Shedding Light on
HIS DARK MATERIALS

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To all who seek liberation
from the tyrant of self.

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Introduction

As one madly in love with the writings of J. R. R. Tolkien and C. S. Lewis, I suppose I had no choice in the matter. Upon hearing of Philip Pullman's *His Dark Materials* series, I knew it would join *The Lord of the Rings* and *The Chronicles of Narnia* on my list of mandatory reading. I hoped to discover yet another writer capable of immersing my imagination in spiritual themes by whisking me off to other worlds. As our earlier Finding God books have shown, fairy stories carry us away to places our more sensible inclinations might avoid. In the process, we are caught off guard by truths we've known our entire lives—even to the point of boredom—with an infusion of surprise and wonder.

As I read Pullman's series, I was not disappointed. He clearly has the gift and knows how to weave spiritual themes into the fabric of a well-told tale. And yet I don't remember when an author's work has left me more disturbed.

Like his fantasy-genre predecessors Tolkien and Lewis, Philip Pullman lives in Oxford, England. Although he has never achieved the scholarly merits or academic status of either man, he did teach part-time for several years at Oxford's Westminster College before dedicating himself to writing full-time. So while only on the fringe of the academy, Pullman's imagination has flourished in the city many consider the capital of fantasy literature. And it shows. His

brilliant craftsmanship betrays a love for some of the most influential British authors of all time.

Like the men who gave us Bilbo Baggins and Queen Lucy, Pullman has written books that have sold millions and millions of copies. In fact, they have emerged as one of the most widely read fantasy series produced in the past decade, trailing only Harry Potter in popularity among adolescent readers. Pullman's books are so popular, in fact, that New Line Cinema chose *His Dark Materials* as its first major fantasy film series to follow Peter Jackson's blockbuster trilogy *The Lord of the Rings*.

Similar to the writings of Tolkien and Lewis, *His Dark Materials* is carried along by profoundly spiritual undercurrents that, at times, overpower plot and character. It would be difficult to read his series without tripping over Pullman's overtly religious agenda, which, in my mind, was where the similarities between Pullman and his famous Oxford ancestors end and my concern over his growing influence began.

As we examined in *Finding God in The Lord of the Rings* and *Finding God in The Hobbit*, J. R. R. Tolkien's Middle-earth is a world that bubbles up from solidly Christian theology. Masterfully subtle in his approach, Tolkien pioneered a genre of literature that allows the author to carry readers on to a stage where themes such as good over evil and heroic self-sacrifice can be encountered. By no means trite or cute, the world of Tolkien contains disturbing images and oppressive shad-

ows. But in the end, light breaks through in what he called "eucatastrophe," thrilling our hearts as the bright surprise of redemption overtakes the ominous cloud of darkness. Millions of readers have enjoyed themes rooted in Tolkien's Christian faith, though most of them have no idea of the true source of their pleasure.

C. S. Lewis also used fairy stories to help readers encounter God, most notably in his seven *Chronicles of Narnia* tales. Inspired by the writings of his predecessor George MacDonald and influenced by his love of ancient mythology, Lewis used an approach similar to Tolkien's—though much more overt. While the Narnia stories are not allegory, they do grow out of a central supposition. *Suppose* there existed another world, peopled by animals rather than human beings. *Suppose* that world fell, like ours, and had in it someone who was the equivalent of Christ. Aslan entered Narnia in the form of a lion just as Jesus came into this world in the form of a man.

Based upon this notion, Lewis created a fantasy world that depicts the central theme of our real world—redemption through the incarnate God's death and resurrection. As we explained in *Finding God in the Land of Narnia*, the magical part is that this mythical Christ somehow draws us closer to the Real Christ. Why? Because, as Lewis would say, a fantasy tale has none of the "stained glass and Sunday school associations" that diminish one's sense of wonder.

So Philip Pullman stands in good company in using the

genre of fantasy literature to carry spiritual themes. His inventive brilliance rivals that of J. R. R. Tolkien and J. K. Rowling, who are also master storytellers and creators of other worlds. Why, then, did I find his series so disturbing? Because, unlike Tolkien's works of Christian imagination or Rowling's relatively innocent fun, many of Pullman's spiritual undercurrents run in direct opposition to the God of Christianity.

Some have gone so far as to call Pullman "the most dangerous author in Britain"[1] because his trilogy presents a universe in which rebellion against a tyrannical "Authority" is encouraged, the church is depicted as an oppressive institution that suppresses truth and freedom, and "his dark materials" (a concept borrowed from Milton's *Paradise Lost,* regarding Satan's rebellion) open our eyes to the "truth" that we came into existence out of our own energy rather than being created by some illegitimate, decrepit deity.

Despite Pullman's obvious vitriol against the orthodox Christian faith, however, some believers find themselves agreeing with many of his characterizations and attacks against the organized church. In some ways, the "God" he seeks to murder deserves to die. The question we must ask, however, is whether his plot ultimately targets Jehovah Himself.

If it does, what are we to make of the hints of a familiar moral center within the series? For, as we will explore throughout this book, Pullman can't entirely get away from

a spirituality he seems eager to escape, due to a "spiritual impulse" he both acknowledges and shares.

> The religious impulse [is one] which I would characterize as the impulse to feel awe, wonder, a sense of mystery, a sense of delight in being alive, and in being a part of this great, extraordinary universe. That I can't gainsay and I wouldn't gainsay because that's something that I feel myself. It's a very important part of what makes us human beings; this sense of wonder and delight and mystery.[2]

Truer words have never been spoken. Our sense of wonder, delight, and mystery attest to our humanity—the very part of us most connected to God because it reflects His image—*Imago Dei*. That's why Pullman's "spiritual impulse" has compelled him to offer unwitting tribute to the very God his work intended to attack.

A person only casts a shadow when standing near the lamp. Pullman may have turned his back to the light, choosing to see only the extended form of his own dark shadow. But the story he tells strongly suggests the existence of an illuminating bulb we Christians know as the light of the world. A light, says the apostle John, that "shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it" (John 1:4-5, ESV).

One reason Jim and I chose to write this book is to help

parents navigate the *His Dark Materials* cultural buzz certain to engulf their children when the stories make it to the big screen. As with the Harry Potter phenomenon, nearly every child will likely want to devour these books as the stories' characters hit movie screens and Happy Meals. Moms and dads need to understand the initially latent but eventually overt attacks against the foundations of Christian belief beneath the core story line. To that end, we hope this brief overview proves helpful.

But we also intend to treat Pullman's series with the respect it deserves as well-crafted art containing much beauty. Our book tries to help readers reflect on rather than replace experiencing Pullman's own works. To this end, we begin each essay with an imaginative paraphrasing of a scene from *His Dark Materials,* followed by our thoughts on its significance to the underlying spiritual themes of the series. We consider not just Pullman's troubling agenda, but the often inspiring inference of an imagination engulfed by the very light it can't bring itself to face. An imagination that touches truths the author himself might wish to reject.

In that spirit, we invite you to join us as we seek to discover the light behind the shadows cast in *His Dark Materials*.

Kurt Bruner

"And that city in the air. Is it another world?"

—*The Golden Compass*, Chapter 2, "The Idea of North"

OTHER WORLDS

Lyra's anxiety rose as her view from the wardrobe became obstructed. The Master, arriving late for the meeting, blocked the otherwise perfect view she'd created by leaving the doors slightly ajar. Fortunately, he moved away from the gap before calling his fellow scholars to attention. The time had come for Lord Asriel's presentation.

The room had been off-limits to children, especially girls. But to Lyra it was just another forbidden corner of the university campus to explore. When she'd heard approaching footsteps, she'd decided to hide in the wardrobe and spy. As Lyra pushed the collection of soft and prickly coats aside, she had no idea that her latest adventure would pull her into worlds she didn't know existed.

So far, no one seemed aware of her hidden attendance. No one, that is, except for Lord Asriel. But Lyra had saved his life moments earlier by alerting him to the poison in his drink, so he welcomed her nosy alliance as he presented his most recent findings to his academic benefactors, at least one of whom wanted him dead. Lyra sat stealthily watching and listening, hoping to pick up unwitting confessions from the whispered conversations of those seated near the wardrobe. Like her own, each of their daemons seemed to betray feelings of intimidation and jealousy at Asriel's dominating presence. Clearly, he was a very important and powerful man.

As part of his talk, Lord Asriel showed several slides. And what mysterious slides they were; photogramic images like none Lyra or anyone else in the room had ever seen.

The first slide showed a snow-covered hut on the distant horizon surrounded by various philosophical instruments, complete with aerials, wires, and insulators. In the foreground stood a man clad in heavy furs to protect him from a harsh, arctic cold. Beside the man stood a smaller figure, perhaps a child.

As he prepared to show the second slide, Lord Asriel explained that this image of the same scene had been taken one minute later with a specially prepared emulsion.

The image changed drastically, the man now bathed in a brilliant light.

His hand was raised, and glowing particles seemed to flow from his fingers.

"What is that light?" asked the Chaplain.

But it wasn't light. As Lord Asriel's punch line clarified, "It is Dust."

A sudden and ominous silence immediately overtook the room, and Lyra sensed that he meant something more significant than ordinary dust with a small *d*. Moments later the room filled with exclamations of surprise.

Lord Asriel replaced the slide with another, also taken at night, containing a small group of tents and travel gear resting beneath the Aurora, or Northern Lights.

Again, Asriel replaced the traditional slide with one containing the same scene moments later using his special photogram technique—revealing an even more mysterious and troubling image.

Peering more intently through the tiny gap, Lyra could see within the illumined sky the unmistakable outline of buildings, towers, and streets. A city! Suppressing a gasp of wonder, she listened to equally amazed reactions from beyond the wardrobe doors.

All of the Scholars noticed the city. It couldn't be missed. Some seemed to show a reserved giddiness, as if they were seeing a living, breathing specimen of a creature long assumed merely mythical. Others reacted with skepticism, even disapproval.

The conversation continued, but Lyra understood very little. She drifted off to sleep and was awakened by Lord Asriel after the others had departed. She could hardly contain her excitement, eager to discover more about what she had heard. But Lord Asriel seemed uninterested in expanding her education, ordering her to keep what she knew to herself and announcing he would be leaving shortly to go back to the North and continue his work.

Despite his pronouncements that he would go alone, Lyra begged to join him. "I want to find out about Dust. And that city in the air. Is it another world?"

* * * * *

Who among us hasn't longed for a chance to explore other worlds? As babies, our sense of wonder and curiosity kept our anxious mothers on their toes as we crawled toward whatever room remained uncharted. Lacking the developmental sophistication to do anything else, we popped most of the objects we discovered into our mouths in an attempt to taste our way to understanding. Every stairway, every table, every closet, and every container afforded an entirely new realm of learning.

The older we got, the further we traveled to scratch the itch for adventure. Human history includes a long tradition of exploration as we've edged our way further away from the tiresome and familiar to places where, in the words of *Star*

Trek's Captain Kirk, "no man has gone before." We've pushed the boundaries to find something new, something more. We risk life and limb to climb Mount Everest and build gigantic Apollo missiles to carry us to the moon. Our robots touch the bed of the Atlantic Ocean and analyze the floor of Mars.

And while our diligence and technology provide the leverage, they would be useless on our quest of discovery without that which gives them focus and purpose; something at the core of what it means to be human: imagination. Children pretended to be space travelers long before engineers designed the first rocket. Neil Armstrong's "giant leap" owes more to imagination than to science. The latter merely built what the former conceived.

Nothing has motivated our imaginings more than the desire for other worlds, be they around the corner, part of a mythical history, or through a wardrobe door. Few of us will ever have a chance to climb the world's tallest mountain or board NASA's next spacecraft. But millions of us can travel to new worlds through the power of the pen in the hand of great writers.

One of the greatest, J. R. R. Tolkien, wrote an essay describing the purpose and power of fantasy stories, a literary genre he introduced to twentieth-century readers—opening the door and creating an audience for those who would follow in his footsteps, including Philip Pullman.

"Fantasy is a natural human activity," wrote Tolkien. "It certainly does not destroy or even insult Reason; and it does not either blunt the appetite for, nor obscure the perception of, scientific verity. On the contrary. The keener and the clearer is the reason, the better fantasy will it make."[1]

Imagination is not the enemy of reason, but its lover. Both represent uniquely human capacities, gifts that allow us to discover realities beyond the obvious and mundane. "For creative Fantasy is founded upon the hard recognition that things are so in the world as it appears under the sun; on a recognition of fact, but not a slavery to it."[2]

So while reason enables us to calculate, decipher, and apply logic, imagination lets us conceive, explore, and invent.

Philip Pullman proves himself a master when it comes to conceiving other worlds worthy of the reader's exploration. Like genre predecessors Tolkien, Lewis, Madeleine L'Engle, and others, he seems a student of ancient poets who created mythical realms and heroic characters. But Pullman does something new. While he joins a great tradition of whisking readers off to imaginary lands filled with witches, daemons, angels, and other supernatural beings, Pullman's worlds also draw inspiration from cutting-edge scientific theory.

Throughout the three books, characters refer to a heretical doctrine suggesting the existence of many worlds. "Is this the Barnard-Stokes business?" a member of the Jordan College faculty asked Lord Asriel while looking at an inexplicable

city in the sky. Everyone in the room knew what he meant. So can we.

The concept is based upon the Many-Worlds Interpretation of quantum mechanics. In layman's terms, it suggests that there are myriad worlds in the universe in addition to the one we know. In particular, every time something with potentially different outcomes occurs—such as a coin toss—one possibility becomes the reality in our world, while the other carries forward in another. In fact, Lord Asriel uses this very illustration to explain his research.

> Take the example of tossing a coin: it can come down heads or tails, and we don't know before it lands which way it's going to fall. If it comes down heads, that means that the possibility of its coming down tails has collapsed. Until that moment the two possibilities were equal.
>
> But on another world, it does come down tails. And when that happens, the two worlds split apart.[3]

So Lyra's world, while much like our own, contains traces of coins landing on the opposite side; for the most part, these are slight variations rather than fundamental differences. We have jet planes with pilots. In her world, air travel is in balloons navigated by aeronauts. Our Oxford has Queens College. Lyra's has Jordan College. We take pictures. They

take photograms. And unlike our pictures, theirs never move. No wonder Lyra finds Will's local cinema a wonder.

While traveling from one world to the next with Lyra and the rest of Pullman's characters, readers experience a delicious combination of two rarely mixed ingredients—the wonder of fantasy and the mystery of science. In the process, however, Pullman comes close to diminishing some of the magic that more traditional fantasy literature engenders. That may be due to an internal tension every writer must resolve.

In his essay "Sometimes Fairy Stories May Say Best What's to Be Said," C. S. Lewis describes the conflict between a writer's "Author" and his "Man." The Author, driven by an unscratched itch and a desire to discover what might be, allows his story to unfold on its own momentum, unfettered by the practical, the profound, or the preferred. The Man, on the other hand, stands firmly grounded in the real world and his own philosophical predispositions, critical of the Author's work when it defies either. Subconsciously, the Man meddles with the Author's craft—turning a story that should affirm the soul's quest into something that forces an agenda. Good writers master both extremes, finding ways to allow both Author and Man to play their parts effectively. Fanciful stories lacking consistency won't ring true, but didactic sermons don't please the soul either.

His Dark Materials shows signs of this all-too-common tension. The world Pullman creates seems to vacillate between

a latent desire for the God of Christianity and hostile criticism of the same. As subsequent chapters will show, the Man's philosophical agenda repeatedly spills onto the pages of the Author's work, leaving periodic stain marks on the dialogue of characters and on what becomes an upended moral center.

Tolkien warned of this possibility, suggesting fantasy "can, of course, be carried to excess. It can be ill done. It can be put to evil uses. It may even delude the minds out of which it came."[4]

On the whole, however, Pullman follows the best tradition of fantasy writers by satisfying his readers' yearning for the wonder of other worlds—worlds that allow us to explore new possibilities, encounter new creatures, and taste the mystery of what it means to be fully human. After all, since we were made in the image of the Creator, we are never more human than when we create.

LIGHT

Wonders of the imagination connect
us to the wonder of being human.

Endnotes

1. Videotaped interview with Philip Pullman featured on Stagework.org © 2006/07 The Royal National Theatre. All rights reserved. Video last accessed 4/4/07 at http://www.stagework.org.uk/webdav/servlet/harmonise?Page/@id=6005&Session/@id=D_Ntrh0ktwfPStOA6CPrLq&Section/@id=62
2. Ibid.

Chapter 1: Other Worlds

The authors' imaginative adaptation to begin the chapter is based on pages 16–26 of The Golden Compass.

1. J. R. R. Tolkien, *The Tolkien Reader,* ed. Christopher Tolkien (New York: Ballantine Books, 1966), 74–75.
2. Ibid.
3. Philip Pullman, *The Golden Compass* (New York: Dell-Laurel Leaf, an imprint of Random House Children's Books, a division of Random House, Inc., 1995), 330.
4. Tolkien, *Tolkien Reader,* 74–75.

Chapter 2: Daemons

The authors' imaginative adaptation to begin the chapter is based on pages 146–147 of The Golden Compass.

1. Tony Watkins, *Dark Matter: Shedding Light on Philip Pullman's*

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