

The enemy church: Pullman's agenda in 'Compass' and beyond

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Philip Pullman, the British author of the fantasy trilogy *His Dark Materials*, is an avowed atheist who makes no attempt to disguise his distaste for religion and especially for Christianity. As one of his characters (the scientist and ex-nun Mary Malone) says, “The Christian religion is a very powerful and convincing mistake, that’s all.” In a 2001 interview he said, “I’m trying to undermine the basis of Christian belief.”

The film version of the first book in Pullman’s trilogy, *The Golden Compass* (published in the United Kingdom as *Northern Lights*), was released last month. The lead character in novel and film is Lyra Belacqua, a girl who roams from the rooftops and hidden tunnels of an Oxford-like university to the frozen northern wastes and through alternate worlds, trying to rescue children who have been captured by agents of the Church. At the hands of the Church, the children are being “intercised,” separated from their souls (what Pullman calls daemons) so they can be protected from Dust, fine particles that the Church regards as original sin. Lyra is helped by a talking armored bear, boat people called Gyptians, a Texan aeronaut balloonist and several wise witches. The first volume ends as Lyra and her father, Lord Asriel, cross a bridge into another world.

In volume two, *The Subtle Knife*, Lyra meets Will Parry, a 12-year-old who has traveled through a breach into the other-world city of Cittàgazze. Will is from a different, modern version of Oxford. Though severely wounded, he becomes the bearer of a magic knife that is able to make windows into other worlds. Lyra and Will try to find Will’s long-lost father, but Lyra is captured by her mother, Mrs. Coulter, who hides her from the Church to save her from an assassin sent to kill her lest she fulfill the prophecy of becoming the new Eve. Will is instructed by a pair of rebel angels to find Lyra’s father and give him the subtle knife for his war against the armies of the Church. As war heats up between the Authority (God) and his brutal

army and Lord Asriel's force of rebel angels and witches, Will refuses to bring the knife to aid Lord Asriel until he finds Lyra.

The third volume, *The Amber Spyglass*, follows Will and the rescued Lyra into the world of the dead, where they ultimately release the souls of everyone who has ever lived from the Land of the Dead, to which the Authority has sent them (his promise of heaven was a lie). Meanwhile, traveling to the strange land of creatures called Mulefa, Lyra's mentor Mary Malone discovers Dust and its true connection to consciousness and environmental well-being. The war in heaven comes to a climax with the pitiable death of God (the original angel to emerge from matter into consciousness) and his usurping regent, Metatron. The series ends with Will and Lyra falling in love but forced to go their separate ways to fulfill their destinies in their own worlds.

As this account may suggest, Pullman's depiction of Christianity is reductive. For him, the Church embodies anti-human forces. The Church's Magisterium and its Consistorial Court of Discipline are reminiscent of the Inquisition. This is not, in short, the church that produced St. Francis, Julian of Norwich, Oscar Romero and Mother Teresa. Pullman's version of Christianity is a fairly common straw man: the oppressiveness of organized religion.

Yet when Mary Malone says that "the Christian religion is a very powerful and convincing mistake," she has not stopped believing in the power of good and evil. She remains a compassionate, selfless servant to others. Like J. R. R. Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings*, the Harry Potter novels and C. S. Lewis's Narnia Chronicles, Pullman's novels contain archetypal themes: the loss of innocence, the journey-quest, loyalty and the struggle against evil. In the end Lyra serves as a prophet, even a Christ figure, who harrows the Land of the Dead to free hapless souls.

Near the end of *The Amber Spyglass*, Lyra articulates her alternative religion: "No one can build the Republic of Heaven if they put themselves first. We have to be all those difficult things like cheerful and kind and curious and patient, and we've got to study and think and work hard, all of us, in all our different worlds." The values that the main characters embody—love, kindness, justice, loyalty, hope—are consistent with Christian virtues. Lyra herself is the embodiment of these virtues, with a feisty overlay of adolescent rebellion tossed in.

A major voice of the atheological themes in the novels is the witch-queen Serafina Pekkala. In her view—a classically Romantic one—human beings are fundamentally good and should be free to grow and develop in knowledge and wisdom. How or why they are good is a question she leaves unexplored. Various authorities, especially organized religions, seek to control and ultimately kill all that is good in human life. The Authority thinks that human beings have become dangerously independent. All of human history, observes Serafina, has been “a struggle between wisdom and stupidity.” The trilogy’s rebel angels and her witches have been the followers of wisdom (Sophia), she tells Mary Malone, and “have always tried to open minds; the Authority and his churches have always tried to keep them closed.”

While the novels are moral, they are not particularly morally complex. The agents of the Church are all cruel, vengeful, violent and vicious. The Church has spies in every world, a veritable Gestapo combing the land for heresy and rebellion. Its God, the Authority, hates Lyra. A Church-commissioned assassin, Father Gomez, has done “preemptive penance” for a sin not yet committed and is therefore granted “absolution in advance” for stalking and killing Lyra.

While Pullman claims to have a different worldview from that of Tolkien or Lewis, his evil Church is akin to Tolkien’s Mordor and the evil Sauron and to Lewis’s White Witch of Narnia. Without bad guys (often cast in a quasi-religious guise) to combat, what’s the point of the hero’s journey?

If the Church depicted in the *Magisterium* is not the Christian church, likewise the god who dies in the third novel of the trilogy is not God. While Pullman’s god holds some of the names of the biblical God, the virtues that most Christians think derive from God are embodied in the Authority’s enemies.

When we finally see the Authority up close in Book III, he has grown so old and decrepit that he is powerless and has to be carried about on a crystal litter. This wasted and demented “ancient of days” pitiably dies in a cold wind when rescued from his crystal cell by Lyra and Will, “blinking in wonder [with] a sigh of the most profound and exhausted relief.” This is an amusing postmodern portrayal of Death of God theology, perhaps, but finally it’s the death of a false god.

The most morally complex characters in the novels are Lord Asriel and Mrs. Coulter. For most of the trilogy these two (they became Lyra’s parents during a long-ago love affair) are a mixture of malevolence and righteous crusade. Mrs. Coulter is at times

on the side of the Magisterium. Lord Asriel is a rebel against the power of the Magisterium but is ruthless in his opposition. Yet by series end, both Lord Asriel and Mrs. Coulter sacrifice themselves for the higher good by pulling Metatron (the real power behind the Authority) into the abyss. These two characters represent the mixture of evil and good in human beings but also, in their love for Lyra and their sacrificial acts, a powerful symbol of redemption and transformation in the face of evil.

It might seem odd to say that Pullman has a doctrine of salvation, but he clearly thinks that people need saving from some things and saving for others. Key to his scheme is Dust. According to the Magisterium, Dust is “the physical evidence for original sin.” For the good guys in the story, however, Dust represents the elemental force of consciousness. It is reminiscent of the “spermatic logos” in Stoicism, the fine particles of universal reason that are the life-force in all things. The seeds of this logos reside in humans as the power of reason—something of the divine, cosmic order in everyone, akin, perhaps, to the Quakers’ inward light. Pullman gives Dust a quasi-religious meaning, saying it is “a mysterious force” and “a visual analog” of the good.

Dust is what the Church is trying to destroy (because it thinks it is sin), while all the good characters in the books conspire to save the world from the Church and to preserve this Dust of life. Lyra and Will, Mary Malone, the bears, the witches and rebel angels—in the end, even Lord Asriel and Mrs. Coulter—all sacrifice to save human beings by helping to reverse the flow of Dust out of the universe. They give up themselves so that humans can be redeemed from the great harm the Church is doing to humanity and to all life. Lyra and Will leave their souls behind and journey to the terrible Land of the Dead. There, through much hardship, they lead the dead to liberation or salvation so these souls can rejoin the elements of the world of the living. Lyra, like Christ, brings about the death of death, fulfilling the prophecy about her.

These books are a gripping account of a story that is familiar in our culture: organized religion is bad and dangerous, self-reliance and heroic work are good and redemptive. For many readers, this story will ring true. Many other readers will realize that Pullman’s God is not the God of the Bible, who “abounds in steadfast love” and insists on justice for the poor. These are not reasons to censor or shun Pullman’s powerful, enjoyable and imaginatively rich series, but they are reasons to argue with it.