



Pullman's Progress

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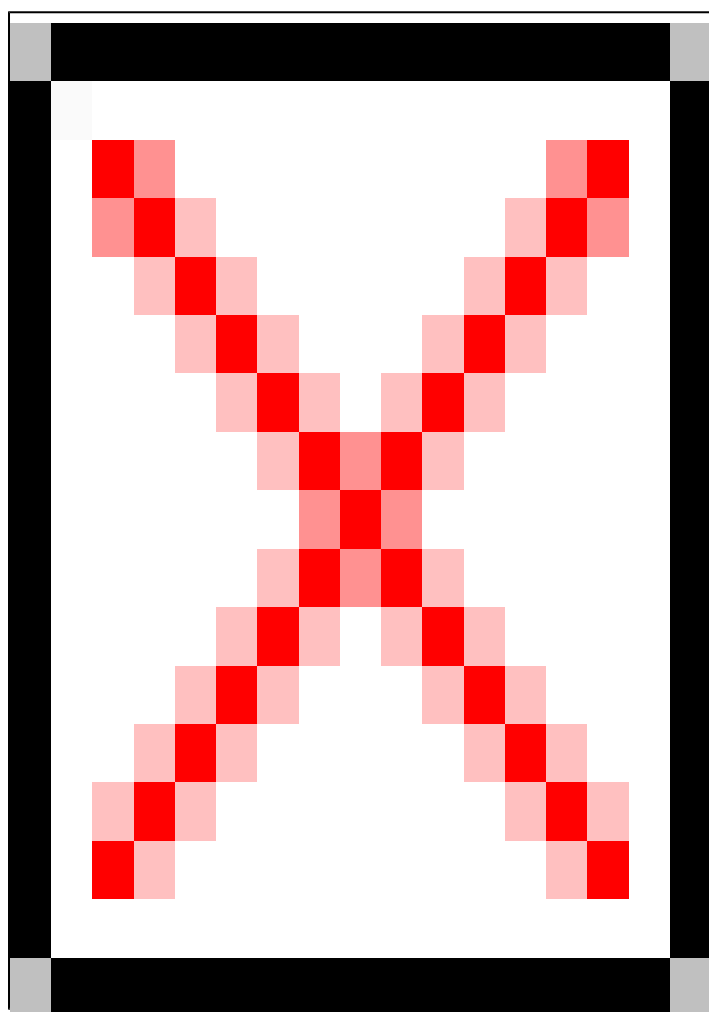
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Nicholas Tucker discusses Pullman's views on religion.



Philip Pullman's latest book, **The Good Man Jesus and the Scoundrel Christ**, is a retelling of the story of Jesus. It is not a children's book but it does investigate further the critique of organised religion and clerical cover-ups that Pullman first explored in *His Dark Materials* with its unflattering portrait of god. Pullman apparently decided to write it when asked by the Archbishop of Canterbury Rowan Williams, why having tackled god, he had neglected to write about Jesus. **Nicholas Tucker** discusses Pullman's approach.

Philip Pullman's **The Good Man Jesus and the Scoundrel Christ**, published earlier this year, received respectful rather than ecstatic reviews. Those expecting something in the same vein as his superb trilogy *His Dark Materials* may have been particularly disappointed, given that **TGMJ**, for the sake of brevity, sometimes reads like an extended theological dialogue. But it was never planned as a follow-up to the actual trilogy. This will occur when Pullman's long promised fourth volume, **The Book of Dust**, finally gets finished and published. While there may be no queues at

bookshops when this happens, with the disappointing box office take-up of the film version of **The Golden Compass** failing to provide the additional publicity boost enjoyed by J K Rowling and Stephenie Meyer for their best-selling novels, it remains a widely anticipated event for Pullman's considerable body of existing fans here and abroad.

TGMJ largely rewrites the story of the New Testament, with Mary now giving birth to twins, one named Jesus and the other Christ. Jesus is both the favourite and the most extravert of the two, becoming a mesmerising itinerant preacher once adult. Christ is a quieter, more secretive character, who early on reckons that his brother could one day found a hugely successful church. But when he suggests that it would be a good idea to concoct some miracles by way of spreading his fame even wider and so speeding up the day when this brand new religion could really take off, his brother rejects the idea with contempt.

'God will bring about his Kingdom in his own way and when he chooses,' he replies. 'Do you think your mighty organisation would ever recognise the Kingdom if it arrived? Fool! The Kingdom of God would come into those magnificent courts and palaces like a poor traveller with dust on its feet. The guards would spot him at once, ask for his papers, beat him, throw him out into the street. 'Be on your way,' they'd say, 'you have no business here.''

Crowd-pleasing falsehoods

In 'His Dark Materials' Pullman says a number of negative things about organised religion in general and God in particular. But he writes nothing about Jesus himself, and to that extent **TGMJ** does take the main anti-religious theme of his trilogy on a further step. For in this latest version, Jesus once dead becomes yet another casualty of a clerical cover-up. His life story is cunningly re-crafted by his brother Christ in a series of scrolls mixing truth and the type of crowd-pleasing falsehoods needed for a religion to capture the popular imagination. Christ is helped here by his natural talents for Public Relations and also by regular encounters with a smooth-tongued stranger identified as an angel, though whether good or fallen is an open question. Which is better, he had asked Christ, 'to aim for absolute purity and fail altogether, or to compromise and succeed a little?' Christ opts for the second choice. So when he hears Jesus on the eve of his arrest publicly denying the existence of God after failing yet again to get any clear messages from on high, Christ takes on the role of Judas. Betraying his brother to the authorities before he can do any more damage to the faithful, Christ then impersonates him in what came to be thought of as the resurrection. The myth is now ready to run, with Christ now busy putting it all into written form.

But he is never easy in his mind, knowing that before his death Jesus foresaw that any church founded in his name would inevitably become an instrument for evil and oppression. As he put it to Christ, 'as soon as men who believe they're doing God's will get hold of power, whether it's in a household or a village or in Jerusalem or in Rome itself, the devil enters into them. It isn't long before they start drawing up lists of punishments for all kinds of innocent activities, sentencing people to be flogged or stoned in the name of God for wearing this or eating that or believing the other. And the privileged ones will build great palaces and temples to strut around in, and levy taxes on the poor for pay for their luxuries.'

The new Republic of Heaven

At the end of 'His Dark Materials' Lyra looks forward to leaving behind this sort of false religion in favour of the establishment one day of what she gets to call the new Republic of Heaven. Within this, the good angel Xaphania assures her, she and her beloved Will can 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.' There are no details about how such a society would be governed, however, or whether this type of free society could or would come about within this particular fictional framework.

The angel in **TGMJ** has a different view of what most people are capable of. For him, 'in daily life people are tempted by comfort and peace; they are a little lazy, a little greedy, a little cowardly, a little lustful, a little vain, a little irritable, a little envious. They are not good for much, but we have to deal with them as they are.' No wonder he believes that for any real good to come about it is necessary to have an all-powerful church in charge, even if it means distorting its founder's main message at every stage.

?His Dark Materials? can be read as a retrospective endorsement of all the misgiving felt by Jesus in **TGMJ** about the dangers of institutional as opposed to personal religion. Pullman has been criticised for ignoring the more positive side of organised Christianity, with no mention of the church?s role in encouraging art and scholarship in his trilogy, let alone the fine examples set by conspicuously good individual Christians at any stage of history. In **TGMJ** he half meets this argument, with the angel talking about ?the desire for beauty and music? while promising that the new church ?will inspire all these things, and provide them in full measure?. But on the whole Pullman sticks to his previous anti-clerical mode in this new book, following Blake?s famous exhortation to ?Damn braces. Bless relaxes.? As a humanist as well as an atheist, he is sure that people are better than they have been told they are by their priests over the centuries.

In his public life since writing ?His Dark Materials? Pullman has been both vocal and effective in putting this belief in the positive powers of the individual into action. He has publicly attacked the National Curriculum for the crippling effect it was having when it came to its rigid prescriptions on not just what exactly should be taught in English lessons in the classroom but also how. He also spear-headed the successful revolt against the government?s over-anxious and insulting ordinance that every writer visiting schools should first be security checked for any evidence of sexual deviance.

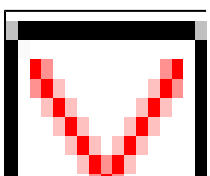
His feelings about some of the potential dangers that followed in the wake of institutionalised Christianity recently found a cautious echo in Professor Diarmaid MacCulloch?s much praised television series **A History of Christianity**, also available in book form. As MacCulloch points out, the development of Christianity in the East, where for many years it was not taken up by the temporal powers, was a far more openly spiritual process, focusing largely upon the inspiring examples set by individual saints and monasteries. But once political power and religion came together, as they increasingly did in the West, then some of the very abuses Pullman fulminates against did indeed take place, to the lasting shame of all concerned.

But while Pullman makes a good case against religious excesses, is he over-optimistic about the human capacity to live together in justice and harmony in a world dedicated only to individual intellectual and emotional freedom? In his Sally Lockhart novels set in late nineteenth-century London, it is humans rather than the church who pay workers starvation wages and rent them houses not fit for animals. His Jewish Socialist hero Daniel Goldberg argues for more controls, not fewer, and it is hard to imagine Pullman approving of any modern right wing government?s insistence on getting rid of various public bodies there to improve living standards. Is this a case, then, of a writer eager to condemn the abuse of power by others while approving of the sort of powers he would wish any state to retain for what he sees as the good of everyone? But what if one person?s powers turned out to be another person?s poison?

This question would matter more if Pullman were writing political treatises rather than brilliant novels. But like many other fine authors he is in his imagination a born anarchist, forever talking up the cause of the individual against the state and on the side of the rebel rather than the ruler. This scenario always has the potential to make for gripping stories as readers and fictional hero meet in the imagination, fighting their battles together. Writing about heroic authority figures is a far harder task, with a notable absence of any inspiring stories featuring local government officials, committees or indeed parliamentarians. And if there are some occasional inconsistencies in this approach, who cares so long as the stories themselves continue to work?

Pullman is also an optimist at a time when teenage literature is leaning heavily towards ever more descriptions of a sick present and a dismal future. Telling readers that they and indeed the whole of the human race could do so much better freed from a sense of sin is surely a message that also deserves to be heard. In **TGMJ** Christ ends up bitterly divided against himself, half proud of the story he has created about his brother and half ashamed at the deceit involved. Pullman deserves to feel very much more positive about his own literary achievements than that.

Nicholas Tucker is honorary senior lecturer in Cultural and Community Studies at Sussex University.



6) at £14.99 hbk. The paperback (978 0 85786 007 1) is available in October at £10.99. ?His Dark Materials? (**Northern Lights, The Subtle Knife, The Amber Spyglass**) is published by Scholastic.

[Philip Pullman?s Authorgraph](#) [3] in BfK 102 January 1997

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