



## look – essays

### Freedom from the tyranny of faith, Philip Pullman's dark materials

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The Christian religion is a very powerful and very convincing mistake, that's all.  
*The Amber Spyglass*, p 464.

*Philip Pullman's trilogy, His Dark Materials, containing the novels Northern Lights, The Subtle Knife and The Amber Spyglass, charts the journeys of two children, Lyra and Will. The children live in parallel universes which almost, but not quite, map on to one another. They find a way into each other's worlds, to discover the beauty and danger of each other's home universe only to find ultimately, that they cannot stay together as they emerge into adulthood. Each must go back to their proper time and place and be parted for ever.*

The books are rooted in the world of the child. The texts are about exploration and adventure where anything is possible and it does not seem strange to enlist the help of a Texan balloonist, a ghost, a witch, or an armoured bear. Discovery and change are always possible. What threatens from the distance is adulthood, sexuality and fixity, after which the world of the child is lost forever, its capacity to change, diversify, imagine and re-make is finished. In one of the worlds, ravaging Spectres will destroy you if you are too old. Many of the adults in the novels are damaged, or seem bewildering. Will's mother is disturbed, his father is lost. Is Lyra's mother, Mrs Coulter, evil or good? What is the mysterious Lord Asriel's ultimate purpose?

Beyond this, there is 'God' (the 'Authority') and the 'Church'. These represent a kind of overarching parenthood whose oppressive regime reaches down into the world of the child and seeks to suppress imagination, exploration, change. The hound of heaven is not a sweet stalker but Fr Gomez, tracking Lyra to prevent her from falling into sin and fulfilling the prophecy which will enable humans to be truly themselves at last. The overthrow of Metatron, the oppressive Regent and power who has held 'God' in thrall, allows liberation into a 'republic of heaven' in which no power, lordship or sovereignty holds sway. Yet this egalitarian vision is constantly suppressed by the Magisterium and by the theologians who do not want the children to pursue their own story and who will disable or kill them to make sure they present no threat.

Philip Pullman has stated that not only does he not believe in God, but that the letting go of a powerful, overarching God whose will is worked out in the universe, allows rediscovery of all that is good and true about human beings and their place in creation. He has also stated that his atheism has given back the scriptures to him in all their diversity and that his work is intentionally full of biblical allusion. Consequently, the last part of the trilogy, *The Amber Spyglass*, reworks the Genesis account of the Fall and puts right the 'injustice' of a parental, punishing God, by throwing out that God and delivering the beauty of Eden back to the lovers through whose eyes the world is revealed in all its glory. Like the poet Yeats, Pullman rejects the negative empty images of the virgin womb and the empty tomb for the essential goodness of human, physical love.





This is more than atheist apologetic however. Pullman opts for the very opposite of a reductionist approach. Instead his imagination expands in response to the freedom offered by a world without an ultimate authority or destiny. The challenge Pullman gives to us is to reconsider our use and control of certain kinds of concepts and words. In the material for the Bishop of Oxford, such words include 'spirit' and 'spiritual'. We (the theologians!) like to use them as if we own them, but Pullman finds them meaningless. A further challenge is whether we can read Pullman's work *without* imposing our Christian meanings on the themes and thereby come to learn new things about parts of our own overarching meta-narrative. But this asks another, complex question: can we allow these new things to enter our own Christian story? Surely the meta-narrative is complete and unchanging: what God did in Jesus Christ? Indeed the story is sharpened and clarified by heretical challenges to its doctrine and belief, so how can we respond to a fiction which uses themes central to scripture and Christian tradition and not only throws out God, but does so as a challenge to us to reclaim heaven for humanity?

The poet and philosopher Wallace Stevens claimed that the supreme fiction must be abstract, must give pleasure and it must change. In these conditions, the sublimity of human imagination, the limits of what we can imagine creatively into being becomes the truth. Our discovery of truth then, depends on what imaginative and creative leaps we can make, whether it be in astrophysics, quantum mechanics, music, art, literature or *theology*. It is one of the particular challenges to mission, whether we can break out of restrictive paradigms to hear theological re-descriptions of those things we have designated axiomatic of Christian thought. Too often, we block out the voices of other theologians around the globe, or ignore those whose energy compels them to offer the story back to us in new forms. If we had, and could use, Lyra's alethiometer, chances are we would never touch it.

What then, does Philip Pullman's use of themes which we have seen as integral to the Christian story and history of missionary transmission, do to open up our minds anew? How do we deal with metaphysical thought impinging on our theology? Below is listed some of these themes and Pullman's use of them.

### Creation

Pullman makes use of the parallel worlds theory in which some physicists have suggested (and imagined) that our universe is not the only one in existence. Currently, it is thought that even if such universes exist, our place in this one precludes us from ever knowing anything about them or whether they are really there. In *His Dark Materials*, Pullman's story allows the impossible to be imagined. Will finds his way into Lyra's universe and, after taking possession of the subtle knife, ways into new worlds can be created. In these worlds, all kinds of people and animals can be imagined and brought to life, - angels, witches on cloudpine branches and the mysterious mulefa. We are required to recognise that Creation is more than ourselves in our own particular universe, but as diverse and extraordinary as human imagination can make it.

### Dust

In these multiple universes, the energy or spirit of the creation is signified by the presence of 'dust'. Again, Pullman's imagination has been sparked by the idea of dark matter or cosmic dust, responsible (perhaps) for the ultimate fate of our universe. In the novels, dust is intimately related to who we are ('dust thou art and to dust thou shalt return' and its loss threatens all life. So the scientist Mary Malone, must leave her defunct project and journey into more fantastic worlds to recover the meaning of dust





and make it possible for Will and Lyra to allow it to return. At the same time, she has left her Christian faith and vocation and recovered value, meaning and purpose from the apparently purposeless universe. Through her efforts, the Fall is redeemed through love. The task given to her by the angels is to play the serpent, - but this time for good, not for evil and to give ordinary human love back its place in the scheme of things.

#### *Daemons*

Similarly, Pullman's imagining of the daemon as what we might call 'soul' or 'spirit' and what he calls 'part of the personality' reminds us sharply that we are more than just cells and water and electrical impulses. The daemon exteriorises something of what a person is like, in their opposite gender, but the love and delight expressed between person and daemon is what shocks us into realising how we should respect and value ourselves as embodied beings. The converse is also shown to us as Mrs Coulter conducts experiments to sever child from daemon, leaving children crippled shadows of themselves who have no real existence or who simply die. The rich variety of the daemons reminds us of the creative energy of all people and the dialogues between person and daemon, the intimacy of their relationship, reminds us of the internal story of each of us in its extraordinary particularity and variety. Perhaps the saddest incident in the trilogy is the death of Lee Scoresby and his daemon Hester, as they struggle in dying to remain as close to one another as possible until they are ripped apart by the physical fact of death.

#### *Liberation from the world of the dead*

In this world without God death is nevertheless not to be feared. Rather, Lyra is able to make friends with her Death and venture down into the world of the dead. Here, the dead are held in thrall until Lyra discovers that imagination, movement and creativity can make the harpies into listeners and receivers of our personal stories. The terrifying Harpy is renamed Gracious Wings, - the power of storytelling can change the world. Telling the story therefore becomes the means of our liberation. Our journey does not cease at death, but (as in Gaarder's *Through a Glass Darkly*) telling the story becomes the purpose of all we have seen and done. At the end point of the world of the dead, the last knife cut into another world is left behind for eternity, so that the dead ones can be reunited with their daemons in a liberation into both nothing and everything (like Marvell's *On a Drop of Dew*).

#### *Betrayal and sacrifice*

Even in a world in which a controlling God and particular form of narrative must be overthrown, betrayal and sacrifice have important consequences. Lyra's betrayal of Roger requires her to search for him, -even into the world of the dead and sacrifice is what prevents the world from seizing up and becoming sterile. Mrs Coulter's lies and betrayal enable her ultimately to ensnare Metatron, the dark angel. Will can only wield the subtle knife which opens up worlds by sacrificing his fingers. Lee and Hester sacrifice their life to protect Will's father and finally Lyra's parents, Mrs Coulter and Lord Asriel must sacrifice themselves and their intertwined destiny to overthrow the despotic heavenly power and release Lyra and Will to be themselves. This is a universe in which atonement is not necessary and sin is not the first cause. There is no deficit and nothing to make up. It is the Church which is the source of betrayal for these young people and only sacrifice, - even a sacrifice of laying down one's own faith, will make up for it.





These themes are all familiar to us, but in Pullman's work are made strange and therefore disturbing. Even more disturbing, committed Christian faith becomes seen as the evil in the world, - the meta-narrative with which we are familiar is a form of strangulation, - the act of becoming Christian not an embrace of life with Christ as we would have it but an act of stifling what is truly human about us.

So is this true? Does this teach us that there are inherent dangers in the outworking of our mission theology whereby our testimony to Lyras and to Wills and our desire to offer them the Gospel cuts across what they have to tell us about the experience of being human? Have we asked people about their daemons or ever sought to discover our own? In mission, do we conduct experiments with people on behalf of the Magisterium and cut them off from whatever makes them feel most intimate and alive? This process of colonising people's heads with our faithful story is described by Robert Schreiter as the narrative of the lie. Our dangerous and risky business is to offer a republic of heaven to every human person where there are no controlling conditions of entry, but only the promise of liberation (how hard to accept for some Christians!). When, at the occasional offices, so we reject the story of human love which is offered to us in favour of teaching loftier but sometimes unreachable truths? So, does living under authority make it *harder* for us to be missionary? In what circumstances do our theological paradigms make dialogue and understanding more difficult? And if Christ's offer to us is that the Spirit should lead us into all truth, are we willing to be so led, or do we only want to walk the predetermined pathways we know are safe? It is the easier path to criticise Philip Pullman's portrayal of Christianity and the Church. Could we rise to the challenge with some of his own creativity, thoughtfulness and celebration?

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