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Dark Materials?: Philip Pullman's Stories and the Christian Story

As *The Golden Compass* plays in our cinemas, Rick Simpson returns us to the books on which the film is based and discusses the attack upon Christian faith mounted by Philip Pullman in the *His Dark Materials* trilogy

His Dark Materials

For a decade, Harry Potter has been very big business. J.K. Rowling's wizard lit-kid has certainly cast his spell over millions of young and not-so-young readers, listeners, and viewers. However, during the apparent reign of Rowling, Philip Pullman pipped her to some of the top children's fiction prizes and earned the highest of literary praise for the *His Dark Materials* Trilogy (1995-2000). Pullman even won the 2001 Whitbread fiction prize, defeating all adult competitors to the accolade,¹ and the trilogy also came third in the BBC's *The Big Read* final in December 2003. And while some Christians spent years getting their theological knickers in a twist over magic Harry, far fewer even noticed that there is far more in Pullman worth raising the eyebrow of faith about. Now that the first volume has reached the screen under the title *The Golden Compass*,² it is yet more important that an intelligent Christian reading of - and response to - the books and films is taking place.³

His Dark Materials, widely lauded in educational circles and available in multiple languages, has won a passionate following among children and adults alike. The books are indeed compelling. Pullman himself says he is a storyteller rather than a writer, and he knows how to hold readers; the clichés about unputdownability abound in formal and informal reviews, and I do not disagree. The trilogy traces the adventures of Lyra and Will, pre-adolescents from two of many worlds: Will is from ours, Lyra from one both like and unlike it. Through them, and the human and other characters we encounter, a drama of biblical proportions (a turn of phrase which is both very true and profoundly untrue, as we shall discover) is played out.

- 1 *The Amber Spyglass* also became the first children's book to be longlisted for the Booker Prize.
- 2 This was the American title for volume one, published in the UK as *Northern Lights* (Pullman 1995). The subsequent volumes are *The Subtle Knife* (Pullman 1998) and *The Amber Spyglass* (Pullman 2000). Frost 2007 offers 'the definitive guide' and has a foreword by Pullman himself ('I can't
- 3 There is now a growing secondary literature on the trilogy including from Christian writers such as Houghton 2004; Rayment-Pickard 2004; Watkins 2004; Bruner and Ware 2007; Craske 2007; Freitas and King 2007.

recommend it too highly to the reader who's found anything interesting or enjoyable in this story of mine').

These are children of destiny: Will is a magical knife-bearer. For comparison, in another world – or book – you might meet a ring-bearer. (They even both lose fingers, Frodo near the end and Will near the beginning of their journeys). Lyra has a pseudo-messianic role too. The universe which embraces these many parallel worlds is under threat: ‘dust’, its very energy and life-force, is flowing out. Will and Lyra hold the key to stopping the dust-drain.

Pullman tells his tale with skill, employing some ingenious devices, especially (although it has been criticised as not altogether novel) this: people in most worlds have a ‘daemon’; that is, their soul is worn on the outside, as a semi-independent animal-shaped creature. Children’s daemons change shape according to mood or will; in adulthood, they fix into one creature – a monkey, a raven, a hare. This enables Pullman to handle big themes imaginatively and creatively: personality, identity and the ‘soul’; innocence, experience and growing up; parenthood and childhood; love, friendship, trust, and betrayal; loss and bereavement; good and evil, greed, violence and abuse; lust, courage, fear, destiny and purpose; spirituality, spiritual power, and God. Given the issues Pullman handles, his creation of other worlds, and the extreme readability of the books, early reviewers gushed comparisons to Tolkien (not really welcomed by Pullman) and C. S. Lewis (not at all welcomed: he hates Lewis and the Narnia books).

Whether *His Dark Materials* is in the same literary league as *The Lord of the Rings* is not my interest here; comparisons aside, make no mistake: these books are compelling, and readers of all ages are gripped and swept along by the narrative. The Tolkien comparison is odd, though, at least in this sense: there is a chasm between the two writers’ moral and theological visions.

Pullman’s ‘message’

Tolkien, as we know, was a Christian, and though *The Lord of the Rings* is in no obvious way an allegory of the drama of salvation, its whole framework is informed by an essentially Christian worldview. In Middle Earth there are forces of evil, which do evil, and as such are warring against the original creation and purpose of everything. There are forces of good which – though often flawed – seek peace and harmony. Who the goodies and the baddies are is clear, though one can be sucked from the one side to the other, seduced by the dark power, and one can unwittingly, or through negligence, weakness or deliberate fault, injure the cause of good even though you might not be an orc, a balrog or an inhabitant of Mordor. Christians have always valued *The Lord of the Rings* as a kind of literary ally, though Tolkien never alludes directly to biblical stories, and there is no church in Middle Earth.

Fall or Ascent?

Pullman’s story is quite different. He uses biblical elements and ideas directly and deliberately, but reimagines them and invests them with wholly other meanings. Significantly, Pullman said (in an interview with *Amazon.com*), ‘The story of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden and the temptation of the serpent is for me the central myth of what it means to be a human being’.⁴ This seems true: the trilogy’s

⁴ <http://www.amazon.com/gp/feature.html?docId=94589> (accessed January 2008)

plot turns upon it. However, original sin is here reconceived as the *happy* choice that makes us fully and truly human; the fundamental meaning of the Fall of humankind is reconceived into something more like an Ascent.

In the second book, *The Subtle Knife*, angels reveal that they intervened in our evolution to bring about human consciousness. Why did they do this? As an act of revenge against 'the Authority'. For this Authority, god, is a tyrannical, usurping angel. The theological myth of the books is summarised by the angel Balthamos in a passage from *The Amber Spyglass*:

The Authority, god, the Creator, the Lord, Yahweh, El, Adonai, the King, the Father the Almighty – those were all names he gave himself. He was never the creator. He was an angel like ourselves – the first angel, true, the most powerful, but he was formed of Dust as we are, and Dust is only a name for what happens when matter begins to understand itself. ... The first angels condensed out of Dust, and the Authority was the first of all. He told those who came after him that he had created them, but it was a lie. One of those who came later was wiser than he was, and she found out the truth, so he banished her. We serve her still. And the Authority still reigns in the kingdom...⁵

It is fascinating how Pullman is deconstructing and reinventing the biblical story here. The one who goes by the biblical names of God is more like a fallen angel: he is the first angel, falsely claiming to be God and Creator. The place of Satan in the traditional myth of the fall in heaven – the first among angels, seeking to arrogate to himself divine power, and falling from grace – is taken in Pullman's myth by God himself. This is, of course, a rather significant change! In the myth of *His Dark Materials* there does not seem to be a creator as such, just matter, and spiritual powers that came into existence when matter 'began to understand itself'. Human consciousness is something the Authority strove to prevent, and which the other angels created by inducing the process that led to the evolution of human beings.

Note the interesting partial parallels here with early pseudo-Christian Gnosticism: there, the creation was not the work of the one God, but the lesser act of a demiurge.⁶ In Pullman's mythology, 'God' himself is not truly God, and in the creation of human consciousness (through the evolutionary process) angels were doing *good*, in rebellion against 'God'. At the end of the story, as we shall see, humans are again led to disobey this tyrannical deity, and in so doing redeem the universe: in disobeying the one who calls himself God, they do well; indeed, to throw off the divine is redemptive.

Pullman confirms this reading in an interview with his publishers, Scholastic, which merits quoting at length:

Underlying the trilogy there is a myth of creation and rebellion, of development and strife, and so on. ... It depicts a struggle: the old forces of control and ritual and authority, the forces which have been embodied throughout human history in such phenomena as the Inquisition, the witch-

5 Pullman 2000: 33-4.

6 Pullman has acknowledged the partial parallels here with early pseudo-Christian Gnosticism in his dialogue with Rowan

Williams. See <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/arts/main.jhtml?xml=/arts/2004/03/17/bodark17.xml> (accessed January 2008).

trials, the burning of heretics, and which are still strong today in the regions of the world where religious zealots of any faith have power, are on one side; and the forces that fight against them have as their guiding principle an idea which is summed up in the words *The Republic of Heaven*. It's the Kingdom against the Republic. And everything follows from that. So, for instance, the book depicts the Temptation and Fall not as the source of all woe and misery, as in traditional Christian teaching, but as the beginning of true human freedom – something to be celebrated, not lamented. And the Tempter is not an evil being like Satan, prompted by malice and envy, but a figure who might stand for Wisdom.⁷

This Fall, then, is Promethean – stealing from heaven for the good of earth – but also morally justified.

The Church and Jesus

This underlying myth sets up another of Pullman's major reversals: the church, in serving the Authority, is the enemy of every development in human freedom and progress. Obedience to the Authority, mediated by the church, stands in the way of knowledge and fullness of life. This church, ruled by the 'Magisterium' (no attempt at fictional distancing is being made here, then!), is a mixture of the worst elements of the Inquisitional Catholic church and theocratic Calvinism. It directly involves itself in murderous experimentation upon children – clearly intended to put us in mind of Mengele-like Nazi atrocities – in order to find a way to defend the Authority.

In this critique we are clearly reaping once again the harvest of too many times when the church has sown evil in the name of good. However, the reality that the church's past and present is a messy mixture of good *and* bad, with most of the good unseen and unsung, is not allowed to intrude upon the church depicted in *His Dark Materials*. The Republic is good, the Kingdom bad.

Even so, it is worth noting in passing that this good Republic will, it seems, have a brutally utilitarian ethic: while the agents of the kingdom are experimenting upon children, the hero of the republican revolution is not above sacrificing them either. The champion of the revolt in the books, leading the opposition to the Authority, is Lord Asriel (who happens to be Lyra's father). At the end of the first book Asriel murders his daughter's best friend, Roger, in a sort of infanticidal splitting of the atom that generates the power needed to move into a world where he can directly assault the Authority. And this is the vanguard of the enlightened Republic?

Maybe this is an artistic flaw, or maybe the agents of ultimate good are morally ambiguous. No such luxury is afforded to the church, though: it is simply bad. Just as biblical language is borrowed to present a deity wholly unlike the God revealed in Jesus, so the church served up is purely and simplistically obscurantist, opposed to all discovery and advance, serving the Authority by demanding an obedience that involves a direct opposition to freedom and progress. The ambiguity of the real church, often but not always failing to do the work of the

⁷ <http://www.scarthinserver.co.uk/child.html>
(accessed January 2008).

God it professes, is not allowed to intrude. The church here is undiluted obscurantism and oppression.⁸

Now, is this any criticism of the real church? Would inferring that be reading too much into the books? Isn't this just a different sort of religion in a different world? Absolutely not: with the parallels so clear, this vision of the church and of Christian belief is actually offered directly and didactically to the reader. It is the truth not only in Lyra's, but also in Will's world, which is our own world. Furthermore, Pullman himself says that he is not a fantasy writer, but a storyteller dealing in 'stark realism'. He distinguishes this trilogy from fantasy writing as such precisely in that the characters here move between other worlds and this world, and we return to our own world informed and enlightened for our task here. The literary method (as explained by the author) and the theological message are clear: *we* return from reading the books to our world knowing that the church is very bad and we are better off without God. When the witch Serafina Pekkala says, 'Every church is the same: control, destroy, obliterate every good feeling',⁹ it does seem Pullman is speaking, and that he means *every* church, including the one that really exists, here.

Significantly, Jesus has no place in the myth or the church of the books. That is astonishing, given that it is the Church of Jesus Christ Pullman so dislikes. But maybe – unlike his body on earth – Jesus is harder to attack.

Anti-Christian myth

Pullman, then, is not Tolkien! He offers an unambiguous assault upon a Christian world-view, all the more direct because Pullman takes up biblical and Christian themes far more directly than the Christian Tolkien did, and does so precisely in order to reverse them. These elements of the Christian story are used to turn the theology of Christianity upside-down and inside-out. While recent generations of avid *Lord of the Rings* readers have been nurtured on a myth sympathetic to and opening onto Christian belief and commitment, Pullman offers something quite different, and clearly opposed.

It is true that viewers of *The Golden Compass* will have seen the critique of the church played down enormously. The sinister authority is not called 'church' at all in the film, but only 'Magisterium', and many viewers will not realise that the term is borrowed from the office of orthodoxy in the Roman Catholic Church. This does not, however, mean that the films are faith-neutral. For those who come to them having first read the books, the visual impact of some scenes will add vivid colour to the critique of the church which they have read. For example, the depiction of the experimentation centre in the frozen north is very powerful indeed, as sinister people who talk about belief and heresy clinically separate children from their souls ('for their own good'). Moreover, it is only in the second and third volumes of the trilogy that the central theological myth is revealed, and it is very difficult to see how this anti-theology and its consequences will remain muted in the two films to come.

8 For example, during a torture scene the witch victim is told, 'There is more suffering to come. We have a thousand years of experience in this Church of ours. We can draw out your suffering endlessly' (Pullman

1998: 39). Pullman even throws in, for no clear narrative reason, a dirty, disreputable and potentially child-abusing parish priest in *The Amber Spyglass* (Pullman 2000: 101-107).

Preaching like Lewis?

Perhaps a more instructive comparison than Tolkien is with the man Pullman so dislikes, C.S. Lewis. His other-worlds fantasies – both the Narnia books and the Dr. Ransom Trilogy – move between those imagined worlds and our own, as Pullman's books do. Also, in both of Lewis' series, the Christian story is drawn upon directly or allegorically. In these respects, he is much closer to Pullman than Tolkien is. However, like his friend Tolkien (and their co-Inkling, Charles Williams), Lewis wrote fantasy in order to lead people to the 'true myth' of Christ. His stories serve, undergird, help to make receivable, even lay the grounds of apologetic for, Christian belief. This is the task – along with giving simple narrative pleasure – they have performed for fifty years.

Pullman, however, pulls apart the Christian story and denies its claim to being God's good story. The elements are used directly, but only in order to rearrange them and give them other and opposite meaning. It's a gloriously postmodern playing-with and rearranging-of the pieces. The Garden of Eden is recovered almost whole, in order to give the biblical story in its entirety a new meaning: God is present, but not good; creation is ambiguous. And what of destiny, eschatology? Everything seems to still be driven by some 'deep magic' (to use Lewis' term from the Narnia books) in which Lyra is a prophesied child, and her rendezvous with Will in a wood mysteriously reverses the dust-flow.

However, where this logic, physic or magic comes from, and how or why it works, is unclear. It is certainly not linked to a good, creator God. One might fairly ask in passing, in purely narrative as well as mythological terms, why this deep structure exists in a universe so ontologically chaotic? Is Pullman not trying to have his metaphysical cake and eat it?

Indeed, the extensive employment of religious themes and material – not least the use of angels and the descent into the underworld in *The Amber Spyglass* – might appear somewhat confusing. However, the way this is all used is almost pure Feuerbach: the elements of religion are themselves recycled into a myth teaching people to throw off religion. This is made clearest in the sequence in *The Amber Spyglass* where the spirits are led by Will and Lyra to escape from the underworld (chapters 21-23, 26). Upon their liberation, they do not progress into an afterlife, but their elements disperse to rejoin the cosmic ether: the anti-theology here seems to be that we are to throw off the myth of paradise in order to enter true freedom; only that can release us from the dull, half-life of living in the false hope of heaven.

To return to Lewis: Pullman dislikes him for his preachiness. For example:

I didn't read the whole of Narnia as a boy: I read *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader*, and felt slightly queasy, as if I were being pressured to agree to something I wasn't sure of. Now I can see what that was, and why I felt odd. Reading the whole sequence for the first time as an adult, I was angered and nauseated by the sneakiness of that powerful seductive narrative voice, that favourite-uncle stance, assuming my assent to his sneering attitude to anything remotely progressive in social terms.¹⁰

9 Pullman 1998: 52.

10 <http://www.bridgetothestars.net/index.php?p=pullmanquotes> (accessed January 2008)

However, it is very difficult to see how Pullman can avoid a similar charge of preaching or teaching himself. He may believe different things to Lewis, but he too has a 'powerful seductive narrative voice' and our assent to his depiction of an utterly evil church also seems assumed. And why should he worry about taking, and leading readers to, such a stance? For the Kingdom of Heaven *needs* to be overthrown, and replaced with a Republic, he says. The overthrow, of course, starts in the mind, with getting rid of God (which Pullman does in the narrative by its end, and not with a bang, but a whimper: when god's cage is opened, he expires in relief.) And near that end, we hear Pullman's own voice, distilled in that of his ex-nun character, Dr. Mary Malone: 'The Christian religion is a very powerful and convincing mistake, that's all'.¹¹

Redemption and the reversal of the Fall?

Malone, we learn in the story, threw off her chains by throwing off her habit – quite literally. It was religion or sex, and sex won through in the end. Here is another instance of the powerful narrative voice, certainly seductive, treading a pretty well-worn path. The recipe goes like this: first, take a nun, embodying the denial of sex, as the symbol of faith; then have her lose her faith, in the name of full humanity, through the affirmation of the goodness of sex. Finally, to make the escape from the folly of religion complete, and just to make sure the traditional opposition of religion and reason is also employed, re-create the ex-nun as ... a scientist. Serve with a garnish of making said ex-nun a really nice, normal person, and – voila! – a character who can embody Pullman's message of post-Christian sex, science and sanity.

Pullman employs this carefully constructed character of Malone to introduce these themes, and to observe and approve of the climactic moment in the reversal of the whole biblical myth of fall and redemption. This great reversal – and the use of the theme of sex to achieve this – is the narrative's true finale. For even after Pullman's version of the last battle, the decisive defeat of the Authority, the life-giving energy is still flooding out of the universe. So if it is not the death of God that stops this, what does? It happens when the adolescent Will and Lyra enter a wood (which is quite clearly a Garden, let the reader understand). There they take off their shoes and socks (holy ground, maybe? Certainly, the nakedness of Eden), feed each other succulent red fruit, and declare their love. Then Will kisses Lyra 'over and over again, drinking in with adoration the scent of her body and her warm honey-fragrant hair and her sweet moist mouth that tasted of the little red fruit. Around them was nothing but silence, as if all the world were holding its breath'.¹²

It is from this moment that 'dust' stops exiting the universe, and starts flowing back. The reversal of the ruin is achieved by the happy, good and right loss of innocence: 'these children-no-longer-children, saturated with love, were the cause of it all'.¹³ At this Eden moment, grasping the forbidden fruit, full humanity is grasped, attained, not lost, and it's all got something to do with romantic love and sex. The myth of the Fall is now a myth of ascent, with the discovery of sexuality affirmed as positive.

¹¹ Pullman 2000: 464.

¹² Pullman 2000: 492.

¹³ Pullman 2000: 497.

I am genuinely surprised there has not been some debate about Pullman's choices as an author here, in this account of Will and Lyra's sexual experience in the garden. How old are these kids? Fourteen, at most. What passes in the wood-come-garden is left only *somewhat* ambiguous, and actually not very: Will and Lyra are called 'lovers'; they touch and stroke the animal shapes of one another's daemons, though this is strictly, *strictly* taboo: no one touches another's daemon. Also, from this exact point onwards their daemons are fixed in shape, indicating unambiguously the shift into adulthood. This really is a questionable thing to do in a *children's* book. When quizzed about this, Pullman said that he does not *know* what took place: 'I don't know what they did. I wrote about the kiss – that's what I knew happened. I don't know what else they did. Maybe they did, maybe they didn't. I think they were rather young to, but still...' ¹⁴

Apart from this sounding appallingly pretentious, and possibly disingenuous, I find myself asking: will that *do*? The narrative and symbolism shout 'sex!' The almost irresistible conclusion that this scene describes under-age sex begs the question of how wise or appropriate this is in a world increasingly concerned about sexualised images of children and the sexual exploitation of children by adults. (It will be interesting to see how film number three, with a probable PG certificate, interprets this.)

So, the traditional (though of course questionable/false) link of the fall story with sex and the loss of innocence is used and milked heavily. Throughout *The Amber Spyglass* there are quotations from Milton, by whom Pullman is captivated. In this critical scene, Paradise is not lost; through a sexual experience, and all that this means, it is gained. Whatever has been going on has clearly done the trick, and the ex-nun Mary Malone (who, as we know, became fully human herself by becoming sexually active), watching Will and Lyra returning from the Garden (I mean wood), sees in them 'the true image of what human beings always could be, once they had come into their inheritance'. ¹⁵

Just in case we are in any doubt about where Christianity stands in relation to this sexualised achievement of full humanity, it is underlined boldly, and astonishingly clunkingly: as Will and Lyra are heading into the wood, a fanatical priest, Father Gomez, is hunting Lyra. He is ready (no, determined) to kill her, to make sure that the redemptive liaison (whatever Will and Lyra actually *do* that is redemptive) cannot occur. To the church, dust is evil; its departure must continue. Gomez, however, is foiled by an angel, who kills the priest, dying himself in the process. The clear message is: whatever good spiritual reality is out there in the universe, the church opposes it, and is not on the side of the angels in doing so!

Furthermore, the character who kills Gomez is Balthamos, a male angel, who has recently lost his male angel partner, Baruch. When Will first meets the pair, we read, 'The next moment, the two angels were embracing, and Will, gazing into the flames, saw their mutual affection. More than affection: they loved each other with a passion'. ¹⁶ So, let's freeze-frame the picture, and describe clearly what we

14 Interview in *Third Way*, February 2002, currently available online at <http://www.thirdway.org.uk/past/showpage.asp?page=3949> (accessed January 2008).

15 Pullman 2000: 497.

16 Pullman 2000: 27.

see: a gay angel prevents a priest killing a child; this frees the child to engage in some sort of sexual act, which, though condemned by the church, is actually *the* redemptive moment for the universe. An ex-nun, who lost faith largely for sexual reasons herself, looks on approvingly. Unlike his *Knife*, Pullman is *not* subtle.

Harmless Story?

Is it worth worrying about what is offered to us as simply a children's story? After all, endless books are written from the perspective of non-Christian world-views. However, it is very rare that they take up the raw materials of our Christian story so directly in order to (so aggressively) deconstruct it, and few if any will be as popular as *His Dark Materials*. And here is the practical rub: the books are, as I said, very good indeed. A lot of people have drunk the full draught of *His Dark Materials* and been moved both emotionally (no doubt: I was), and also intellectually by it. With the films, yet more will see this story, and indeed then read it.

The obvious concern Christians will have is that, where Tolkien or Lewis might have moved people looking for a good read towards a biblical worldview, Pullman pulls men, women and children in the opposite direction. For God is indeed dead in these books (literally, by the end), and Pullman is teaching us to live in a world without God. Curious to see whether the message of living without God is actually being received by readers, I searched the many reviews posted on Amazon.co.uk. One reviewer of the trilogy wrote:

Clearly addressing the modern day era, a time in which we are finding our feet in a world without Christianity, it offers an answer to the question ... why are we the way we are? What does it mean to be human? Pullman's answer serves to teach us how to live our lives as fallen beings, alone in a seemingly meaningless world. ... The Dark Materials Trilogy will come to be seen as ... giving us hope as we tread our solitary way into an unknown future (review posted 2.2.2001).

Philip Pullman may help generations to come to see things this way, and he will do so through the sheer power of his tale. It is claimed that Pullman admitted to writing his stories to 'undermine the basis of Christian belief',¹⁷ and that is clearly the effect of his work. We know that stories are important and that they can shape our minds.

Some – including some Christians – have suggested that, as the God of the books is so clearly not the God whom Christians believe in, this is not a critique of Christianity. This misses the point. True, the God really worshipped by the church has not been introduced at all. However, that is part of the point, is it not? For this God is not *going* to be introduced, although his names and part of his story *have* been employed. A close parallel is drawn between the foul Authority and the true God, and between the repressive church in the books and the ambiguous church here; this is *all* the reader *is* offered. To recall an example quoted already: 'The Authority, god, the Creator, the Lord, Yahweh, El, Adonai, the King, the Father the Almighty – those were all names he gave himself'.¹⁸ This is not neutral or fantasy

17 See <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/main.jhtml?xml=/news/2007/11/30/npullman130.xml> (accessed January 2008). The original statement was in a Washington Post article in 2001.

18 Pullman 2000: 33.

language, but biblical language. Here the narrative voice is (to return to Pullman's critique of Lewis) sneaky as well as seductive, as readers are led into an antipathy to the God of the Christian story. This is done by generating an understandable dislike towards an odious, fictional demi-god, but then identifying this creature with the God of the Bible, by using his names for both. The Authority is given the same names as God, and his character is allegedly drawn not from a fictional scripture, but from biblical narrative itself. It is surely naïve to resist the conclusions that it is Christianity, not some fictional faith, that is in Pullman's sights here, and that many will make this identification.

Nevertheless, the *Church Times* reviewer of the books,¹⁹ John Pridmore, ruled off-side any Christian criticism. While acknowledging that the metaphysical and philosophical undergirding of the trilogy is not Christian, Pridmore said, 'The only Christian response to this work is to read it once more'. I would hope a Christian mind can do a little better than that with *every* book, not just these. Pridmore goes on: 'where the moral base is secure, as in this most wonderful tale it surely is, the metaphysics can look after themselves'. That seems to me an astonishing theology: don't worry about the underlying truth as long as the morals lying on top seem OK. Against this, it must be argued that a Christian vision of the good is derived from God; that means our vision of God – however it is informed – is really rather important. Popular works of fiction dealing with spiritual themes (especially powerful and moving ones like Pullman's) inform that vision strongly, and all the more so as fewer and fewer people are rooted in a biblical vision from childhood. Well-meaning theologians may often try to split nice friendly morals from ugly, angular history and metaphysics, with all the controversy attaching to them. It is, however, a very subtle knife indeed which is needed to perform that operation, and neither of the divided parts is ever the same again afterwards.

Pridmore's review ended with a quotation from *The Amber Spyglass*, and his comment upon it: "Just tell them stories". If only we had heeded that wisdom'. Again, that begs all the important questions: What stories? Any stories? All stories? "Just tell", with all the assumed but bogus innocence that implies? We need to do much better than that. Stories are powerful materials; oh yes. So which we use, and how we use them, and how we learn to read them, are all important questions. And it should be noted that Pullman has told his story by putting *our* story into reverse; actually there is no 'just', no simplicity, no ultimate naivety, about the telling of stories. Stories – which stories are told, how and to what intent, and how they are heard – are a very serious business.

Pottering around in the dark?

Many Christians have exercised themselves greatly worrying about the fantasy world of Harry Potter. Not only have the later books been – arguably – full of imagery and themes far more compatible with Christianity, but there was always far less to be concerned about in that series than in *His Dark Materials*. This, unlike Potter, does represent a concerted attack upon a Christian worldview. Again, listen

¹⁹ *Church Times*, 5th January 2001, archived at <http://www.churchtimes.co.uk/content.asp?id=34373> (accessed January 2008).

to Pullman himself: 'I think that as long as people are agitated about whether Harry Potter makes you into a Satanist, they're not going to be very bothered with me. So I'm happy to shelter under the great umbrella of Harry Potter'.²⁰

It's important to shift that umbrella out of the way, and bring the materials Pullman uses into the light. For we need to be aware of the voices in our culture, their content and impact. Of course, any Christian critique offered of the books and now of the film has been readily put down as fundamentalist and obscurantist. That is not exactly a surprise, and the books' attack upon unquestioning dogmatism head-offs any unsubtle critique or defensiveness very effectively. Hence, the requests for a boycott of the film (for example, that made by Bill Donohoe, the president of the Catholic League in the United States) played into the hands of the trilogy's picture of the church: that's exactly what you can expect from such a controlling, wicked, dark-ages institution.

However, I would not argue that Christians should avoid *His Dark Materials*. On the contrary, I think we had better read the books (and very carefully) and see the films with our theological and ethical antennae in place. And then we had better talk about them, not least with young people who are part of church families.

Perhaps books raising spiritual issues are in themselves helpful – some would say so. And Philip Pullman's trilogy *is* psychologically and morally rich, as well as a cracking good read. However, that does not make it simply good. Furthermore, we would not expect to be *tempted*, much less seduced, by narratives that were ugly, would we? Ultimately, Pullman introduces readers to a God who is ugly and dead, and directly identifies this God with the one we claim to know as beautiful and alive. Given that, it seems appropriate to ask: what are these immensely popular books (and the films now following on) leading people to think about the Christian story?

As Christians, we need to know how and where our story is under attack, and how to respond. We believe that a significant focus of the battle in which we are involved is quite simply whether God is known and loved or not. To prevent the knowledge and love of the true God, it has always been claimed that the dark power in our universe will employ many materials, some of which will indeed be beautifully crafted, most appealing, and indeed in many ways good. I am not trying to demonize Pullman himself. Nevertheless, if the way, the truth and the life is Christ, and his story is given to us in scripture, then deconstruction of scripture and reversal of its meaning is not morally or spiritually neutral. (That is surely a fairly uncontroversial conclusion!). There is also something about little ones being led astray and millstones, that somebody once said. If Pullman's story helps people to dismiss the story that is ultimately Christ's story (especially to dismiss it unheard), then this material has dark elements to it indeed.

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²⁰ Amazon.com interview, <http://www.amazon.com/gp/feature.html?docId=94589> (accessed January 2008).

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