Intolerance

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No children's books since C. S. Lewis's *Chronicles of Narnia* have combined popular success and religious advocacy as effectively as Philip Pullman's *His Dark Materials* (1995-2000). But quite unlike the Christian-inspired *Chronicles*, Pullman's fantasy series is unreservedly hostile towards organized religion. How many children's books, after all, kill off God? Or include a statement like this one: "The Christian religion is a very powerful and convincing mistake . . ." (*Amber Spyglass* 441)? And no *other* religion gets Pullman's approval, either: "Every church is the same: control, destroy, obliterate every good feeling. . . . For all its history [religion] has tried to suppress and control every natural impulse" (*Subtle Knife* 50).

The Golden Compass, The Subtle Knife, and *The Amber Spyglass* are, as one writer put it, "rip-roaringly unputdownable" (Ross). Over twelve million copies have been sold worldwide (Cieply), and in 2001, *The Amber Spyglass* won the Whitbread Prize for book of the year—a first for a children's book. In these three books, Pullman sets out to replace the great mythic stories of Christianity, rejecting the power and authority of the divine in favor of the intellectual potential and moral responsibility of humans. Natasha Walter finds that Pullman "fulfills an often unassuaged longing in this secular age" through his depiction of "a great battle between good and evil . . . where everything is at stake, where you have to take sides" (Walter).

Shirley Hughes calls Pullman a writer of "extraordinary descriptive power" and adds, "simply nothing can match the power of his imagination" (McCrum). As a result, it would take at least a dozen pages to summarize *His Dark Materials*. Briefly described, the series takes place in multiple overlapping universes (which Pullman explains using quantum theory). The twelve-year-old protagonists are Lyra, from a parallel Oxford, and Will, from our world's Winchester.

Humans share existence with other rational creatures, including witches, angels, and *panserbjørne*, armored bears who work as mercenaries. In some universes, humans have dæmons, a sort of external soul in animal form. Every place is plagued by hostility, warfare, aggression, and violent death. The Church is bad, God is much worse, and the central action involves a second war in heaven.

In depicting established religions as inflexible obstacles to freedom, progress, and social harmony, *His Dark Materials* violates the decorum and sensitivity common in most twentieth-century children's fantasies, which typically disregard religion entirely, or present a pseudo-pagan spirituality that encourages tolerance by suggesting that doctrinal distinctions are of no importance. Yet *His Dark Materials* is as intelligent as it is bold. Pullman rejects religion and traditional notions of God (as he understands them) because he believes them to be antithetical to freedom. For him, the value in being human lies in having a mind and a heart and a spirit that can enjoy and love and give and grow. He thus provokes a crucial question: how successfully can a text value human experience and champion toleration of diversity while savaging religious belief?

The Church in *His Dark Materials* is a particularly nasty vision of religious fanaticism, an amalgam of Catholicism and Protestantism in which Pope John Calvin once ran the papacy from Geneva (*Golden Compass* 30). Like churches everywhere, we are told, it has set itself in permanent opposition to individual growth and independence: "Every little increase in human freedom has been fought over ferociously between those who want us to know more and be wiser and stronger, and those who want us to obey and be humble and submit" (*Subtle Knife* 320). (Pullman himself says of the world's religions, "They're all bad. Every single one of them" [Curtis].) David Gooderham has shown convincingly that Pullman's fictional church

directly represents Christianity and not just some fantasy parallel (158-60).

The Church and its adherents are, almost without exception, dangerous zealots, ready to use violence and intimidation in order to prevent sin. The true believers work to fulfill what they perceive to be the divine will, and that requires blind and absolute obedience. In *The Golden Compass*, the Church hopes to perfect an operation to permanently separate people and their dæmons; it will strip them of autonomy, passion, and the potential for growth, a horrifying violation that leaves them too bland and docile to sin—but less than human. Pullman's depiction of religious characters is unfailingly critical, abounding in hypocrisy, cruelty, bigotry, dishonesty, alcoholism, lust, and arrogance. The Church members appear to be open to any act of cruelty or violence, if it serves their purpose. The priests plot to kill Lyra, whom prophesies identify as the new Eve, before she can subject the world to a second Fall, and they will kill anyone they have to in the process. Pullman gives us no good religious characters; like religions themselves, they are all bad. Finding fault with this flat characterization, Nick Thorpe comments on "the almost pantomime evil of his churchmen, who are conspicuously lacking in either redeeming features or . . . the nuanced psychology that makes his heroes so compelling" (Thorpe).

Pullman's portrayal of God figures is only a bit more complex. He provides two of them—the Authority and his regent, Metatron—meant to be at least loosely identified with the Christian Father and Son. Metatron is not really Jesus but an institutionally corrupted version of him, a mixture of egocentric power, moral intolerance, and carnal desire. The Authority is worse: "The Authority, God, the Creator, the Lord, Yahweh, El, Adonai, the King, the Father, the Almighty—those were all names he gave himself," an angel explains. "He was never the creator. He was an angel like ourselves . . ." who early on established his power over all the

universes (*Amber Spyglass* 31). The first war in heaven, some 30,000 years ago, is tied up in fascinating ways with the evolution of human consciousness, which has given rise to purposeful, autonomous behavior, the essence of rebellion against the divine.

The Authority loathes this development, believing "that conscious beings of every kind have become dangerously independent. . . ."; in order to crush this defiant individualism, "Metatron is going to intervene much more actively in human affairs . . . [and] set up a permanent inquisition in every world . . ." (*Amber Spyglass* 61). For the Authority, the only acceptable behavior for thinking beings is blind obedience to his will. Rowan Williams, the Archbishop of Canterbury, correctly commented to Pullman on the severe narrowness of this conception of the divine: "[you've presented] a church . . . without redemption. . . . It's entirely about control" ("Dark Materials Debate").

The Authority's control is best realized in Pullman's land of the dead, a nightmarish afterlife inflicted on all rational beings when they die. The spirit of a martyr, who lived and died in the hope of eternal reward, proclaims that it "isn't a place of reward or a place of punishment. It's a place of nothing. The good come here as well as the wicked, and all of us languish in this gloom for ever, with no hope of freedom, or joy, or sleep, or rest, or peace" (*Amber Spyglass* 320). This is the Authority's ultimate triumph: a place where *everyone* has nothing to do, nothing to enjoy, nothing to hope for or choose. It suggests how the Authority and Metatron would like *all* the universes to be: devoid of everything except volitionless creatures conscious of the gods' power and control. Ultimately, *His Dark Materials* liberates the land of the dead and kills off both of the gods: the Authority dies in a state of senile incomprehension; Metatron's lust leads him to a violent death.

By interfering with natural human processes and especially maturation—of the individual

at puberty and of the species through evolution—the Church and the Authority have elevated death above life, stasis over process. Humanity suffers endlessly, torn between the contraries of active improvement and severe restraint, and the uncountable deaths that pervade the books serve as metaphors for the diseased condition of the human state under religion's guidance and control.

William Blake famously claimed that the deeply pious John Milton was actually "of the Devil's party without knowing it" (86). Pullman cheerfully *admits* that he is of the devil's party (Vulliamy 18); and in fact, Blake and Milton are his two greatest influences in *His Dark Materials*. Not surprisingly, the series has come in for its share of criticism, mostly on ideological grounds rather than artistic ones. In an often quoted attack, *The Catholic Herald* denounced it as "the stuff of nightmares[,] worthy of the bonfire" (Sands). *The Daily Telegraph* warned, "Christian parents beware: his books can damage your child's faith" (FitzHerbert). Peter Hitchens wrote an article provocatively titled "This Is the Most Dangerous Author in Britain." The head of England's Association of Christian Teachers called the work "anti-Christian propaganda" and asserted that "Pullman sets out to undermine and attack the Christian faith. His blasphemy is shameless" ("Philip Pullman and Nicholas Hytner").

Pullman has been public and entirely unapologetic in response. "As you look back over the history of the Christian church," he told one interviewer, "it's a record of terrible infamy and cruelty and persecution and tyranny" (de Bertadano). In an essay on biologist Richard Dawkins, Pullman discounts any of the church's apparent virtues, saying that "If some parts of the Christian church are decent and tolerant today, it is because the crusaders and inquisitors and witch-burners have been shamed and stripped of their authority by the great critics of religion . . ." ("Every Indication" 274). "[I]f there is a God and he is as the Christians describe him, then he deserves to be put down and rebelled against" (de Bertadano). Thus, and much more, Philip

Pullman.

Even independent of Pullman's various inflammatory statements to interviewers, *His Dark Materials* makes no effort to disguise its contempt for religions that exalt the divine at the expense of the human. And yet the books otherwise embrace diversity, tolerance, compassion, open-mindedness, cultural integrity, and moral commitment, among other positive values. Can we read *His Dark Materials*—better yet, can *children* read it—in such a way that it is *not* fostering religious intolerance? Or is Pullman another Sam Harris, urging tolerance for most things while preaching hostility towards religious faith? The answer isn't simple. I find *His Dark Materials* to be undeniably anti-religion but nonetheless committed to fostering spiritual awareness and responsibility.

Pullman insists upon the centrality of *this* world and *this* life. In *Mere Christianity*, C. S. Lewis wrote that Christians should regard their mortal existence as "Enemy-occupied territory . . . [where] an evil power has made himself for the present the Prince of this World" (40-41). Pullman recoils from such thoughts; in "The Republic of Heaven," an essay developing a key conceit in *His Dark Materials*, Pullman asserts that "This world is where the things are that matter . . . not in some gaseous realm far away" ("Republic"). This world is, for Pullman, spiritually rich and marvelous. He once spoke of "The sense of astonishment at the sheer fact of being alive, and wonder at the revelation of the beauty of the world" that he wants others to feel (Dodd). In "The Republic," he writes that "our world, [is] a place of infinite delight, so intensely beautiful and intoxicating that if we saw it clearly then we would want nothing more, ever" ("Republic"). His novels go a long way to stimulating such a sense in readers.

Pullman balances human joys with human responsibilities: he has observed that "the old idea of . . . a personal God who lives somewhere and keeps an eye on us . . . and punishes us and

rewards us is dead" (Billen). People "are connected in a moral way to one another. . . . We're not isolated units of self-interest" ("Republic"). Morality is more than a matter of belief. Throughout his series, Pullman shows that moral choices and moral actions require unflinching effort: faced with difficult options, Will cries, "I'm divided, I'm pulled apart" (*Amber Spyglass* 203). As Naomi Wood puts it, Pullman "demonstrates the difficulty of determining the good course of action when knowledge is always partial and impressions may be manipulated or mistaken" (246). Morality begins with judgments, which are complicated by the uncertainty of truth; these lead to actions, which, in *His Dark Materials*, tend to be scary, challenging, unfamiliar, dangerous, and even mysterious to the participants. And moral actions can demand a very high price, both physically and emotionally. Even understanding comes at a cost: "it wasn't a welcome truth. It was heavy and painful" (*Subtle Knife* 335). Yet with no god to depend upon, humans *must* undertake moral actions.

Opposed to this responsible cooperation, Pullman sees dogmatic certainty and its demands for inflexible conformity, which inevitably stand in the way of intellectual growth and development. St. Augustine explained Original Sin—a major theme in *His Dark Materials*—by saying: "God's instructions demanded obedience. . . . it is calamitous for [a person] to act according to his own will and not to obey the will of his Creator" (571). Pullman sees *independence*, not obedience, as essential to morality and human fulfillment. He dismisses all claims of a monopoly on unassailable truth, rejecting "Not [just] Christianity, but every religion and fundamental organisation where there is one truth and they will kill you if you don't believe it" (Chrisafis). Any such set of rigid beliefs stunts or violates an existence that is too various, too abundant, and too dynamic to be circumscribed or controlled.

Pullman presents a moral vision of considerable complexity. Good is not something one

is but something one must work at doing. In *His Dark Materials*, knowledge comes from humans, angels, witches, armored bears, and more; knowledge and authority are *decentralized* here. The greatness that religion commonly places in the divine, Pullman invests in many people, and especially in Lyra and Will.

Witches, angels, *panserbjørne*, and yet other species, the dead, and humans from a range of cultures and societies populate *His Dark Materials*. Their beliefs, values, and spiritual awareness of the world differ in significant ways. For instance, witches do not experience existence as humans do: "There's all kinds of concerns that play on the life of witches," a human tells Lyra, "things invisible to us; mysterious sicknesses . . . causes of war quite beyond our understanding; joys and sorrows bound up with the flowering of tiny plants up on the tundra" (*Golden Compass* 220-21). Lyra's soul exists separate from her, as a dæmon that has an animal form; Will, coming from our universe, has an internal soul; and Iorek Byrnison, the armored bear, says that his *armor* is his soul (*Golden Compass* 196). A single approach to living, a single perspective, is unacceptably narrow here; respect for variety is central to the series' morality, and we may assume that a sufficiently open-minded religious tradition would not come in for Pullman's censure. Pullman's implication is that people must cooperate, even while preserving their own cultures. The Church does not cooperate; it coerces.

The Church in *His Dark Materials* seeks to obstruct knowledge and progress. As an angel describes it, "all the history of human life has been a struggle between wisdom and stupidity. . . . the rebel angels . . . have always tried to open minds; the Authority and his churches have always tried to keep them closed" (*Amber Spyglass* 479). Yet independence does not mean—or allow—selfishness, as Lyra and Will discover when called upon to sacrifice their own happiness for a larger good.

The last great choice facing Lyra and Will combines the two biblical events that transformed all of humanity: the temptation of Adam and Eve, and the redeeming sacrifice of Jesus. To give two twelve-year-old characters such a burden involves enormous artistic risk; but Pullman succeeds fairly well. Their sacrifice prevents a cataclysm but does *not* produce an earthly paradise. On the last page of *The Amber Spyglass*, Lyra muses, "No one could [build the republic of heaven] if they put themselves first. We have to be all those difficult things like cheerful and kind and curious and brave and patient, and we've got to study and think, and work hard . . ." (548). Pullman allows no easy fixes. But *His Dark Materials* points the way to a spiritually rich existence.

Grace, salvation, morality, spirituality, and love—these are all very much in evidence in *His Dark Materials*, and they may be what Daniel P. Moloney, writing in the conservative Christian journal *First Things*, has in mind when he writes, ". . . Pullman has unintentionally created a marvelous depiction of many of the human ideals Christians hold dear." "I really think," writes Andrew Billen, ". . . that he has written a profoundly religious epic. . . ." Pullman's hostility towards *organized* religion pervades his masterpiece. But the spiritual richness and moral commitment of *His Dark Materials* are never in question.

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