

**Reflections on the Fantasy Trilogy *His Dark Materials* by Philip Pullman
Better Known from the Film Title, *The Golden Compass***

Rodney J. Decker, ThD, Prof. of NT, Baptist Bible Seminary
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I began 2008 by reading a 931–page fantasy trilogy.¹ I enjoy that genre and have read a number of such works.² The “gold standard” for the genre (at least in my opinion) remains the work of the two best known Inklings, C. S. Lewis’s *The Chronicles of Narnia*, and J. R. R. Tolkien’s *The Lord of the Rings*.³ They both present a fictional, theistic “mythology” in the settings of other worlds: Narnia and Middle Earth. Lewis writes explicitly as a Christian and tells a Christian story complete with the Christophanic figure, Aslan.⁴ Tolkien’s theism is more cloaked, depicting God’s work in a world in which he does not appear personally,⁵ but who nevertheless governs the affairs of Middle Earth through providence and the Valar with their special emissaries, the wizards.⁶

My most recent reading, however, was not of this sort, for the trilogy I just completed is Phillip Pullman’s *His Dark Materials*.⁷ Though the genre is the same, this epic fantasy is a dark one—an atheist’s version of Narnia. The author has been described as “the anti-Lewis, the one the atheists would have been praying for, if atheists prayed.”⁸ These “dark materials” are no less powerful than the works of Lewis and Tolkien, but it is power employed in explicit, open opposition to God. Though Pullman’s agenda may be subtle in the first volume (and even more subtle in the movie), in the context of the entire trilogy, it’s “about as subtle as an army tank.”⁹ He has not been bashful about this agenda. In what might be his most frequently quoted interview he contrasts his own writing with Rowling’s *Harry*

¹ In the process of reading Pullman and writing this paper I discovered that this is a vast subject—one of which I was unaware previously. There are many, many issues that I have not even attempted to include here (e.g., the conscious, deliberate relationship of Pullman’s epic to Milton’s *Paradise Lost*), but I trust that this essay is adequate to indicate the significance of Pullman’s work and suggest some of the ways in which Christians might interact with it intelligently. I have read the entire trilogy once, though “indexing” as I read; consequently I have reread portions several times. I welcome comment or clarification of anything I have misrepresented or missed. The paper has been written in and for a seminary context, so the perspective at times reflects the concerns of pastors and church ministry.

² E.g., Stephen Lawhead, *The Dragon King Trilogy*; Calvin Miller, *The Singreale*; John White, *The Archives of Anthropos*. Awaiting my reading is the first volume of a new trilogy, Jeffery Overstreet’s *Auralia’s Colors*.

³ There were about 20 other “Inklings,” the best known of whom was Charles Williams. For further information, see <<http://www.mythsoc.org/inklings.html>>.

⁴ Lewis retells the key Bible stories of creation, the fall, and the cross, though in a form adapted to his fictional world. He does something similar in his science fiction trilogy, *Space Trilogy* (*Out of the Silent Planet*, *Perelandra*, and *That Hideous Strength*).

⁵ God is known in *The Lord of the Rings* as “the One,” Eru, or (among the Elves) as Ilúvatar, the “Father of All.”

⁶ The five wizards (the Ishtari) are essentially incarnated angel figures charged by the highest ranking “angels” (the Valar) with a mission to oppose Sauron and establish God’s king and kingdom in Middle Earth. Gandalf is the chief of these, especially after Sauron becomes a “fallen angel.” The other three wizards do not enter into the plot of *The Lord of the Rings*.

⁷ Phillip Pullman, *His Dark Materials*, omnibus edition (New York: Knopf, 2007). This trilogy consists of *The Golden Compass* (1995, known as *Northern Lights* in its original British edition), *The Subtle Knife* (1997), and *The Amber Spyglass* (2000). All page references to the trilogy in this paper are given parenthetically in the text and refer to the omnibus edition. (Hereafter, *HDM* = *His Dark Materials*.)

⁸ Peter Hitchens, *The Mail*, 1/27/2002, <<http://home.wlv.ac.uk/~bu1895/hitchens.htm>>, accessed 1/28/2008.

⁹ Albert Mohler, “*The Golden Compass*: Briefing Your Concerned Congregation,” <www.crosswalk.com/pastors/11561090/>, accessed 12/6/2007.

Potter: “I’m flying under the radar [while *Harry Potter* takes all the flak], saying things that are far more subversive than anything poor old Harry has said. My books are about killing God.”¹⁰

Like its Christian predecessors, *His Dark Materials* is a complex work of fantasy that generates conflicting responses in its readers. These reactions are due in part to the skill of Pullman as a writer and in part to the subject matter. Pullman “is an amazing storyteller, with one of the most formidable imaginations since J. R. R. Tolkien himself.”¹¹ He writes with sufficient sophistication to generate an entire range of emotions in a thoughtful, engaged reader: the heart pounds, the mouth goes dry, tears flow; you are shocked, horrified, and moved with compassion. That’s a mark of a good writer. The conflict comes when you discover that as a Christian you may be cheering for and sympathizing with the “wrong” side and thinking poorly of the Church. Even knowing Pullman’s plot and purpose in advance (which I did from numerous reviews and summaries), I experienced all the emotions above—and more. If nothing else, that suggests that this is a book to take seriously because it will have a serious impact as the “first post-Enlightenment fantasy.”¹² The first volume of the trilogy was just released as a major movie in December 2007.¹³

Why is fantasy written? There may be a variety of reasons, but serious writers often write to “tackle profound philosophical questions.” The real world can only be described so many ways, so some writers turn to fantasy and “rewrite one or two basic rules about society and then examine how humanity responds.” It may be that “teenagers love to ponder such massive, brain-shaking concepts, which is

¹⁰ Steve Meacham, “The Shed Where God Died,” *Sydney Morning Herald*, 12/12/2003, <www.smh.com.au/articles/2003/12/12/1071125644900.html>, accessed 12/6/2007.

¹¹ Jeffrey Overstreet (“Fear Not the *Compass*,” *Christianity Today*, 11/30/2007, <<http://www.christianitytoday.com/movies/commentaries/fearnotthecompass.html>>, accessed 12/1/2007). Overstreet’s assessment is interesting since he also is a contemporary fantasy writer (see n. 2 above). On the other hand, some of his fellow writers have been positively ruthless in their depiction of Pullman’s *incompetence* as a storyteller and writer; see, e.g., John C. Wright, “Phillip [sic] Pullman, on the Other Hand, Is No Hero of Mine,” *LiveJournal*, 11/28/2007, <<http://johncwright.livejournal.com/134046.html>>, accessed 1/15/2008. For information on his many science fiction books (including several trilogies), see <<http://www.sff.net/people/john-c-wright/>>, accessed 1/26/2008. Wright was formerly an atheist, but now professes to be a Christian, albeit a rather bizarre form of Catholic Christianity: “Why I Am Not a Deist,” <<http://johncwright.livejournal.com/59241.html>>, accessed 1/26/2008.

¹² Robert Elder, “The Author of ‘The Golden Compass’ Doesn’t Mince Words,” interview originally published in the *Chicago Tribune*, <<http://www.chicagotribune.com/entertainment/chi-golden-compass-author,0,6131012.story>>, (December 2007?), but is no longer available there. (Hereafter cited as Elder, “*Chicago Tribune* interview.”) What appears to be a reprint of the same article may be found at PopMatters, 12/13/2007, <<http://www.popmatters.com/pm/news/article/52050/the-author-of-the-golden-compass-doesnt-mince-words/>>, accessed 1/27/2008. The original article may eventually be retrievable from <<http://web.archive.org/>>, but it is six months before content appears there. The description of his work as “first post-Enlightenment fantasy” is one that that Pullman accepts, commenting that the “Enlightenment was a great step forward in our development as human beings. We are still warmed by the background radiation from the Enlightenment, but it’s cooling. You can feel that it’s cooling, by pronouncements that have been made recently about my book” (Elder, “*Chicago Tribune* interview”).

¹³ The movie is a somewhat sanitized version of the first book—or at least most of it. Interestingly, the final three chapters are not included; it would not likely have generated as much enthusiasm for a sequel had the movie ended with the deliberate killing of a child to power (literally) a scientific experiment! I doubt that one would suspect the ultimate plot or purpose of *HDM* from seeing only the movie version of *The Golden Compass*. That does not begin to come into focus until well into the second book, though the groundwork is clear enough in the first if someone knows where the trilogy is headed.

precisely why they devour novels like Philip Pullman's *His Dark Materials*, the *Narnia* series, the Harry Potter books, and *Ender's Game*."¹⁴

Note, too, that these titles are all billed as *children's* books. As Pullman himself says, "There are some themes, some subjects, too large for adult fiction; they can only be dealt with adequately in a children's book."¹⁵ He explains that is because adult fiction tends to get caught up in literary matters, cutting artistic capers, etc., but in children's literature, it is the *story* that's most important.¹⁶ Stories—fiction stories, even (or perhaps especially) fantasy stories—are didactic. Pullman argues that

all stories teach, whether the storyteller intends them to or not. They teach the world we create. They teach the morality we live by. They teach it much more effectively than moral precepts and instructions.... We don't need lists of rights and wrongs, tables of do's and don'ts: we need books, time, and silence. Thou shalt not is soon forgotten, but Once upon a time lasts forever.¹⁷

In seminary we sometimes forget that not all truth is taught in expository form. Life, literature, media, etc. also play their part.¹⁸ Not all fantasy teaches well. Pullman is quite critical of some of his fellow writers:

Fantasy, and fiction in general, is failing to do what it might be doing. It has unlimited potential to explore all sorts of metaphysical and moral questions, but it is not ... My quarrel with fantasy writing is that it is such a rich seam to be mined, such a versatile mode, that is not always being used to explore bigger ideas. Fiction must return to carrying a "moral punch", unless literature is to become petty and worthless.¹⁹

¹⁴ Clive Thompson, "Take the Red Book: Why Sci-fi is the Last Bastion of Philosophical Writing," *Wired Magazine*, Feb. 2008, p. 52.

¹⁵ Philip Pullman, "Carnegie Medal Acceptance Speech," 1996, <www.randomhouse.com/features/Pullman/author/Carnegie.html>, accessed 1/19/2008.

¹⁶ "When you write for an audience that largely consists of children, you have got to put the story at the centre of what you're doing, and when you do that, you cannot be self-conscious and postmodern and tricky and self-referential and all that sort of stuff that the literary types like" (Huw Spanner, "Heat and Dust" (interview with Philip Pullman), *Third Way*, 2/13/2002, <<http://www.thirdway.org.uk/past/showpage.asp?page=3949>>, accessed 1/19/2008.

¹⁷ Ibid. Pullman told the BBC, "I am a story teller. If I wanted to send a message I would have written a sermon" (Julian Joyce, "Golden Compass Author Hits Back," *BBC News*, 11/29/2007 <http://news.bbc.co.uk/go/pr/fr//hi/uk_news/7115300.stm>, accessed 1/15/2008). Despite Pullman's protestations, he is actually a quite blatant preacher, though he preaches in story guise. For a scorching critique of Pullman's being too blatant in this regard, at the cost of the story, see Wright, "Pullman ... Is No Hero of Mine." As one sample of Wright's comments about Pullman in this regard: "Nothing I have ever read, not Heinlein and not by Ayn Rand has been more blatant in dropping the story-telling, and devoting its pages to preaching a message. The writer was drunk on sermonizing. If this plotline was a motorist, it would have been arrested for driving while intoxicated."

¹⁸ This is not to suggest that "life, literature, media" are authoritative sources. I am not advocating a post-modern theology which views the sources of theology to be Scripture, tradition, and culture (a la Grenz and others). I am talking here about methodology in communicating the truth of Scripture. Nor do I intend to suggest when I say that "not all truth is taught in expository form" that *preaching* should not be expository. That, I am convinced, must remain inviolable. But not all teaching is done from the pulpit.

¹⁹ Pullman, quoted in Angelique Chrisafis, "Pullman Lays Down Moral Challenge for Writers," *The Guardian*, 8/12/2002, <<http://books.guardian.co.uk/print/0,,4479940-99819,00.html>>, accessed 1/28/2008. This is a common theme in reading Pullman. As one additional sample, "My quarrel with much (not all) fantasy is it has this marvelous toolbox and does nothing with it except construct shoot-em-up games. Why shouldn't a work of fantasy be as truthful and profound about becoming an adult human being as the work of George Eliot or Jane Austin?" ([Michael Thom?], "Achuka Interview: Philip Pullman," <www.achuke.co.uk/archive/interviews/ppint.php>, accessed 1/19/2008).

These “bigger ideas” of metaphysics and morality certainly reflect the worldview of the author and a good writer will not ignore them. Pullman says that “you can’t leave morality out unless your work is so stupid and trivial and so worthless that [nobody] would want to read it anyway.”²⁰ In that he is dealing with these “bigger issues,” it is obvious that despite the genre of children’s fantasy, “he wants us adults to overhear the story he tells that [adolescent] audience.”²¹ Young or old, Pullman does challenge his readers to think: “I pay my readers the compliment of assuming that they are intellectually adventurous.”²² This is not the shallow, mindless, “action-adventure” story (as some think *Harry Potter* to be), but a very serious work.²³

This raises the question, of course, as to how Christians ought to respond to thoughtful fantasy literature (whether book or film) that teaches a different, nonchristian worldview—a different, nonchristian morality. I will return to this question again at the end of this article, but these introductory comments have been intended to suggest why I think it’s worth discussing a work such as this at such length.

The response of some is to call for boycotts, to send out emails telling everyone how evil it is—or to forward such emails without ever trying to determine whether what is said is true or not.²⁴ Doing so in the case of Pullman’s writings *does* accomplish something: it adds to the evidence that Christians are ignorant and uncaring, characterized by blind allegiance to dogma, close-minded bigots who hate those

²⁰ Chrisafis, “Pullman Lays Down Moral Challenge.”

²¹ William Flesch, “Childish Things,” *The Boston Globe*, 6/30/2004, <www.boston.com/news/globe/ideas/articles/2004/06/13/childish_things/>, accessed 1/19/2008.

²² “Achuka Interview.”

²³ Moloney comments that “few serious critics praise Rowling with the superlatives—‘sophisticated,’ ‘ambitious,’ ‘complex,’ ‘realistic’—regularly applied to the novels of Philip Pullman, especially his fantasy epic series is *Dark Materials*” (Daniel Moloney, “An Almost Christian Fantasy,” *First Things*, May 2001, <www.firstthings.com/article.php3?id_article=2181>, accessed 1/28/2008.

²⁴ There have been numerous emails circulating the past few months. One I have accuses Pullman of the unpardonable sin. Here’s an excerpt from another one that I received in early Dec. 2007: “I found this very interesting and very frightening to say the least.... [then followed a brief summary of the movie which was reasonably accurate] ... Please consider a boycott of the movie and the books. Also pass this information along to everyone you know (including church leaders). This will help educate parents, so that they will know the agenda of the movie. I am sending this to those of you who have kids or friends with kids, grandkids or have influence with kids.... Don’t let kids see ‘The Golden Compass’ ... PASS THIS ON AND LET’S HELP STOP THIS MOVIE DEAD IN ITS TRACKS!!!!” But relying on protests and boycotts rather than challenging the underlying worldview at the intellectual level accomplishes little. Christians have taken the protest approach or relied on political action too often in the past century and not done enough to engage the marketplace of ideas. In this regard, see the thoughtful essay by Keith Plummer, “Culture, Compassion, and Compass: Responding to Anti-Christian Media,” *The Christian Mind*, 12/12/2007, <<http://christianmind.blogspot.com/2007/12/culture-compassion-and-compass.html>>, accessed 1/15/2008.

who disagree with them.²⁵ That is exactly the way that Christianity is portrayed in *HDM*²⁶—and how it is observed by other, nonchristian reviews of the movie.²⁷ Al Mohler’s advice is much better:

A good first step would be to take a deep breath. The Christian faith is not about to be toppled by a film, nor by a series of fantasy books. Pullman has an agenda that is clear, and Christians need to inform themselves of what this agenda is and what it means. At the same time, nothing would serve his agenda better than to have Christians speaking recklessly or unintelligently about the film or the books.²⁸

We really do need to be aware of these books and the movie since it will have an impact on our culture—and on our churches. To do so, however, requires that we know what we’re talking about. We dare not just click “Forward” and think we’ve done God a service. As Mark Earley pointed out on Breakpoint, “When Christians start warning the culture about something dangerous, we often get a backlash. And it is worse if we are not prepared. If we just go out there and tell people, ‘This movie is about kids who kill God!’ we just get a reputation as ill-informed scolds.”²⁹

The Movie or the Book?

The issues that Pullman raises for Christians are different depending on whether one is talking about the recent movie, *The Golden Compass*, or the entire published trilogy. Since it is the movie that’s getting the attention of late,³⁰ I will begin with that form of Pullman’s work and then expand my focus to the entirety of *His Dark Materials*. The significance of the movie only becomes apparent when viewed as part one of the three books.³¹

Billed as a young teen movie (PG13), produced by New Line Cinema (the same studio that produced the spectacular film version of *The Lord of the Rings*), and cosponsored by *Scholastic* magazine, this is a

²⁵ As one writer points out, “The American Family Association, ‘because of Pullman’s clearly articulated anti-Christian motives,’ is ‘warning all viewers to run from the film.’ In a strange twist of life imitating art, this reaction to *The Golden Compass* validates the image Pullman creates in his trilogy of Christians and of organized Christianity generally” (Paul Edwards, “Who’s Afraid of *The Golden Compass*?” <www.crosswalk.com/movies/11560628/>, accessed 12/6/2007).

²⁶ I have cited examples of Pullman’s caricature of the church later in this article. Unfortunately, it is not always a caricature.

²⁷ Amanda Marcotte, e.g., refers to the “*Christianist temper tantrum* over the release of the movie ... for the high crime of refusing to play into their lies about god and religion” [italics added], “Review: *His Dark Materials* Trilogy,” *Pandagon*, 12/27/2007, <<http://pandagon.blogspot.com/2007/12/27/6490/>>, accessed 1/15/2008.

²⁸ Mohler, “*The Golden Compass*: Briefing Your Concerned Congregation.”

²⁹ Mark Earley, “It’s Not a Hoax,” *Breakpoint Commentary*, 11/26/2007, <<http://www.breakpoint.org/media.asp?ID=26>>, accessed 11/27/2007.

³⁰ This is “big budget” film with production costs of \$180 million, though at least one “box office” site refers to New Line’s investment of “\$300 million plus” (<www.the-numbers.com/interactive/newsStory.php?newsID=3040>, accessed 1/15/2008). Ironically, in light of the explicit anti-supernatural message of the movie, the same web page declares that in light of the disappointing opening of the movie (only a \$26.1 million opening weekend in the US), “only a miracle can save it now”!

³¹ I have seen the movie. Though the cinema is not part of my lifestyle, due to the seriousness of the subject matter, and after having read the trilogy, I decided that I needed to evaluate the film firsthand to be able to assess its possible impact. For those who want to sample the movie online, I recommend that three following video clips on You-Tube:
The Official Teaser: <http://www.technorati.com/videos/youtube.com%2Fwatch%3Fv%3DvK6MDIEQjMg>
The Official Trailer: <http://www.technorati.com/videos/youtube.com%2Fwatch%3Fv%3D0j61Q5KPues>
The first five minutes: <http://www.technorati.com/videos/youtube.com%2Fwatch%3Fv%3Duxt72D9E-X4>

movie that many teens will see.³² The movie plot seems harmless: a precocious girl of twelve by the name of Lyra sets off to the Arctic to rescue a group of children who have been abducted by an totalitarian group to be used for scientific experimentation. Through the help of the usual diverse collection of fantasy characters, including an “aeronaut,” Gyptians, and an armored bear, and guided by the compass-like alethiometer, she succeeds against overwhelming odds and sets the captives free. Like most such movies, there are some major battles, nicely enhanced with the current forms of computer-generated special effects.

Some who see the movie will see nothing more than what is implied in the preceding paragraph, but there are two factors that need to be considered. First, this movie is part one of three. Although *The Golden Compass* is the only film produced thus far, two more are planned to complete Pullman’s trilogy.³³ When the storyline of the entire work is considered, the implications become much clearer. The first book does not make the long range plot very clear, and the movie version obscures it even further—some might even suggest that the movie has “sanitized” the more objectionable aspects of the book.³⁴ As such it may have been designed as a teaser, a “come on” for the real story in books two and three. And perhaps it is designed “to lure unsuspecting parents to unwittingly purchase these books for their children, ironically, for Christmas!”³⁵ When challenged on this matter, the producer has promised to “take the gloves off” in the sequels—and that raises the stakes on what might otherwise be a ho-hum movie on its own. When the books are evaluated below, those anti-Christian stakes come into focus quite sharply.

Second, the content of the movie is not as bland as some think. Though the full message is veiled here, there are enough clues to cause an observant viewer to hesitate. The movie begins with an explicit postmodern view of truth. In describing the protagonists, the narrator describes “the ruling power”—the totalitarian “bad guys”—as those who “feared every truth but their own.” In this setting, that can only mean a pluralistic view of multiple, contradictory “truths.” Perhaps only the more astute viewers will pick up on that comment and many munching their popcorn waiting for the action to begin won’t even notice. But it is there, and that very deliberately. Another item that some will miss is

³² This has been described as a “Steampunk” movie, “a subgenre of fantasy and speculative fiction which came into prominence in the 1980s and early 1990s. The term denotes works set in an era or world where steam power is still widely used—usually the 19th century, and often set in Victorian era England—but with prominent elements of either science fiction or fantasy.... Steampunk is often associated with cyberpunk and shares a similar fanbase and theme of rebellion.” <<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Steampunk>>, see also *Steampunk Magazine*, <<http://www.steampunkmagazine.com/>>, both accessed 1/18/2008.

³³ Whether the remaining two films will actually be produced or not depends in part on how well the first one does at the box office. Thus far the response has been much lower than anticipated for a movie with big-budget status.

³⁴ In an interview with the director, Chris Weitz, he acknowledged that the religious element has been downplayed in the movie: “There will be some religious imagery in the movie, Weitz said, but it will be blended so unobtrusively into the production design that it will take a ‘DVD player and working knowledge of Latin to decipher the symbols.’ Outside the Magisterium buildings will be icons of Orthodox saints. Sprinkled around the movie will be Latin inscriptions from the Vulgate translation of the Bible, including one in Mrs. Coulter’s bedroom that refers to eating from the tree of good and evil. ‘Kind of a little joke between me and me,’ Weitz told me” (Hanna Rosin, “How Hollywood Saved God,” *The Atlantic Monthly*, Dec. 2007, <<http://www.theatlantic.com/doc/200712/religious-movies/>>, accessed 1/15/2008).

³⁵ Marc Newman, “*The Golden Compass: Sexualizing Children in the World of His Dark Materials*,” <http://www.movieministry.com/articles.php?articles=all&article_view=107>, accessed 1/3/2008.

the significance of the name of this totalitarian group which experiments on children, but it is very deliberate and explicit, even in the movie: the group is identified as the Magisterium. That is the formal name for the teaching authority of the Roman Catholic Church.³⁶ By using it, Pullman is identifying the bad guys as the church. Least we Protestants think it might be OK to have the Roman church be the bad guys, wait until we've discussed the books; it is not as simple and innocuous as that.

Though these first two items of content may be somewhat subtle, there is another element that is not at all subtle. A regular refrain in the movie is resistance to anyone telling someone else what they must do, to authority. Though it is the Magisterium who does this most objectionably, it is broader than that. There is a underlying mood of anti-authority throughout the film, and it is verbalized explicitly a number of times. That is a message that children and teens *will* hear and which, if adopted, will produce very undesirable results, not only for Christian families, but for any family or school. Why a children's magazine would want to encourage the use of this film in schools is puzzling since its most likely result would be to sow rebellion against the *school's own authority*.³⁷

When you realize that the Magisterium (the totalitarian bad guys) serves "the Authority," it gets more serious, for the Authority is none other than God. Though the movie mentions him by this name only a few times (two or three is all I caught), and never refers to him with the word "god"), that is clearly what is intended—and the sequels make that abundantly clear.

Considerably more could be said about the movie, but I think I've said enough to indicate the nature of it and its possible impact. I turn, then, to set the movie in the context of the entire 931 pages of *His Dark Materials*—part one of which ranked at #42 in *USA Today's* "Top Books for 2007."³⁸

Summary of the Books

Any serious review should contain a summary of the book for those unfamiliar with the plot. That is an extremely complicated task for close to 1,000 pages of fantasy that contains multiple sub-plots running in parallel, all of which eventually cross at the appropriate time.³⁹ I'll attempt an ultra brief summary of the key themes, but be forewarned that it does not do justice, omitting most of the sub-plots and almost all the fantastic events.⁴⁰

To understand any work in the fantasy genre one must understand the world and especially the worldview created by the writer. What has he changed? One need not accept that it is true, but to understand the story, it must be read with the *author's* assumptions. I will eventually argue that this is a

³⁶ See the discussion at <<http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/15006b.htm>>, accessed 2/4/2008.

³⁷ Scholastic magazine is making teaching and discussion materials available free to any school who requests them. I have not seen this material, but it would be quite interesting to evaluate what they are distributing.

³⁸ *USA Today*, "Top Books for 2007," Jan. 17, 2008, p. 10D. See also *Best-Selling Books Database*, "This Week's Top 150 Best Sellers," <<http://asp.usatoday.com/life/books/booksdatabase/>>. The highest rank that *The Golden Compass* achieved was #13—an exceedingly popular book. *HDM* has sold over 15 million copies and translated into 40 languages as of 2007 ("An Interview with Philip Pullman: The Art of Darkness," *Intelligent Life Magazine*, Dec. 2007, <<http://www.moreintelligentlife.com/print/697/>>, accessed 1/3/2008).

³⁹ The books run over 1,200 pages in the three original volumes; I read the combined volume which has been reset to reduce the number of pages—and the thickness of a one-volume edition!

⁴⁰ For a more adequate treatment, see the SparkNotes' summary at <<http://www.sparknotes.com/lit/hisdarkmaterials/summary.html>>.

key to understanding *His Dark Materials* and formulating a Christian response to it. A major part of that is demonstrating the inconsistencies within the fictional worldview.

What sort of world is this? To understand the author, one dare not assume one's own world, but be willing to accept the author's as one reads.⁴¹ This will include both physical and metaphysical aspects of the fantasy world. Pullman has created a world with differences at both levels. There are different physics operating here as well as a very different philosophical framework. Some things are the same—that's what makes it a believable world—but many things are different. The biggest difference is at the level of physics. The book plays deliberately with several modern models such as quantum physics, the Heisenberg uncertainty principle, string (and superstring) theory, dark matter, multiple worlds, etc.⁴²—how accurately, I cannot say, but they are there to make the plot feasible. The gist of Pullman's world, or more accurately, worlds, is that there are an infinite number of worlds each of which began as the result of a choice in a previous world. These worlds are, to use a theological analogy, consubstantial with our own; they are present “in, with, and under” every other world, but the other worlds are unaware of their existence. One of the keys in this fantasy trilogy is the ability of certain beings to pass from one world into another. Ultimately this is found to be through “windows” cut with a special knife by the Knife-Bearer. (Note the title of the second book, *The Subtle Knife*.)

Once that is in place the story comes down to two pre-teen children, Lyra (the consummate liar—and thus her name) and Will (who becomes the Knife-Bearer), from two different worlds who meet in a third world and are charged with saving the worlds from the Enemy. This they do through a fascinating sequence of events (all highly improbable—but this is fantasy!) in multiple worlds populated with the usual assortment of human and nonhuman creatures. Just as Narnia has talking animals and Middle Earth has Ents, in *His Dark Materials* you will meet a cast of humans (in various forms), angels (both fallen and not), witches, exotic beings (the *mulefa*, who evolved very differently from our own world, so we are told), miniature people (the Gallivespians), Spectres, ghosts, as well as intelligent, armored polar bears.

The crucial twist in Pullman's fantasy world is that the Enemy is God and his church (“the Authority” and “the Magisterium”). So the “bad guys” are the monks and priests and theologians—indeed, anyone connected with the church—and the “good guys” are those beings (humans, angels, and others) who rebel against the Authority. It may appear that it is primarily the Roman Catholic Church that Pullman targets, but he actually combines it with Protestantism by making John Calvin one of the popes and moving the Vatican to Geneva (23)—though no one will confuse Pullman's descriptions with anything other than the Roman church in her worst form. (Pullman doesn't reflect much knowledge other forms of Christianity, especially of the “free church” tradition—which is a pity.)

As Pullman weaves the threads together toward the end of the third book, his seemingly autobiographical narrative explains that,

⁴¹ There have been some major Christian reviews of the movie that have not been careful in this area, making assumptions not in the movie (or book), and in some instances, incorporating outright factual areas. This is inexcusable.

⁴² An entire book has been written on this subject: Mary and John Gribbin, *The Science of Philip Pullman's His Dark Materials* (London: Hodder Children's Books, 2003). See also Tony Watkins, “The Science of *His Dark Materials*,” appendix to *Dark Matter: Shedding Light on Philip Pullman's Trilogy His Dark Materials* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2004), 183–92.

all the history of human life has been a struggle between wisdom and stupidity.... The rebel angels, the followers of wisdom, have always tried to open minds; the Authority and his churches have always tried to keep them closed” (899).

The entire trilogy is framed to work out that thesis and create a believable alternative for a worldview without God—to replace the “Kingdom of Heaven” with the “*Republic of Heaven*.” As Will’s father explains to Lyra and Will, “we have to build the Republic of Heaven where we are, because for us there is no elsewhere” (814, see also 907). The leaders of the “last rebellion” want no part of a kingdom ruled by the Authority, but instead “intend to be free citizens in the Republic of Heaven” (703).

Pullman uses two creative literary devices to develop his thesis: Dust and *dæmons*. To begin with the second, *dæmons* are a personification of a person’s soul.⁴³ In most (but not all) of Pullman’s worlds this *dæmon* is visible in the form of an animal which is always present with the person (to separate the two is to die) and who can converse with them.⁴⁴ This creative literary device enables Pullman to let the reader hear what a person is thinking. It also serves more subtle purposes in the plot by implying means of knowing other than by empirical data and often by suggesting the control of one person by another in a “spiritual” way.⁴⁵

The second device, Dust (note the capitalization!), is a different and much more complex figure than *dæmons*. It appears in the story as a golden colored dust (small ‘d’) that only some people can see, but which pervades the worlds, floating through the air and landing on some people. Children don’t have it, adults do but in varying degree. Dust is another name for dark material (as in the trilogy’s title). Some reviewers have claimed that it is a personification of original sin and that Pullman intends to either deny or destroy such guilt.⁴⁶ Though some of the church figures in the book do speak of Dust in those terms, that is not Pullman’s primary use.⁴⁷ He plays with the definition of Dust early on, including

⁴³ It can be argued that there is more to it than this, but it is no less. Certainly the major function of these *dæmons* is that of the soul. Although it is not developed in *HDM*, in subsequent interviews Pullman has suggested that in the consciously created mythology which undergirds *HDM* these *dæmons* were given to people in some worlds by the (fallen) angels to help along the evolutionary process. This mythology has not yet been published but may appear in (or at least be elaborated in) a forthcoming book titled *The Book of Dust* (see Ben Hoyle, “Pullman Writes a Book That Will Shed Light on Darkness of His Beliefs,” *The Times*, August 1, 2007, <http://entertainment.timesonline.co.uk/tol/arts_and_entertainment/books/article2176386.ece>, accessed 1/25/2008).

⁴⁴ The animal/*dæmon* is also a characterization of the person, e.g., servants and soldiers often have dog *dæmons* and powerful people have beasts of prey, etc.

⁴⁵ A Christian reader must be careful not to read any ideas of biblical demons into Pullman’s *dæmons*. They are *not* the same. There are plenty of (biblical) demons in the books, but they are referred to as angels—and only in time does the reader discover that most of them are fallen angels. There is no explanation as to why Pullman chose to call his invention *dæmons*; it may be deliberate to further insult Christians, but even that is somewhat dubious. Once you get past the name, they are really a quite delightful—and key—part of the story. (The movie handles the *dæmons* very nicely, creating a very natural, realistic role for them.)

⁴⁶ I had originally entertained that idea myself as I began to read, and in the movie that is the only conclusion possible. Pullman certainly does not intend to “deny or destroy” Dust/Original Sin! Pullman idealizes Dust nearly to the level of Soter—it is what rescues humans from ignorance. The Fall is a good thing in Pullman’s mythology, not a tragedy.

⁴⁷ Pullman does say in an interview that “the idea that Dust should be in some sense emblematic of consciousness and original sin—what the churches traditionally used to understand by sin, namely disobedience, the thing that made us human in the first place—seemed too tempting to ignore, so I put them together” (Kerry Fried, “Darkness Visible: An Interview with Philip Pullman,” <<http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/tg/feature/-/94589/103-2179560-1236619>> and part two [where this quote is found], <<http://tinyurl.com/38yj4g>>, accessed 1/19/2008).

some false leads offered by those we later learn were lying (e.g., cf. 291 and 827). Since the children and the Church do not understand Dust (for different reasons), though both desperately want to learn what it is, there is a lot of deliberate ambiguity. By the end of the first book Lyra has decided that Dust is good—because “if *they* all think Dust is bad, it must be good” (293). The *they* (italicized in the original) refers to various representatives of the Church. What we eventually learn is that “Dust came into being when living things became conscious of themselves” (879),⁴⁸ conscious beings create Dust “by thinking and feeling and reflecting, by gaining wisdom and passing it on” (909). Dust is thus the wisdom of human experience and consciousness—apart from God.⁴⁹

The problem in *His Dark Materials* is that Dust was leaving all the worlds. The Church, who opposed all human wisdom (labeling it as heresy and persecuting those who believed it), was intent on preventing children from ever “getting Dust”—i.e., intent on children growing up without wisdom and believing only what the Church said. Other people who dabbled with “science” they did not understand created holes through which Dust was leaking out into the Abyss. Though it is not explained very well (one of Pullman’s major literary failings in the trilogy), this problem is resolved by the two children who in the end become “the true image of what human beings always could be, once they had come into their inheritance”; the pair had so much Dust that they seemed “to be made of living gold,” and “the Dust pouring down from the stars had found a living home again, and these children-no-longer-children, saturated with love, were the cause of it all” (893).

Pullman never even tries to describe this event; he is content to speak in vagaries and innuendo. When he has a key character describe it, she only says that,

I don’t know what it was. They saw each other differently, or something ... Until then, they hadn’t felt like that, but suddenly they did. And then the Dust was attracted to them, very powerfully, and it stopped flowing the other way” (899, ellipsis in the original).⁵⁰

Pullman alludes to the actions of the children numerous times, drawing an explicit parallel with the temptation of Adam and Eve both in “prophecy” and in the narrative of the actual event where Lyra and Will are in a clearing in a wooded area (described very much like a garden) with a “little red fruit” which Lyra gives Will to eat. Although all that is explicitly stated is that they fall in love and kiss, it is quite clearly implied (but only implied, 890) that they have sex.⁵¹ The Magisterium has been attempting

⁴⁸ This happened, by the way, about 33,000 years ago according to Pullman, who repeats that date many times: “that’s about the time, apparently, that modern human beings first appeared” (365).

⁴⁹ There are some similarities between Pullman’s Dust and the “force” of Star Wars.

⁵⁰ In the phrase “They saw each other differently,” Pullman may intend to allude to Genesis 3’s “and they saw....”

⁵¹ The description is more explicit in a later scene not long before the two are finally parted to return to their own worlds (915), and a comparison with the original temptation is explicit, but the actual act is still only implied. As Wright points out, “Mr. Pullman is understandably coy about displaying statutory rape!” (“Pullman ... Is No Hero of Mine”). He can play this angle very well in self-defense. In an online discussion he explained it this way: “As for what they actually DO—it’s none of my [*!@#] business! My imagination withdrew at that point. If you want to follow them under the tree and watch what happens, you must bear the responsibility for what you see. Personally, I think privacy is a fine and gracious thing” (“Philip Pullman in Readerville,” 2/6/2001, <<http://www.readerville.com/WebX?@216.M6d8aZsiqFu.18@.ef6c70e/30>>, accessed 2/29/2008).

Since this is marketed as “children’s fantasy” and has received numerous awards for children’s literature, Pullman may be avoiding explicit sex—though counting on older readers to understand what he intends. The “kissing” is something children understand. He plays the “just a kiss” angle in interviews and refuses to acknowledge anything more—but in light of the overall story, it is hard not to be suspicious at this point. For two children to kiss and eat a red fruit is hardly adequate to

to prevent this temptation and thus prevent the second Eve from “falling” once again; indeed, a Church-commissioned assassin (a young priest with “preemptive absolution,” 600, 603) has been following them to the woods to shoot Lyra before she can be tempted, but he is detained at the edge of the woods and killed by an angel—a fallen angel. And so Lyra-Eve falls, but this time the fall is “good,” not evil, since by falling she saves the world from the loss of Dust. The “knowledge of good and evil” is clearly implied to be a good thing gained by the children. Though that phrase is never used, their description as having so much Dust and as becoming the true image of humanity makes the allusion clear.

Though solving the problem of Dust is the ultimate goal, the plot is moved along by a major attempt to overthrow the Authority. This “last rebellion” is led by Lord Asriel, in many ways the classic Nietzschean “superman,”⁵² who raises in another world an army of all those opposed to the Authority (echoes of Rev 20!). Though it appears initially that this will be by means of a military attack on the Church (and its military forces), it ultimately becomes “war in heaven” as Asriel’s forces of humans, angels, witches, bears, and others attack and are attacked by The Clouded Mountain—the mobile, celestial residence/Chariot of the Authority and his Regent, Metatron. It turns out that the Authority—God himself!—is a sad, decrepit creature who has long since become irrelevant. Will cuts an opening in his crystal cell and helps him out:

Demented and powerless, the aged being could only weep and mumble in fear and pain and misery, and he shrank away from what seemed like yet another threat.... The old one was uttering a wordless groaning whimper that went on and on, and grinding his teeth, and compulsively plucking at himself with his free hand.... he tried to smile, and to bow, and his ancient eyes deep in their wrinkles blinked at her with innocent wonder.... to their dismay his form began to loosen and dissolve. Only a few moments later he had vanished completely, and their impression was of those eyes, blinking in wonder, and a sign of the most profound and exhausted relief. Then he was gone: a mystery dissolving in mystery (848).

The real power is the Regent, Metatron (the former earthly Enoch), who has taken over running the affairs of the Kingdom of Heaven and who has plans for becoming more directly involved in human life—which the rebellion understands to mean a more widespread and permanent Inquisition (822). While their forces battle on the plain between the Clouded Mountain and Asriel’s fortress, Mrs. Coulter

explain a “temptation” that is explicitly compared to Adam and Eve. (Why Pullman makes it sex is perplexing, and he comes close to suggesting that was the nature of the original temptation, but he would not be the first to suggest that—despite the biblical record. Milton’s *Paradise Lost* does not equate them, but does tightly connect the two events—and Pullman follows Milton more closely than the Bible.) It should be noted that Pullman understands “temptation” (or “playing the serpent”) in his fantasy adaptation to be equivalent to “bring wisdom” (see the Readerville post above). See Newman, “Sexualizing Children in the World of *His Dark Materials*.”

⁵² See the perceptive article by Marc T. Newman, “‘The Golden Compass’: Nietzsche Invades Narnia,” *Christian Cinema*, 11/30/2007, <http://www.christiancinema.com/catalog/newsdesk_info.php?newsdesk_id=463>, accessed 1/3/2008. “The main theme running throughout the writings of Nietzsche, gaining full force in his work, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, is that life is a demonstration of a will to power. Nietzsche rejected external authority, arguing that since all morality is subjective—a mere expression of the will of others—there is no reason why any one morality should be preferred. What marks humanity, Nietzsche argued, is a desire to assert one’s own will, or, in other words, to do that which is right in one’s own eyes.” Again, note the parallel of the following with the theme of *HDM*: “In order for Nietzsche’s ultimate expression of the will to power to arise—the superman—it is first necessary to kill God. In *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, Nietzsche portrays the murder of God at the hands of The Ugliest Man, who chokes God to death on His own pity.”

(Lyra's mother) seduces Metatron and deceives him into attacking Asriel one-on-one. Asriel is waiting, deliberately, along the brink of the Abyss where they fight. Asriel and Mrs. Coulter together manage to hurl Metatron into the Abyss (along with themselves), thus effectively ending any heavenly authority over earth (838–40, 843–47).⁵³

The story ends with the melodramatic parting of the two children to return to their own worlds (where the Church still wields power, though weakened by the end of the Authority and of Metatron—but not destroyed) where they each commit to helping establish the Republic of Heaven through their influence:

helping [everyone in their world] to learn and understand about themselves and each other and the way everything works, and by showing them how to be kind instead of cruel, and patient instead of hasty, and cheerful instead of surly, and above all how to keep their minds open and free and curious (910).

Analysis

A trilogy this massive could be analyzed in many different ways. One could write a book on the trilogy, but I don't have the time or interest for that—and it's already been done.⁵⁴ The scope of the work is quite broad—as indeed it would have to be to sustain a successful trilogy. Though occupying a relatively short temporal sequence, *His Dark Materials* spans multiple worlds, peoples, and cultures, incorporating many key characters (most quite well developed) and multiple, supplementary sub-plots. That's a lot for a writer to hold together, but Pullman manages to do so successfully for the most part. The scope of *His Dark Materials* is not as great as Tolkein's masterpiece (*LOR*), nor is the creativity and complexity as involved. Pullman is a very good writer, but he's not in Tolkein's class (very few are!). The comparison would certainly irk Pullman, who has stated that he detests both Tolkein and Lewis,⁵⁵ but the comparison is inevitable and could be profitable.

Rather than analyzing *His Dark Materials* from a literary viewpoint, I've chosen to use a worldview approach. That is, I'm not going to study how Pullman develops his characters, point out where there are inconsistencies or anomalies in the story, where he makes some convenient "leaps" to make the story work, or where he leaves some untidy loose ends in the narrative.⁵⁶ What I'm interested in is *why* Pullman tells this story. The narrative itself, of course, never states that in so many words, but it is clearly implied. What can be determined from the story is, in large measure, substantiated by what Pullman has said in public interviews. Pullman creates a fictional, fantasy world that presents his own worldview—one that is expressed through the actions and words of his hero characters, primarily Lyra

⁵³ Pullman never says what happens to the angelic forces still battling on and over the plain or what happens to Asriel's forces—one of many "loose ends" that never get tidied up in a satisfactory way.

⁵⁴ There are several books out already on *HDM*, by both Catholic and evangelicals writers. They can easily be found with a search on any of the major booksellers web sites.

⁵⁵ I suspect that Pullman's distaste of his fellow Oxford writers is due more to their theistic worldview than to their ability as writers. Surprisingly, he describes Tolkein's work as "trivial"; Lewis is serious, but proposes, thinks Pullman, an unsatisfactory answer to the questions of life. See Jillian Edelstein, "The Art of Darkness: An Interview with Philip Pullman," *More Intelligent Life*, 3/12/2007, <www.moreintelligentlife.com/print/697>, accessed 1/3/2008, and especially Tony Watkins, "A Clash of Other Worlds," *Culture Watch*, <www.damaris.org/content.php?type=5&id=446>, accessed 1/19/2008, which subjects Pullman's numerous criticisms of Lewis to a careful review.

⁵⁶ For a scathing critique of this sort, see Wright, "Pullman ... Is No Hero of Mine."

and Will, Lord Asriel, and Mary Malone (the former nun turned physicist), and secondarily through Will's father (John Parry, who is a shaman), Mrs. Coulter,⁵⁷ and various lesser characters among the fallen angels and witches. He also portrays the worldview which he opposes through the actions and words of his villains: God and the Church. The following pages examine *His Dark Materials* by evaluating the key elements of Pullman's worldview. I will not attempt to present a refutation or biblical argument for an alternative, but will assume an orthodox Christian view of such matters. My goal here is to show the contrasts between the two.

Nature of the World

Pullman never commits to any explanation of the origin of the world(s). At one point he places an agnostic statement on the lips of one of Asriel's generals: "the Authority is not the creator. There may have been a creator, or there may not: we don't know" (703). A pantheistic view characterizes a number of passages, particularly in regard to death. After a time spent in the underworld, the ghosts of those who merit it are released. As Lyra explains to the ghosts,

When you go out of here, all the particles that make you up will loosen and float apart, just like your dæmons did. If you've seen people dying, you know what they look like. But your dæmons en't just *nothing* now; they're part of everything. All the atoms that were them, they've gone into the air and the wind and the trees and the earth and all living things. They'll never vanish. They're just part of everything.... You'll drift apart, it's true, but you'll be out in the open, part of everything alive again" (783; cf. 913–14).

This universe is not, at least in *His Dark Materials*, a strictly materialist universe, but one with material, immaterial,⁵⁸ and "semi-material"⁵⁹ elements. This is at least partly literary device—fantasy elements necessary to accomplish his purpose. There is no way to tell from the books what Pullman himself would say about our own world. From his interviews, he subscribes to panpsychism,⁶⁰ the view that all matter is (potentially) conscious, though to varying degrees.⁶¹

⁵⁷ Mrs. Coulter is certainly a key character, but Pullman does not use her as a primary spokesperson for his worldview. She is a conflicted character, serving the Church initially, but changing allegiances several times in the story. She dies on the "right side" with her lover, Lord Asriel, as they fall with Metatron to their death in the Abyss.

⁵⁸ The immaterial would include ghosts, specters, and in some cases dæmons/souls. (Not every world is characterized by visible dæmons—Will does not have one until the end—but they are real nevertheless.)

⁵⁹ By semi-material I refer to beings such as angels, which Pullman describes in terms not quite either material or immaterial. They have a body that is sufficiently material to engage in hand-to-hand combat with a human and which can leave footprints, but which cannot be seen directly. These are not bodies which angels "take" to interact with humans, but appears to be part of their nature in *HDM*.

⁶⁰ "Panpsychism is the doctrine that mind is a fundamental feature of the world which exists throughout the universe" (William Seager and Sean Allen-Hermanson, "Panpsychism," *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Stanford University, 2005, <<http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/panpsychism/>>, accessed 1/26/2008). Or see David Skrbina's article on the same subject in the *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, University of Tennessee, 2007, <<http://www.iep.utm.edu/p/panpsych.htm>>, accessed 1/26/2008.

⁶¹ Pullman comments on this in several interviews: "Matter I see as being potentially conscious.... Matter loves matter, it delights to join with itself and form organized structures. At some point when the complexity of the organization becomes sufficient, matter begins to become self-conscious" (Tony Watkins, "Interview with Philip Pullman," *Culture Watch*, 2004, <www.damaris.org/content/content.php?type=5&id=357>, accessed 1/19/2008). He is here speaking of both his own view and how that is reflected in the *Dust of HDM*. In more detail, and more directly personal: "Those who are committed materialists (as I claim to be myself) have to account for the existence of consciousness, or else, like the behaviourists such as Watson and Skinner, deny that it exists at all. There are various ways of explaining consciousness, many of which seem to take the line that

God

God, in the sense: supernatural being worshipped/served by the Church (at least as portrayed in *His Dark Materials*), is referenced as “the Authority.” This god, however, is neither a supreme being, eternal, nor anything remotely resembling the God of orthodox Christianity. He’s really a “straw God.”⁶² As Pullman paints him, the Authority is merely an angel; he just happens to have been the one who “took charge” (703). The most complete description is given by Balthamos, a fallen angel:

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. Matter loves matter. It seeks to know more about itself, and Dust is formed. 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, and she found out the truth, so he banished her. We serve her still. And the Authority still reigns in the Kingdom, and Metatron is his Regent (569–70).

Though posed as questions, Mrs. Coulter reflects what Pullman intends regarding God—and later narrates to be the case (837, 840, 848):

Well, where is God ... if he’s alive? And why doesn’t he speak anymore? At the beginning of the world, God walked in the Garden and spoke with Adam and Eve. Then he began to withdraw, and he forbade Moses to look at his face. Later, in the time of Daniel, he was aged—he was the Ancient of Days. Where is he now? Is he still alive, at some inconceivable age, decrepit and demented, unable to think or act or speak and unable to die, a rotting hulk? And if that is his condition, wouldn’t it be the most merciful thing, the truest proof of our love for God, to seek him out and give him the gift of death? (789).

This god has not been any sort of authority for a long time. It is rather the Regent, Metatron, who has long since taken over the affairs of the Kingdom of Heaven. But the shift changes little in terms of the nature of “god” since he, like the Authority before him, is a finite being: Metatron is the former human Enoch. Thousands of years old with a profound intellect, yet he is still capable of lust and of being deceived (839–40, 844). This god also dies, though he does not dissolve in the wind as does the Authority (see the description in the Summary above). Rather he falls into the Abyss to be extinguished along with Asriel and Mrs. Coulter (844–47). Thus the long-pursued purpose of Asriel is fulfilled: to kill god (332–34). So *His Dark Materials* concludes with no god, only finite beings and no ultimate authority. That is the way Pullman thinks it has always been in our own world.

it’s an emergent phenomenon that only begins to exist when a sufficient degree of complexity is achieved. Another way of dealing with the question is to assume that consciousness, like mass, is a normal and universal property of matter (this is known as panpsychism), so that human beings, dogs, carrots, stones, and atoms are all conscious, though in different degrees. This is the line I take myself, in the company of poets such as Wordsworth and Blake” (Peter Chataway, “Philip Pullman: The Extended E-Mail Interview,” *FilmChat blog*, 11/28/2007, <<http://filmchatblog.blogspot.com/2007/11/philip-pullman-extended-e-mail.html>>, accessed 12/1/2007). Understanding that philosophy, what otherwise might be viewed simply as literary effect suggests something more; in *The Amber Spyglass* Mary Malone observes that “the entire world was alive and conscious” (877).

⁶² Overstreet (“Fear Not the *Compass*”) says that Pullman “has, in effect, set up a ‘straw God’ rather than a ‘straw man,’ and his fans are congratulating him for knocking down Pullman’s flawed perception of God rather than the God of Christianity.”

There is no metaphysical dualism in *His Dark Materials*, not even a finite devil so far as I can tell.⁶³ Although there is one reference to an angel wiser than the Authority who is banished for determining the truth regarding the Authority, she appears only obliquely in the trilogy and never appears to function very directly as the “head demon”; she never appears at all.⁶⁴ The fallen angels are portrayed as fully cooperative, democratic, and well organized in their opposition, but we never learn of an “authority” in their ranks. Even Xaphania, one of the most powerful of their number, is subservient to the human Asriel.

It is puzzling in Pullman’s world how there can be such a thing as “fates” that are higher than all. Xaphania explains to the children that “there are fates that even the most powerful have to submit to” (909). Is this an intelligent, purposeful “fate”? Or just “the way things are”? But if they are only the way things are, why is the language of power and submission used?⁶⁵

It is not accurate to say that Pullman describes God as killed with a knife by children. That is not at all what he means by “killing god.” In the trilogy, the pseudo-god (the Authority) is only a demented, finite creature who “dies” a natural death by evaporating in the wind (848). Although Lyra and Will are present when it happens, they take no action to “kill god.” This scene, of course, is intended to represent reality in our world. Just as “mystery dissolves into mystery” in *The Amber Spyglass*, so in our world the *idea* of God dissolves in the face of science; it can no longer be believed.

God to Pullman is a metaphor:

“Perhaps it might be clearer to call him a character in fiction, and a very interesting one too: one of the greatest and most complex villains of all.... But he’s not real, any more than Hamlet or Mr Pickwick are real. They are real in the context of their stories, but you won’t find them in the phone book.”⁶⁶

The “death of god” is much closer to the use of that phrase in classic liberalism, especially as popularized by Thomas Altizer in the 1960s,⁶⁷ or, more probably, by Nietzsche himself.⁶⁸ Pullman explained in an interview that,

The phrase ‘God is dead’ seems to me to encapsulate a much more truthful way of looking at it than to think there never was a God. There was a time when we all believed in God—very important, a central part of all

⁶³ There is one reference to the witches serving “different gods from ours,” but no specifics are given, and whatever this implies is never indicated or illustrated in the book (332). This contrasts with Tolkein’s Melkor (the Morgoth), or with Lewis’s White Witch.

⁶⁴ There is only one reference that I noted in which the rebel angels are said to “serve” her (570). Pullman refers to her elsewhere (e.g., Watkins, “Interview with Philip Pullman”) as Sophia, though I do not remember reading that name in *HDM*.

⁶⁵ For that matter, can there be “fate” if choices result in alternative worlds?!

⁶⁶ Chataway, “Pullman Extended Interview.”

⁶⁷ Thomas Altizer, *The Gospel of Christian Atheism* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1966). The idea of that movement was that the *concept* of god was no longer possible in a modern, scientific age.

⁶⁸ Nietzsche’s “Madman” says, “Where is God?” he cried; ‘I’ll tell you. *We have killed him*—you and I! We are all his murderers.... God is dead! God remains dead! And we have killed him! How can we console ourselves, the murderers of all murderers! The holiest and mightiest thing the world has ever possessed has bled to death under our knives: who will wipe this blood from us? With what water could we cleanse ourselves? What festivals of atonement, what holy games will we have to invent for ourselves? Is the magnitude of this deed not too great for us? Must we not ourselves have to become gods merely to appear worthy of it? There was never a greater deed—and whoever is born after us will on account of this deed belong to a higher history than all history up to now!” (Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, transl. Adrian Del Caro, Cambridge Texts in the History of Philosophy [Cambridge Univ. Press, 2001], Book 3, §125, pp. 119–20)

our lives. Then it became impossible to believe in it. It's as if God has died. That's the feeling I have. What are the consequences of this? Well, the consequences of this is that instead of seeing ourselves as creatures, children, or whatever, we've... Well, the parents are dead; we're in charge. We have to look after the place.⁶⁹

Although Pullman professes an atheistic worldview, it is a “Christian atheism”—it is the Christian God that Pullman rejects, not an Islamic or eastern one. He acknowledges that he still owes a great deal to his Christian heritage: “I’m still an atheist,” he says, “who has a great deal of the Christian in him. I have the heritage of my grandfather’s church, with the King James Bible and the Book of Common Prayer and all that stuff.”⁷⁰ He explains that,

I was brought up in the Church of England, and whereas I’m an atheist, I’m certainly a Church of England atheist, and for the matter of that a 1662 Book of Common Prayer atheist. The Church of England is so deeply embedded in my personality and my way of thinking that to remove it would take a surgical operation so radical that I would probably not survive it.⁷¹

That influence is significant, not only for many of the values he still espouses (see below), but it appears to be an ongoing issue in his mind. He once said, “I can’t get rid of God. I don’t believe in him, but he won’t leave me alone.”⁷² When pressed on that statement by the interviewer he referred to the “sense of wonder” created by the physical universe as a “great mystery” which prompts questions such as, “Is there a purpose to the universe, or is there none? Why are we troubled by this question?” He then admits that “we are troubled by it, even though we know, objectively, there isn’t a purpose.”⁷³ From my perspective, it seems that Pullman is grappling with what Romans 1:19–20 says is plain: “What is known [τὸ γνωστόν] about God is plain to them [i.e., to those who suppress the truth], because God has made it plain to them. For since the creation of the world God’s invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made.”

Truth, Values, and Absolutes

One of Pullman’s most difficult challenges is creating a consistent, believable, atheistic metanarrative that still has moral values—and he does champion a great many positive moral values, despite what is sometimes said of his work. He is quoted as saying that, “the qualities which my books criticise are intolerance, fanaticism, cruelty, and the qualities they celebrate are love, kindness, openness, curiosity.”⁷⁴ Others might be added to that list (responsibility, faithfulness, authenticity, etc.). Several groups of people are deliberately contrasted with the Magisterium in terms of authenticity. The Gyptians, the witches, and the armored bears (the *panserbjørne*) are portrayed as “genuine, open, unaffected, wholesome, pure.... They all show that it’s possible—even desirable—to live good lives of integrity entirely independent of [Christianity].”⁷⁵ The difficulty with this vision is obvious if any of these virtues are examined carefully within *His Dark Materials* and within Pullman’s worldview.

⁶⁹ Chataway, “Pullman Extended Interview.”

⁷⁰ Elder, “*Chicago Tribune* interview.”

⁷¹ Chataway, “Pullman Extended Interview.”

⁷² Elder, “*Chicago Tribune* interview.”

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ Claudia FitzHerbert, “Claudia FitzHerbert Talks to Philip Pullman,” *Literary Review* (Aug.[?] 2007), <http://www.literaryreview.co.uk/pullman_08_07.html>, accessed 1/28/2008.

⁷⁵ Watkins, *Dark Matters*, 69.

Truth is a key element in the plot. Much revolves around the “golden compass” (the title of book one and of the movie), which is more properly known as the alethiometer.⁷⁶ This “truth-meter” (ἀλήθεια + μέτρον) is an instrument resembling a compass with multiple hands and a symbol-filled bezel. Only six have ever existed, but Lyra is given custody of one of them. By arranging the hands correctly the master needle gives information by swinging from symbol to symbol. This information is always true, though it cannot foretell the future (contrary to the claim of the movie introduction). Normally a lifetime of study and multiple reference volumes are necessary to understand it, but Lyra learns to read it intuitively with neither training nor books and so it serves as her means of discovering crucial information and deciding what to do. There is little explanation as to what causes the instrument to function. Asriel and Lyra attribute it to Dust (272, 366); Dr. Malone learns to communicate with the same source through a computer program—and the source of the information professes to be rebel angels (479–80), who explain that matter and spirit are the same. Spirit beings are apparently highly complex structures of dark matter (i.e., Dust) which are conscious. There is no explanation why the alethiometer is always truthful. It just is.

Although a very convenient fantasy tool to facilitate the plot, it is really a rather awkward philosophical problem for Pullman’s worldview. Given the capabilities of the alethiometer and the ways it is used, and that by *both* sides in the struggle (the Magisterium and the rebellion),⁷⁷ it would require an omniscient source of information that metes out service to anyone who possesses such a device. But Pullman’s worldview has no such source. There is no omniscient god and those claiming the title (the Authority and the Regent) are clearly finite. Nor would a god cause the instrument to provide information to the rebellion.

To attribute it to Dust is no explanation because the alethiometer operates as an independent, intelligent agent separate from human consciousness.⁷⁸ And if Mary Malone’s source is correct (that the alethiometer is powered by rebel angels), why does the alethiometer provide truthful information to the agents of the Magisterium?! To ascribe consciousness to matter works as a fantasy device (though Pullman holds it to be true in the real world as well),⁷⁹ but it falls short in possessing any “focus,” any

⁷⁶ The origins of the term “Golden Compass” are interesting. It comes, not from Pullman at all, but from the American publisher. “Pullman provisionally titled the trilogy *The Golden Compasses* (from Book VII of *Paradise Lost* where it refers to compasses for drawing circles with). Someone at the American publishers, Knopf, mistakenly thought this referred to the alethiometer and that became their working title for the first volume. When Philip informed them that he had changed the trilogy’s title to *His Dark Materials*, Knopf refused to change the title of the first volume” (Watkins, *Dark Matter*, 194 n.16, referring to <<http://www.bridgetothestars.net/index.php?p=FAQ#4>>).

⁷⁷ Although the movie claims that Lyra’s alethiometer is the only such instrument left (of the six originals), in the trilogy there are several others in use. The Magisterium has at least one (597–98), and Asriel also has access to one (593). The readers of these other devices read “by book” and much more slowly than Lyra, but they do provide accurate information to their respective inquirers.

⁷⁸ The closest Pullman comes to trying to offer some explanation for how he conceives of such matters is the discussion between Lyra and Dr. Malone, who refers to Dust as Shadows, Dark Matter, or “particles of consciousness” (364). One can make such statements in a fantasy world, but then either each individual particle must be an intelligent creature (if so, how do they all work together?), or there must be a larger intelligence/consciousness that “coordinates” them—but that brings us perilously close (for Pullman!) to a god.

⁷⁹ That is, panpsychism; see elsewhere in this article.

means of integration or purpose that would serve the cognitive purpose of the instrument. It remains an enigma.⁸⁰

This enigma might be allowed to stand as a simple fantasy device which requires no justification or explanation except for the fact that it is used consciously as a symbol for truth, ironically manipulated by Lyra “Silvertongue”⁸¹—the consummate liar! She cannot make the device lie and as a liar she trusts it implicitly to tell the truth, as do all others who have access to an alethiometer. The only more proficient liar/deceiver in the story is Lyra’s own mother, Mrs. Coulter, though there is plenty of lying to go around. Few key characters in the story never lie or deceive (again, true of both sides). Yet Lyra discovers that she cannot lie in the underworld since the harpies⁸² know instantly when she does (762)—seemingly another source (or at least “criteria”) of truth. When the story concludes, Lyra is presented as consciously transformed into a truth-speaker who insists on telling a *true* story (925).

Though this is not developed very well in the story (it is a sudden switch near the end, not a gradual development), Pullman says that he intends to portray Lyra growing up in this regard: “she’s learning to distinguish between truth and fantasy ... learning to see the value in truth rather than just spinning lies is an important part of growing up.”⁸³ This does seem to be the best way to understand the narrative. Rather than saying that the trilogy advocates and glorifies lying,⁸⁴ the overall picture makes best sense as demonstrating truth as a positive value.

Yet, why is there “value in truth” in Pullman’s worldview? What basis for truth or any other value is possible apart from an absolute? How can there be any absolute apart from a transcendent standard? Is lying “wrong”? Is it ever justified? Can it be described as good or bad in a moral sense? Can those questions even be discussed apart from a standard? Yet what standard is there in *His Dark Materials*? It seems that in order to make his world “work,” Pullman must “borrow” values from a theistic worldview that have no organic connection with the fantasy world that he has created. Though professing to be an atheist (or sometimes an agnostic if he’s pushed), his Anglican upbringing appears to still exercise considerable influence in his thinking.

Take a different value as another example. Asriel deliberately kills a child as part of a scientific experiment (287–89). Is doing so wrong? Why or why not? It accomplishes a good end—from Asriel’s viewpoint; it is what enables him to open a passageway into another world to establish his fortress in preparation for war against tyranny. Yet a key charge by the rebellion is that the Church has been

⁸⁰ A comparison with the palantíri in LOR is inevitable, but these globes can be turned to good or evil. They enable communication and observation over great distances, but can be used to deceive. Normally they are a two-way device requiring two palantíri to function. There is no supernatural power in the palantír; they are but a piece of Elven technology—a fantasy one, yes, but still only that. The alethiometer is also a human invention (the technology of the Guild of the Torre degli Angeli in Cittàgazze), but it has a transcendent source of power and of information.

⁸¹ “Silvertongue” is the name given to Lyra by Iorek for her ability to tell stories—and lies.

⁸² The harpies, creatures borrowed from Greek mythology (see *Encyclopedia Mythica*, <<http://www.pantheon.org/articles/h/harpies.html>>, accessed 1/28/2008), are ghastly winged bird-like creatures charged by the Authority with charge of the underworld and the tormenting of its inhabitants (760f).

⁸³ Watkins, “Interview with Philip Pullman.”

⁸⁴ This was my initial impression and I have read similar conclusions in other reviewers. One must take into account the entire trilogy in this regard and that seems to substantiate a deliberate emphasis on truth by way of contrast with Lyra’s dominant character until near the end.

kidnapping children to use in scientific experiments, most of whom die in the process. This is a double-standard. On the one hand, killing (by the Church) is wrong and to be resisted, yet if the rebels kill a child, they are justified in doing so. Apparently social constructs have different values. How then can Pullman be so adamant about truth and good? How can these issues even be discussed in terms of right and wrong apart from a standard?

Pullman does address this at one point—one of the few explicitly philosophical sections. Interestingly, he discusses it through Dr. Mary Malone, the former nun turned physicist. As she tells her story to the children,⁸⁵ Lyra asks her about good and evil: “Did you think about them [good and evil] when you were a nun?” To which Mary replies,

“No. But I knew what I *should* think; it was whatever the Church taught me to think.... So I never had to think about them for myself at all.”

Will wants to know if she thinks about it now:

“When you stopped believing in God ... did you stop believing in good and evil?”

“No. But I stopped believing there was a power of good and a power of evil that were outside us. And I came to believe that good and evil are names for what people do, not for what they are. All we can say is that this is a good deed because it helps someone, or that’s an evil one, because it hurts them. People are too complicated to have simple labels” (875).⁸⁶

One must give Pullman credit for trying, but this is a horribly over-simplified, unworkable basis for ethics. It doesn’t even work in his own story. When Arisel kills the child, Roger, to power his access to another world (287–89), it is a good deed—it helps someone: Arisel. Of course from Roger’s perspective it’s quite different! But Pullman’s proposal through Dr. Malone cannot resolve the issue. There is no way to adjudicate the conflict of interests with such a simplistic proposal. Is taking innocent life ever justified? Is experimenting on or killing children “good”? Pullman’s standard cannot say. He might protest that he is writing a children’s book, not a philosophical/ethical treatise. True enough, but since his overall purpose is to argue for a godless worldview, and instill that in children, then he has an obligation to work out the details far more carefully since it will have a substantial impact on young minds. Pullman has not written responsibly in this regard.

“Pullman’s worldview ultimately collapses in on itself, because his characters are fighting evil in a universe in which it cannot be convincingly argued that evil exists.”⁸⁷ Since Pullman is a materialist, there can be no god, and “therefore no crimes.”⁸⁸

Wisdom encounters the same enigma. How does one determine what is wise? Pullman deliberately plays this out as the story of Adam and Eve who become wise by eating the fruit, but for Pullman this is

⁸⁵ The story is a most interesting one, but far too lengthy to cite here in detail; see 870–76.

⁸⁶ Pullman expresses the same thought when he says that “Qualities such as authority and love and kindness—or their opposites, such as cruelty or evil—are not abstract. They have no existence outside human life. They can only exist when embodied in a human being. That is where the difference between me and a Christian is most clearly marked, I dare say” (Chataway, “Pullman Extended Interview”). To limit value terms to concrete expressions results in vacating any possible basis upon which to assign value; they must be an abstract concept of a value in order to assign it to a concrete particular.

⁸⁷ Gina Dalfonzo, “The Impoverished Imagination,” *Breakpoint Worldview Magazine*, March 2004, <www.breakpoint.org/listingarticle.asp?ID=5660>, accessed 11/27/2007.

⁸⁸ Wright, “Pullman ... Is No Hero of Mine.”

a good thing that has been repressed by the Authority and his church. The “second fall” by Lyra and Will succeeds in enabling people to realize their full potential and to become truly wise. With this “salvation” provided by the children and with the death of god, people are now free to live as they please in the self-governing, self-determined *Republic* of Heaven. Self-will is the beginning of wisdom. As the book closes Will declares, “Whatever I do, I will choose it, no one else.” And he is reassured by Xaphania (a high ranking fallen angel), “Then you will have already taken the first steps toward wisdom” (913).⁸⁹

One might ask, of course, what happens when two people each choose something different, something contradictory that is such that only one of the two choices can happen? If self-will is the beginning of wisdom, how are contradictory choices adjudicated? In Pullman’s world there does not seem to be any choice here other than that of the Nietzschean superman—the stronger of the two wins by force.

Pullman is incensed by criticisms such as this; it is expressed in many of his interviews. A few samples.⁹⁰

Q: Throughout His Dark Materials there’s a strong sense of ‘ought’. All the most attractive characters—Lyra and Will, Lee Scoresby, Iorek Byrnison, Mary Malone—are driven in the end by a sense of duty, at least to their loved ones if not to the world. Where in a world without God does that sense of ‘ought’ come from?

A: I’m amazed by the gall of Christians. You think that nobody can possibly be decent unless they’ve got the idea from God or something. Absolute bloody rubbish! Isn’t it your experience that there are plenty of people in the world who don’t believe who are very good, decent people?

Q: Yes. I’m just curious to know where it comes from.

A: For goodness’ sake! It comes from ordinary human decency. It comes from accumulated human wisdom—which includes the wisdom of such figures as Jesus Christ. Jesus, like many of the founders of great religions, was a moral genius, and he set out a number of things very clearly in the Gospels which if we all lived by them we’d all do much better. What a pity the Church doesn’t listen to him!⁹¹

Or again,

Q: A number of commentators have argued that, while your books are critical of Christianity etc., they nevertheless reflect Christian virtues such as love and self-sacrifice.... How do you respond to this sort of analysis—both as an evaluation of your work (does it carry within itself a latent Christianity?) and for what it says about Christian critics who have tried to engage with your books?

A: My answer to that would be that I was brought up in the Church of England, and whereas I’m an atheist, I’m certainly a Church of England atheist.... But that doesn’t prevent me from pointing out the arrogance that deforms some Christian commentary, and makes it a pleasure to beat it about the head. What on earth gives Christians the right to assume that love and self-sacrifice have to be called Christian virtues? They are virtues, full stop. If there is an exclusively religious sin (not exclusively Christian, but certainly clearly visible among some Christians) it is the claim that all virtue belongs to their sect, all vice to others. It is so clearly

⁸⁹ One must wonder if Pullman has deliberately chosen Will’s name in light of his final declaration of self-will since that is the final goal of the trilogy.

⁹⁰ In the following interview extracts I have reformatted the paragraphs by inserting a ‘Q.’ and ‘A.’ for the interviewer’s question (or comment) and Pullman’s response. All paragraphs beginning with ‘A.’ are thus Pullman’s own words.

⁹¹ Spanner, “Heat and Dust.”

wrong, so clearly stupid, so clearly counter-productive, that it leads the unbiased observer to assume that you're not allowed in the religious club unless you leave your intelligence at the door.⁹²

A bit later in the same interview the subject resurfaces.

Q: True virtue doesn't seem possible in a materialist world, because no one truly acts freely; instead, our actions are the end results of various deterministic (and, following quantum physics, random) ... It may be wrong to say that virtues belong to a particular religious sect ... but without some sort of religious basis, there seems to be no particular motivation to be virtuous, nor does it seem possible. Does looking at it from that angle make any more sense?

A: Well, I think that's a very bleak and limited view of human possibility. No motivation for virtue if you don't believe in God? What about the joy you feel when a good action of yours brings a happy result for someone else? What about the basic empathy we feel even for creatures who aren't human—a rabbit caught in a trap, a little bird inside the house trying to get out through a closed window, a polar bear drowning in a world where the ice is melting? That's not due to religion: it's due to the fact that we're alive and conscious and able to imagine another's suffering.

As for the existence or otherwise of free will, that is so profound a question that philosophers and scientists have been plumbing it for centuries if not millennia and the answer is still as far off as ever. But the only way we can live, it seems to me, is to believe that our will is free.... The plainest and simplest description of the world, for me, and the truest, is that there is no God, but that human beings are capable of great goodness and great wickedness, and we don't need priests or Popes or imams or rabbis to tell us which is which.⁹³

And finally,

Q: It seems to me that "His Dark Materials" backs a fundamentally moralist, even Christian, value system, without original sin and without the abuse of power.

A: You could say that, but I would wonder why you'd feel the need to say, "Christian." Because, after all, the good qualities that the story praises are surely good qualities in the value systems of other religions. You might equally say, "Jewish," "Muslim," "Hindu." But, yes, I think that's a good way of putting it.⁹⁴

Despite Pullman's heated objections, this is a valid criticism. He has no adequate justification on which to ground his values. To appeal to "ordinary human decency ... accumulated human wisdom," is insufficient.⁹⁵ What some people consider decent is quite indecent to others, and accumulating a larger sampling cannot validate subjective preference. To suggest that other religions have similar values is not at all helpful to Pullman, since he appeals to other *theistic* religions that *do* have a transcendental standard upon which to found a value system.⁹⁶ In the end, Pullman is only a "half-atheist" (or perhaps a "half-conscious theist"!) in that he must inconsistently assume a theistic worldview to make his atheistic fantasy morally functional.⁹⁷

⁹² Chataway, "Pullman Extended Interview."

⁹³ Ibid.

⁹⁴ Elder, "Chicago Tribune Interview."

⁹⁵ "Human wisdom, accumulated or otherwise, has nothing transcendent about it. In other words, there's no objective basis for it, nowhere to ground it" (Watkins, *Dark Matters*, 161).

⁹⁶ We would quibble as to the legitimacy of some such claims, but it is still a *theistic* claim which is inadmissible in an atheistic argument.

⁹⁷ In this connection it is quite interesting to read J. Budziszewski's essay, "Escape from Nihilism," <www.leaderu.com/real/ri9801/budziszewski.html>, accessed 9/26/2007. Budziszewski's experience is slightly different philosophically, but is

Human nature

In many ways Pullman's portrait of human nature is fairly accurate. He paints a functional dualism of body and soul with his novel use of *dæmons* distinct from the person's body, the separation of which results in death. We might object that the result is a dual personality, but given appropriate allowance for the literary device, it is actually a fairly realistic portrait.

Pullman makes no bones about human nature being evil. Whether it is the Neitzschian *Übermensch* (superman) Arisel, driven by power alone, or the ultimate portrait of depravity, Mrs. Coulter, people in *His Dark Materials* are not good by nature. Even the children heroes are liars and deceivers who kill when necessary (even if Will does bemoan several times having done so). One of the most graphic descriptions of depravity is Metatron's assessment of Mrs. Coulter:

Corruption and envy and lust for power. Cruelty and coldness. A vicious, probing curiosity. Pure, poisonous, toxic malice. You have never from your earliest years shown a shred of compassion or sympathy or kindness without calculating how it would return to your advantage. You have tortured and killed without regret or hesitation; you have betrayed and intrigued and gloried in your treachery. You are a cesspool of moral filth (839).

The irony of that assessment is that Metatron does not realize that she is doing the very same thing to him at the time. She "was lying with her whole life" and "feels a little gush of triumph" when she heard his judgment (839)—and promptly seduces him and leads him to his death. Pullman is much more accurate in his assessment of the nature of man than of god. He obviously knows one much better than the other!

Yet this portrait of human nature is a major stumbling block to Pullman's purpose. His long term goal is to encourage the Republic of Heaven in which self-determining people make their own decisions. The children are sent back to their worlds to help others,

to learn and understand about themselves and each other and the way everything works, and by showing them how to be kind instead of cruel, and patient instead of hasty, and cheerful instead of surly, and above all how to keep their minds open and free and curious (910).

But why should people do that? And what would cause them to want to do that? Is it all based on altruistic motives?

Where in all of *His Dark Materials* is there any altruism? More importantly, what basis is there in Pullman's worldview for altruism? One possible instance—and it is a contradictory portrait if there ever was one—comes near the end of the story. Although Asriel has either ignored or treated Lyra—his own daughter—with contempt throughout the entire book, and Mrs. Coulter has largely done the same, yet at the end both of them determine to sacrifice their own lives in an attempt to destroy Metatron in order to give Lyra time to find her *dæmon* and escape. In response to his lover's question, "We won't live, will we? We won't survive like ghosts?", Asriel replies,

Not if we fall into the abyss. We came here to give Lyra time to find her *dæmon*, and then time to live and grow up. If we take Metatron to extinction, Marisa, she'll have that time, and if we go with him, it doesn't matter (844).

very much parallel in his struggle to ground moral values in an atheistic worldview; ultimately he was forced to return to theism by the irrationality of his nihilism.

What would cause them to change their motives at this point? Are they acting self-sacrificially out of compassion for Lyra? I doubt it. More likely we are to see Mrs. Coulter's characteristic conflation—and Asriel using her as a tool to fulfill his hatred of Metatron.

A more likely example is by a representative of the Church, Father MacPhail, who voluntarily gives his own life in a desperate attempt to explode a bomb intended to kill Lyra (802–05). Pullman does not portray it altruistically, but as the actions of a desperate madman motivated by blind loyalty to Church dogma:

his expression ... was so fixed and intense that he looked more like a mask than a man. His lips were moving in prayer, his eyes were turned up wide open as the rain beat into them, and altogether he looked like some gloomy Spanish painting of a saint in the ecstasy of martyrdom (802).

It is, however, more easily understood as an altruistic act than that of Asriel and Mrs. Coulter.

Minor characters are more likely to act kindly than the protagonists, though never those on the side of the Church. These characters are never portrayed in terms of motive, so it seems incidental in Pullman's account. The children themselves are perhaps the best example of treating others kindly for their sake alone, yet these are the same children who can lie and deceive and kill, so altruism does not seem to be a prominent or determinative characteristic of their nature. Again one must ask, *why* should citizens of Pullman's Republic of Heaven act altruistically?

If human nature is such as Pullman portrays it, what is to prevent anyone with the determination and ability from oppressing others rather than living altruistically? They have consistently done that throughout the book—both the leaders of the rebellion and of the Church. What is the motive to do otherwise? Is human society possible on such a basis? Pullman's is only another version of classic utopianism, only an atheistic one. With his silly view of a debased, finite god, Pullman has no alternative but to trust people to do right as they learn wisdom. But in a godless world, there is no basis for values and goodness, certainly not altruistic ones, and self-centered ones are quite arbitrary and conflicting. Utilitarianism might be an alternative resort,⁹⁸ but even then there is no compelling reason for any one individual to submit to the good of a larger number of people, for that is only power by force and oppression—and also contrary to Pullman's glorification of self-determination. Greater knowledge does not guarantee greater good. This is again evident in that the smartest characters in *His Dark Materials* are the most likely to deceive, kill, and use others to their own advantage—Asriel and Mrs. Coulter being the best examples.⁹⁹

⁹⁸ One of the more influential advocates of utilitarianism was John Stuart Mill, though likely John Dewey's version, founding action on intelligence as the supreme motive, is closer to what Pullman would propose. For a simple overview of utilitarianism, see Sidney Hook, "Utilitarianism," *Microsoft Encarta Online Encyclopedia 2007*, <http://encarta.msn.com/encyclopedia_761574664/Utilitarianism.html>, accessed 1/3/2008.

⁹⁹ As Newman points out, "All of these characters embody, to varying degrees, Nietzsche's idea of Will to Power. They reject any morality as having authority over them. They are people of command. Whether the issue is sexual license, lying, torture, or killing—they all feel justified in doing as they will to obtain their desired results. They serve themselves, and they revel in power" ("Nietzsche Invades Narnia").

Religion

When one asks about the religion advocated by *His Dark Materials*, in one sense there is none. Since there is no god, no devil, no “higher power”—just various autonomous, finite beings—there is no system of worship, no liturgy, no sacrifice, no prayer. Pullman is not advocating the worship of Satan; such a being never appears in the book.¹⁰⁰ Though the witches may use spells, their power is never attributed to any supernatural being or higher power.¹⁰¹ Mrs. Coulter, even while working for the Church, has some impressive mental powers over the souls/dæmons of others—as does the Church in general—but this is never described in terms of a supernatural power.

Though not described as such in *His Dark Materials*, what this worldview amounts to in terms of religion is probably best described as either self-worship or as the worship of human wisdom (and they may not be much different). Though there is no organized system for the practice of any ritual that Pullman commends, the matter of final authority and supreme value comes down to individual self-determination (self/free-will) on the basis of human wisdom.

There is, however, plenty of religion discussed in the books, but not in any commendable sense. Pullman is very clear who the “bad guys” are: all the earthly representatives of the Authority, whether called the Magisterium, the Church, or any of several competing branches/arms of the Church.¹⁰² This religion is evil from its very inception. To say that Pullman’s portrait of the Church is very negative is a gross understatement. He views the Church as the cause of everything that is wrong in the world; his *sunum bonum* is the total destruction of both the Authority and his Church. Consider a few samples of his rhetoric. The Latvian witch queen, Ruda Skadi, is one of the first to speak openly of the Church.¹⁰³

Sisters ... let me tell you what is happening, and who it is that we must fight. For there is a war coming. I don’t know who will join with us, but I know whom we must fight. It is the Magisterium, the Church. For all its history—and that’s not long by our lives, but it’s many, many of theirs—it’s tried to suppress and control every natural impulse. And when it can’t control them, it cuts them out. Some of you have seen what they did at Bolvangar. And that was horrible, but it is not the only such place, not the only such practice. Sisters, you know only the north; I have traveled in the south lands. There are churches there, believe me, that cut their children too, as the people of Bolvangar did—not in the same way, but just as horribly. They cut their sexual organs, yes, both boys and girls; they cut them with knives so that they shan’t feel. That is what the Church

¹⁰⁰ There is one possible allusion in which a fallen angel refers to an angel who was smarter than the Authority and consequently banished: “we serve her still” (570), but that angel never appears that I can tell. She is identified as Sophia in many comments about the trilogy (including Pullman himself), but I do not remember reading that name in *HDM* and have not located such an explicit reference. That there are witches does not mean there is Satan worship. The witches are a curious part of the story, but we know little about them other than their long life, ability to fly, some miscellaneous suprahuman abilities (they are in the “Legolas-class” as warriors!), and that they “[look] after their own affairs” (335).

¹⁰¹ These spells appear to be largely mental exercises. Their “invisibility spell” does not make them invisible, but only causes people not to notice or pay attention to them. Although this usually works, it isn’t fool proof since those with similar or greater ability are not fooled. Mrs. Coulter, e.g., is depicted as having considerable abilities along similar lines herself, and she is not “taken” by a witch who attempts to use the spell to spy on her (526–27).

¹⁰² Remember from the introductory summary above that Pullman includes both Catholicism and Protestantism in his “Church,” making Calvin a pope and moving the Vatican to Geneva (23). He deliberately paints with a broad brush intended to smear every church: “every church is the same” (336, see context in block quote above).

¹⁰³ Note that this is not in book one and so is not in the current movie version. Pullman wisely reveals his agenda only gradually in the trilogy. It is not until book two that it begins to come into focus and the most specific details are reserved for book three, and even then it is clearer near the end.

does, and every church is the same: control, destroy, obliterate every good feeling. So, if a war comes, and the Church is on one side of it, we must be on the other, no matter what strange allies we find ourselves bound to (336, see also 496).

Just before he dies, Will's father, John Parry, explains to Will that,

there is a war coming, boy. The greatest war there ever was. Something like it happened before, and this time the right side must win. We've had nothing but lies and propaganda and cruelty and deceit for all the thousands of years of human history. It's time we started again, but properly this time (531).

And again,

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 (532).

Near the end of the trilogy the witch Serafina is talking to the former nun, Mary Malone:

All the history of human life has been a struggle between wisdom and stupidity.... The rebel angels, the followers of wisdom, have always tried to open minds; the Authority and his churches have always tried to keep them closed.... And for most of that time, wisdom has had to work in secret, whispering her words, moving like a spy through humble places of the world while the courts and palaces are occupied by enemies (899–900).

When asked what produced this antipathy to the Church, Pullman explains that,

it comes from history. It comes from the record of the Inquisition, persecuting heretics and torturing Jews and all that sort of stuff; and it comes from the other side, too, from the Protestants burning the Catholics. It comes from the insensate pursuit of innocent and crazy old women, and from the Puritans in America burning and hanging the witches—and it comes not only from the Christian church but also from the Taliban. Every single religion that has a monotheistic god ends up by persecuting other people and killing them because they don't accept him. Wherever you look in history, you find that. It's still going on.¹⁰⁴

It is obvious that Pullman has no love for Christianity. Despite this, it is only fair to note that he intends the Magisterium to exemplify *more* than just the Church, though that is the prime example of what he opposes. In his own words,

I've always made it clear that theocracy—the political exercise of religious authority, which is what the Magisterium in the story embodies—is a special example of the regrettable tendency of humankind to believe in 'one size fits all' answers: to cling to the extreme of dogmatic fundamentalism whether religious or not. In fact ... the purest example of theocracy in the twentieth century was Soviet Russia.¹⁰⁵

Chrisafis suggests that his primary concern is “with the ‘propensity of human nature’ to use politics or religion to set up one unquestionable truth—‘it could be the Bible, it could be the Communist Manifesto’—and to then knock down all that went against it.” She quote him to the effect that “This is what I am against. Not Christianity, but every religion and fundamental organisation where there is one truth and they will kill you if you don't believe it.”¹⁰⁶ Although he has been relatively quiet about

¹⁰⁴ Spanner, “Heat and Dust.”

¹⁰⁵ Chataway, “Pullman Extended Interview.”

¹⁰⁶ Chrisafis, “Pullman Lays Down Moral Challenge.” Note, too, that this quote is six years old (2002), long before there was movie publicity to think about.

other associations (for obvious reasons), he identifies it with Islamic extremism as well.¹⁰⁷ It is not fair to suggest that Pullman is deliberately soft-pedaling the role of the Church in the movie in his more recent comments. His broader perspective has been voiced for many years. His target is no less than the Church, which he sees as the most common form of what he considers to be an abuse, but includes a wider condemnation of totalitarianism in general. Perhaps some such recent comments have been intended to deflect some of his more severe Christian (especially Catholic) critics, but he does appear to be attempting consistency on this matter.

It could be tempting to “whitewash” the trilogy at this point and conclude that what Pullman opposes we also oppose (totalitarian abuse of authority, religious or otherwise), and feel quite smug about doing so. But it is not that simple. Though we would certainly agree in condemning totalitarianism in any form, his definition encompasses *any* absolute. Some forms of postmodern Christianity might be willing to accommodate Pullman on this score, but no one who defends genuine theism and epistemological and moral absolutes can escape by this route. Absolutes and authority are Pullman’s avowed targets, so the designation of God as the Authority is quite natural.

In interviews Pullman is dismissive of what he terms “fundamentalists” (which in his British context likely means evangelicalism or conservative Christianity), viewing them as close-minded: “You can’t communicate with people who know they’ve got all the answers.”¹⁰⁸ It’s worth asking a question in this regard: “Why does Pullman have this wrongful impression of the church in the first place? Could it be that he’s encountered arrogant, judgmental Christians? Could it be, to some degree, Christians’ fault?”¹⁰⁹

It is sad that he has apparently had so little contact with believers who have a more compassionate outlook and with local churches which manifest spiritual vitality and love for their neighbors. Independent assemblies of individual Christians worshipping together seem almost foreign to him. In the trilogy he always speaks in corporate, denominational terms, and always of clergy or official representatives of the Church. He *has* investigated firsthand a local church near where he lives; he describes it as “home-based” group (presumably because it was not part of the established Anglican church; they met in a cinema, not a private home). He observed the community and caring of that group of people—but he was totally turned off by what he describes as their nonrational, deceptive

¹⁰⁷ Chataway, “Pullman Extended Interview”; see also the quote in the Spanner interview at n.104 which refers to the Taliban.

¹⁰⁸ Edelstein, “The Art of Darkness.” Or again, “The Christians at the fundamentalist or evangelical end of the spectrum have been so preoccupied with denouncing the wickedness of Harry Potter that they’ve hardly noticed me at all. There are one or two exceptions—a couple of Christian journalists have made it their business to attack me, but their readings of the book have been so comically inadequate that no-one has taken any notice of them; and at a public meeting I was once denounced by a Christian headmistress for advocating under-age sex, and it took no more than a couple of questions from me to establish that she had never actually read the passage she was complaining about. So if that’s the best—or the worst—that that sort of Christian can do, I have little to worry about” (Chataway, “Pullman Extended Interview”). This statement is followed by his perception of more liberal Christians: “Christians at the other end, what you might call the thoughtful liberal end of the spectrum, have on the contrary been very welcoming. Many of my most interesting letters have been from, many of my most interesting conversations have been with Christians both Protestant and Catholic. They can see that I take these big questions seriously, and that the morality—the values that the book as a whole upholds and champions—is something on which we can all fully agree” (ibid.).

¹⁰⁹ Overstreet, “Fear Not the Compass.”

behavior: it was a charismatic group that spoke in tongues. They were also very narrow-minded and knew or cared nothing about the world around them (other than missions in Africa).¹¹⁰

Purpose in life

What is a person's purpose in life? One might wonder how Pullman would articulate that given his materialist worldview, but he does comment explicitly on that in *His Dark Materials*. His intermediary is the physicist and former nun, Dr. Mary Malone who has already announced that "the Christian religion is a very powerful and convincing mistake" (871). The development of this idea is worth tracking. During Mary's discussion about God, good, and evil with Lyra and Will, she reflects on her change of perspective when she stopped believing in God. She misses him "terribly" and "what I miss most is the sense of being connected to the whole of the universe. I used to feel I was connected to God like that, and because he was there, I was connected to the whole of creation. But if he's not there, then..." (875). That night as she walks under a cloudy sky she notes that "when she'd been a Christian, she had felt connected, too; but when she left the Church, she felt loose and free and light, in a universe without purpose.... It was impossible to find a connection, because there was no God" (878). At this point Mary is the classic object of Francis Schaeffer's analysis of life below the line of despair. This is likely autobiographical for Pullman as well since he seems to express his own views most directly in the trilogy through her words.¹¹¹

Pullman does not leave Mary in this despair, however. Through the literary device of Dust he paints the purpose of life in a materialist universe. The ultimate problem in the world of *His Dark Materials* is that Dust is being lost; it is flowing out of the world. Since Dust represents human consciousness and wisdom, Pullman is portraying the danger he sees in the loss of humanity. Given a panpsychic view of matter and the origin of life through evolution (really, the self-organization of matter), self-conscious beings have come into existence, but if they do not guard that consciousness (i.e., Dust), it will be lost and humankind will descend once again into subhuman forms of existence. His philosophical answer then to the question of purpose in life is simply the preservation of conscious life—of Dust. He expresses this in the narrative through Mary Malone.

And then she saw what they were doing, at last: she saw what that great urgent purpose was. They were trying to hold back the Dust flood.

They were striving to put some barriers up against the terrible stream: wind, moon, clouds, leaves, grass, all those lovely things were crying out and hurling themselves into the struggle to keep the shadow particles in this universe, which they so enriched.

Matter *loved* Dust. It didn't want to see it go. That was the meaning of this night, and it was Mary's meaning, too.

Had she thought there was no meaning in life, no purpose, when God had gone? Yes, she had thought that.

"Well, there is now," she said aloud, and again, louder, "There is now!" (880).

¹¹⁰ His extended description of this church is quite interesting: "Watkins, "Interview with Philip Pullman." Pullman chatted at some length with "the chap in charge" in the church office and also attended at least one of their (3-hour-long) services.

¹¹¹ This is evident if one compares Pullman's numerous interviews with the discussions by various characters in the books. The content is strikingly similar.

This is given tangible expression in Pullman’s appeal to abandon the Kingdom of Heaven (i.e., quit believing in a god that doesn’t exist) and begin building the Republic of Heaven. The last page of the trilogy explains:

“He meant the Kingdom was over, the Kingdom of Heaven, it was all finished. We shouldn’t live as if it mattered more than this life in this world, because where we are is always the most important place.”

“He said we were to build something ...”

“... Build what?”

“The Republic of Heaven,” said Lyra (929).

Pullman expresses the same sentiment in one of his interviews:

My answer to the question “Is there a purpose to the universe?” would be: “There is now. Now that we are here.”

As far as we know, we embody the only spark of conscious awareness in the whole of the universe. And that’s a great responsibility, to be in charge of that. That is the most important thing we have to do beyond any other, is maintain that, make sure it doesn’t die out.

And that has implications of course for global warming and environmentalism and all these things. We have to look after this place. We have to look after ourselves. We have to look after human consciousness.

Maybe that’s a moral principle, maybe that’s a religious principle, but it is a principle in which I strongly believe.¹¹²

In a materialist universe, that is as high as it gets. One has only self-preservation on which to rely. If someone senses a need to be altruistic and beneficent (as Pullman does), one might extend that to the human race and claim a broader purpose of preserving human life, but it is still only a finite purpose—and one with only a selfish instinct to motivate it. Why *should* I be concerned to preserve human self-consciousness? If when I die, I am just atoms floating in the ether, it really doesn’t matter what happens to anyone else, for their destiny is the same as mine whether they are “good” or “bad” (whatever that means!).

A Christian perspective is vastly different. Our perspective is much greater since it is not a limited, finite one. We live rather, in the well-known words of Westminster, “to glorify God, and fully to enjoy him for ever.”¹¹³ This is not the “pseudo-god” which Pullman portrays as the Authority, but an infinite, loving, personal, creator God. If he exists, then glorifying, serving, and enjoying him forever gives life a satisfying, transcendent purpose.¹¹⁴

¹¹² Elder, “Chicago Tribune Interview.” Likewise in the *Third Way* interview, in response to the interviewer’s comment about God, in Pullman’s worldview, being “the accidental by-product of a meaningless universe,” Pullman says, “It’s not meaningless. It was meaningless before, but it’s not meaningless any more. This is the mistake Christians make when they say that if you are an atheist you have to be a nihilist and there’s no meaning any more. Well, that’s nonsense, as Mary Malone discovers. Now that I’m conscious, now that I’m responsible, there is a meaning, and it is to make things better and to work for greater good and greater wisdom. That’s my meaning—and it comes from my understanding of my position. It’s not nihilism at all. It’s very far from it” (Spanner, “Heat and Dust”).

¹¹³ *The Westminster Standards, The Larger Catechism*, Question One.

¹¹⁴ As Watkins points out, “if you see God merely as part of the physical universe, then you automatically see him as a deceiver. The historically orthodox Christian understanding of God and the universe only works if God is transcendent” (*Dark Matters*, 154).

A Christian Response

With this analysis comes an additional question. What should Christians do with *The Golden Compass* (i.e., the movie)? How should they respond to *His Dark Materials*?

There are several possible responses to Pullman's work. One possibility is to ignore the movie and the books, hoping that they will fade away.¹¹⁵ Others get angry: "What Christians often do is get angry or talk about the media's attempt to undercut our faith. Neither reaction [accomplishes] much."¹¹⁶ Darrell Bock proposes a better alternative. He is talking about broader media issues, not *The Golden Compass* per se, but this movie is just one more manifestation of the issue he raises.

Rather than seeing new media reports as conspiracies to rail against, why not see them as opportunities to discuss faith with friends and neighbors who will find them intriguing? Only we mustn't do so with an angry or dismissive tone. Rather, we ought to respectfully explain the historic Christian view. Becoming equipped for such discussions may require seminars organized by local churches. Imagine churches working together to help believers contend for the truth in their communities.¹¹⁷

Tony Watkins works out in greater detail this sort of approach—one that I think Christians should take, not only to Pullman, but to others like him.

Pullman ... wants to explore the questions which he considers are the 'most important of all': Is there a God? What does it mean to be human? What is our purpose? Inevitably, he comes at those questions from a particular angle. He rejects the idea of God, and he does believe that religion is easily twisted into something very destructive. But such questions are absolutely fundamental and we should neither be afraid of asking them, nor of considering someone else's answers—even when they are profoundly different from our own. If we believe that our answers are true, we should engage through calm, reasoned discussion, not through closing our eyes, blocking our ears and telling everyone else to do the same. Parents do need to think clearly about whether their children are ready to think carefully about these ideas, of course. But we live in a society where there are many radically conflicting ideas about the answers to these fundamental questions. Pullman's perspective on them is very common, though his presentation of them is a masterpiece of literature—and one that deserves to be read and engaged with. The truth can stand for itself, so I am convinced that it is healthier for Christians to listen seriously to what someone else has to say, and then to respond to it positively where we can, critically where we must, and always in a way that is characterised by grace. Knee-jerk reactions, hurling abuse and scare-mongering does no good to anyone, and reflects very poorly on the church.¹¹⁸

This sort of approach has implications for gospel outreach. I would suggest that we are not qualified to share the gospel with thoughtful unbelievers unless we sense a genuine compassion for them as individuals, seek to understand their worldview, and then speak to them in terms of their worldview. A typical "canned" presentation of the gospel would only make people like Philip Pullman

¹¹⁵ This is the advice of John Thomas, "Opinion" [a review of two books about *HDM*], *Christians in Library, Information and Archive Work*, n.d., <<http://www.librarianscf.org.uk/bookshelf/opinion/houghton.html>>, accessed 1/15/2008. He writes, "Naturally, in our 'secular' society, Pullman is fêted [sic]. But maybe left alone he, like his 'Authority', will just fade away."

¹¹⁶ Darrell Bock, "When the Media Became a Nuisance," *Christianity Today*, 12/12/2007, <www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2007/December/22.40.html>, accessed 1/15/2008.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁸ Tony Watkins, "Golden Compass Briefing," <www.tonywatkins.org/darkmatter/goldencompassbriefing/>, accessed 1/19/2008.

laugh or snort with disgust. In this regard we can learn a great deal from Francis Schaeffer. In talking about the literature and art of such people, he has this to say:

These paintings, these poems and these demonstrations which we have been talking about are the expression of men who are struggling with their appalling lostness. Dare we laugh at such things? Dare we feel superior when we view their tortured expressions in their art? Christians should stop laughing and take such men seriously. Then we shall have the right to speak again to our generation. These men are dying while they live, yet where is our compassion for them? There is nothing more ugly than an orthodoxy without understanding or without compassion.¹¹⁹

In commenting on these words, David Dunham observes,

That is probably the greatest lesson we can learn from Dr. Schaeffer. You can never share the gospel with someone whom you do not take seriously as a human being; and they will never want to listen to you if your words are not truth and compassion mixed together. [The] church, and individual Christians in particular, have over the past several centuries struggled greatly with this kind of evangelism. We have often found ourselves more interested in turning up our noses, mocking, belittling, and boycotting the culture, but Schaeffer would have us to find compassion for the culture.¹²⁰

We may have some strong feelings, even anger, about Pullman's agenda, but we need to ask how that impacts our relationship with Pullman—or more likely with some of his fans and cobelligerents.

I also sense that there is a man who hates God, who is honest about it, and who needs the gospel. I will find in some of his major fans similar feelings of religious disdain. How I share the gospel with them will need to start with recognizing this factor and lovingly tearing down the worldview that supports it as I bring them the gospel. What Schaeffer does so well is to remind us that the culture is part of life, where people's worldviews are expressed, and though we would often criticize and demean culture it can and should actually be part of how we do evangelism.¹²¹

But what about our “internal” response to the movie? What should a pastor say about this film? Should he warn his congregation about seeing an atheist production? As a blanket statement, I think not. Though this raises broader questions of such media in general, ones that I cannot address adequately here,¹²² I think we need to take a more proactive stance on particular movies—popular

¹¹⁹ Francis Schaeffer, *The God Who Is There* (Chicago: Inter-Varsity Press, 1968), 36.

¹²⁰ David Dunham, “Why We Can Neither Boycott Nor Ignore *The Golden Compass*,” *Christ and Pop Culture*, 12/7/2007, <<http://www.christandpopculture.com/film/evangelism-and-the-culture-a-lesson-from-francis-schaeffer/>>, accessed 1/15/2007.

¹²¹ Dunham, “Why We Can Neither Boycott Nor Ignore *The Golden Compass*.”

¹²² My opinion is that fundamentalism made a wrong choice when these questions were first raised nearly a century ago. By taking the “Christians don't go to movies” approach, we cut ourselves off from any engagement with our culture on such matters. Though I certainly do not think that saying nothing or allowing anything would have been good alternatives, I suspect that we would have been wiser to have used the newly developing media to teach worldview analysis, Christian values, and discernment in entertainment. Since many churches did not take that route, the result seems to have been a disconnect between official church positions and the actual practice of its members. Since movies were declared taboo, these churches have not any basis on which to discuss individual productions or to use them critically in their educational endeavors. Their only choice was to condemn outright or remain silent. At this point in our cultural history I think that the “movie issue” is a lost cause. It would have happened sooner or later anyway, but the advent of the VCR and even more so the DVD has changed the cultural landscape forever on these issues. If we were to attempt consistency on these matters, we would have had to prohibit viewing TV/VCR/DVD/downloaded/streamed movies at home as well as the cinema. Except for totalitarian churches that attempt to legalistically regulate their members' lives, the cinema and VCR/DVDs have become a non-issue in almost all churches. I do not think we ought now to ride the pendulum to the opposite extreme and make such media a regular and

and/or influential ones that raise issues regarding our faith. *The Golden Compass* is an ideal example of such a film. A pastor would be wise, first, to evaluate the suitability of any given film for various age groups and various levels of maturity (both spiritually and more generally). We dare not depend on the industry ratings for this; their application of the various criteria is not a Christian one. Some things are obvious (i.e., I doubt any Christian should ever view an X-rated film), but others are more subjective.

In regard to *The Golden Compass*, I would suggest that it is inappropriate for younger children—and not necessarily because of the theology (most of which will blow right by them), but due to the content from a child’s point of view. A Catholic mother made this observation in her review: “My only objection to the film isn’t philosophical, it’s practical: The movie is pretty ... intense. There’s child abduction, cruelty, violence and a bear-on-bear battle that drew gasps from the audience I saw it with.”¹²³ Those are not suitable matters for children to confront, the treatment of children being the most unsuited.

At some point, however, this film, despite its atheistic storyline, *may* be a viable option for teens or adults, *if* it is not treated simply as entertainment, but is used in such a way as to generate discussion of the message and values in the film. I would not suggest that families allow this film as an entertainment option for their teens if they are not willing to talk about it at some length afterwards (and likely before as well). Some families will simply not do this, and in that case, I’d advise them against sending their teens off on their own. An alternative is to use this as a church-sponsored discussion in the teen ministry—with, of course, the parents’ permission. This could stimulate a productive discussion of a Christian worldview and values and also enable Christian teens to interact with their non-Christian friends who see the movie. The same could be quite productive in an adult setting (or a mixed teen-adult group). For those not interested in discussing the film’s message, I’d likely suggest that some less mature folks might find it unsuited and perhaps even unhelpful in their Christian growth. Others, however, who understand the sort of issues involved and are capable of their own Christian evaluation, may find it useful. In either instance, the pastor ought to provide enough reliable information that people can make a wise decision as to whether or not they see the movie. That should probably never be phrased in terms of a “ban,” for such pronouncements typically stimulate as many people to see it as it discourages—and those who do so in that scenario are often the ones most likely to be wrongly influenced by it!

I doubt that it would be wise to make a “movie discussion group” or a “film club” a regular, weekly (or even monthly) feature of a church’s ministry. There are relatively few films that warrant this sort of attention. Undue frequency is likely to degenerate into simply entertainment—and that should not be a priority for church ministry.

So, do I recommend that you see the movie or read the books? Perhaps. It *is* worth reading. Pullman is a good writer. If you want to understand his worldview and that of many like him, this is a good

routine part of our lifestyle. Speaking of pastors, we can, however, monitor the films that are having an impact on our people. What are they viewing? What message is being communicated? If we are cognizant of that, then we can selectively discuss key films (such as *The Golden Compass*) in such a way as to help our people grow in maturity and discernment. There are numerous web sites that enable a pastor to keep his finger on the pulse of such things by reading reviews from a Christian perspective of new movies.

¹²³ Mary Elizabeth Williams, “A Moral ‘Compass,’” 12/4/2007, <www.salon.com/ent/movies/feature/2007/12/04/compass/>, accessed 1/15/2008 (but not accessible 1/26/2008).

entrée into his world. It is the sort of book and movie combination that *will* have an impact on the people to whom you minister, especially if two more films are produced. It is more important to read the books than to see the movie at this point since the plot development in books two and three is so crucial to understanding where Pullman is going. Don't settle for just seeing the movie since it is an incomplete picture that will leave you with considerable misconceptions as to the nature of the issues.

One more thing I *do* recommend that you do. "Pray for Philip Pullman. Pray about the influence of his work. And pray for humility and wisdom in your own response. Pullman is just a man who, somewhere along the way, got a very bad impression of the church."¹²⁴ Too often we put people on our "hate list" and never think of them as real people who need our love, our compassion, and our God.

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