

DEAD GODS AND REBEL ANGELS: RELIGION AND POWER IN PHILIP PULLMAN'S *HIS DARK MATERIALS* AND HAL DUNCAN'S *THE BOOK OF ALL HOURS*

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Given the publicity surrounding the release of the movie version of *The Golden Compass*, it is fair to assume that most members of the public are now aware that Philip Pullman's *His Dark Materials* trilogy¹ contains "anti-religious themes," though the majority of people are probably unaware of precisely what these comprise. This fact, particularly when brought together with the intellectual and literary credibility that Pullman's books have acquired,² makes *His Dark Materials* an important object of Christian academic research. By contrast, Hal Duncan's *The Book of All Hours*³ has largely remained a cult phenomenon and is unlikely ever to attain the kind of popular significance of Pullman's work; consequently, it could easily pass under the radar of both Church and Academy. It is, however, a stimulating and intriguing piece of work and provides a valuable conversation partner to *His Dark Materials*. Bringing these works together, and making our own contribution as a third voice within this conversation, allows us to move into more fruitful reflection upon the themes of religion and power that are found in both works than would be possible by engaging with either on its own. It is a natural move to bring *His Dark Materials* and *The Book of All Hours* into such an intertextual conversation for they share a great deal of source material, imagery, and thematic direction: both draw upon biblical story and ancient mythology, particularly that of the Jewish Enochic works; both revolve around conflict between angelic forces and include some narrative of the death of God/Yahweh, the oppressive rule of Enoch/Metatron, and the establishment of a Republic of Heaven; both assume multiple parallel universes; both reflect on the nature of power structures and individual freedom. The common ground and similarities, however, serve to throw into sharper relief the differences between the works. As will be made clear in what

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1. The trilogy includes *Northern Lights* (London: Scholastic, 1995; US title: *The Golden Compass*), *The Subtle Knife* (London: Scholastic, 1997), and *The Amber Spyglass* (London: Scholastic, 2000). The books have been published internationally and have been released in multiple editions. The page numbers in this article refer to the original Scholastic imprints.

2. The third book of the trilogy, *The Amber Spyglass*, won the Whitbread prize, the first "children's" novel to do so.

3. Comprising *Vellum: The Book of All Hours 1* (London: Macmillan, 2005), and *Ink: The Book of All Hours 2* (London: Macmillan, 2006). The page numbers in this article refer to the first paperback edition of *Vellum* and the hardback version of *Ink*.

follows, Pullman's story is woven around what is essentially an Enlightenment understanding of power and oppression: reason and intellect are the keys to individual and social freedom and their great enemy is the superstition perpetuated by the Church to maintain its control over people's lives. Duncan's story, by contrast, is woven around a much more postmodern understanding of power play: people tyrannize people, and religion is simply one of a range of realities that may be subverted to maintain power; others include sexuality and reason itself. Religion, in this scheme, is not the ultimate *cause* of the problem, but it remains a serious and significant *part* of the problem.

In what follows, then, I will discuss the key themes that are developed by Pullman before turning to examine the contrasting development of similar themes in Duncan's *The Book of All Hours*. Once this is done, I will offer a Christian "hearing" of the two works that will reflect on the concerns that each raises about Christianity and speak to them from within the Christian tradition.

1. *Philip Pullman, His Dark Materials*

It is helpful to begin by asking whether Pullman's *His Dark Materials* should be described as polemical. Is it a deliberate attack on Christianity or just the work of a storyteller whose tale is preoccupied by religious themes? The author himself has repeatedly denied that he is engaging in polemics;⁴ to engage in a serious polemic against Christianity, or religion generally, would perhaps require Pullman to produce the kind of work associated with Richard Dawkins, or to tell a tale that attacks the intellectual foundations of Christianity. Consequently, it is perhaps better to see Pullman as telling a story that reflects his own perception of religion.⁵ This does not mean that *His Dark Materials* is any less devastating as a critique of religion—in fact, as an imaginative narrative, it has the potential to be far more devastating than any logical argument—but it does mean that we will engage with and assess it differently. As an imaginative narrative, we will expect it to have an emotive as much as an intellectual force and we will not demand that its component parts fit together into a tightly structured logic. Crucially, though, we will see the narrative as reflecting what Pullman sees as disturbing about religion in reality.⁶ Thus, despite my caution in describing *His Dark Materials* as polemical, in what follows I

4. See Tony Watkins, *Dark Matter: A Thinking Fan's Guide to Philip Pullman* (Southampton: Damaris, 2004), 21–3.

5. Pullman nicely comments, "I'm not in the message business; I'm in the 'Once upon a time' business." www.philip-pullman.com/about_the_books.asp.

6. Despite this, I will largely avoid biographical literature about Pullman, except where it is unavoidably pertinent. Those interested will appreciate Nicholas Tucker, *Darkness Visible: Inside the World of Philip Pullman* (Cambridge: Wizard, 2003).

will at times use the vocabulary of polemic and critique, for it is surely the case that Pullman wants people to reflect upon his concerns about religion.

In what follows, I will isolate three main threads in Pullman's presentation of religion: the depiction of the Church, the portrayal of Yahweh and Metatron, and the issue of religious hypocrisy. I am not suggesting that a discussion of the polemical significance of these elements will exhaust their literary function, nor that such a discussion will cover all of the arguably polemical dimensions of the trilogy. It does seem to me, however, that these elements lie at the heart of Pullman's critique of Christianity and that understanding their development is essential to an appreciation of the work as a whole. After noting these three threads, I will go on to examine Pullman's alternative to the Church: the Republic of Heaven.

1.1 *The Church, Dust, Genesis 3 and Sin*

On the most obvious level, Pullman's critique of Christianity emerges from his depiction of the Church: wherever the Church is found, it exercises moral and intellectual tyranny over people. This depiction is painted with the broadest strokes in the world of Lyra,⁷ the trilogy's central character, where the Church effectively rules all intellectual endeavors, whether "religious" (in the narrow sense) or not: hard sciences are "experimental theology" and all scholarship requires the approval of "the Magisterium." This latter term—borrowed, of course, from Roman Catholic ecclesiology—is explained in *Northern Lights*:

Ever since Pope John Calvin had moved the seat of the Papacy to Geneva and set up the Consistorial Court of Discipline, the Church's power over every aspect of life had been absolute. The Papacy itself had been abolished after Calvin's death, and a tangle of courts, colleges, and councils, collectively known as the Magisterium, had grown up in its place.⁸

Bitter rivalries may divide the various groups that make up the Magisterium,⁹ but corporately they suppress any speculation that is counter to the accepted beliefs of the Church, including the notion that there might be other universes,¹⁰ despite

7. For those who have not read the books, it perhaps needs to be explained further that the story portrays the existence of multiple parallel universes that may share historical, geographical, and physical features with one another but differ in key ways. Thus, we first encounter Lyra as a young girl in a parallel Oxford, in a world where people are accompanied by daemons (which I discuss below) and in which Calvin was not a Reformer, but rather a Pope. Pullman thus draws into his work elements of the *alternate* history genre.

8. *Northern Lights*, 31.

9. *Ibid.*, 31.

10. The "Barnard-Stokes business." See *ibid.*, 24 and 31–2.

“sound mathematical arguments”¹¹ that may be used in support of this idea. The depiction of the Church’s power over human thought in our world is described in more realistic terms—the brush strokes are less extravagant—but it is no less devastating for that. Thus we encounter the following comment about the Church in our world, placed upon the lips of one of the characters, a former nun called Mary Malone: “I knew what I *should* think: it was whatever the church taught me to think.”¹²

It is clear that wherever it penetrates, Christianity is a force for ill, suppressing all ideas that are deemed inconsistent with its own dogma. Indeed, one cannot help but wonder if Pullman’s description of Calvin as Pope is more than just a witty inversion of history: perhaps he is suggesting that Reformations are only ever superficial, that the problem with Christianity transcends denominational boundaries, an innate and inherent tendency to oppress.

The concept of “Dust” is intimately connected to this depiction of the Church and serves to nuance the problem of Christian intellectual tyranny. The mystery of what Dust actually is unfolds throughout the trilogy. It is established early on, however, that it is attracted to adults, whose companion dæmons have reached a settled form, in a much more focused way than it is attracted to children, whose dæmons still change shape. This proves to be an important point. On his website, Pullman makes clear that the dæmon represents “that part of you that helps you grow toward wisdom”¹³ (thus cleverly subverting the traditional association of the word “demon” with an evil spirit by means of the etymological connection of the word with the Greek term for knowledge or wisdom, *dæmonēs*). Clearly, this wisdom is very much a part of our identity, a fact that can be seen in the appropriateness of the form adopted by the dæmon as the individual reaches adulthood:¹⁴ the dæmon settles on a form that reflects the sense of identity attained by a person as they enter their adulthood. The connection between the settling of the dæmon into its adult form and the attraction of Dust reveals an important positive understanding of what Dust is. The angel Balthamos reveals to Will and Lyra:

“Dust is only a name for what happens when matter begins to understand itself. Matter loves matter. It seeks to know itself and Dust is formed ...”¹⁵

Dust, then, essentially represents conscious thought, understood in material terms, which takes on a mythic quality. It is, however, a consciousness of a par-

11. Ibid., 32.

12. *The Amber Spyglass*, 470.

13. http://www.philip-pullman.com/about_the_writing.asp.

14. A conversation between Lyra and an old sailor reveals this fact. See *Northern Lights*, 166–7.

15. *The Amber Spyglass*, 33.

ticular kind: the kind of self-consciousness that separates reasoning creature from non-reasoning creature. This emerges from the fact that the attraction of Dust to creatures in all universes has a definite starting point: 33,000 years ago, the time at which human culture and civilization first began to be established. In a parallel universe, Mary Malone encounters the *mulefa*, creatures whose own experience of Dust began 33,000 years ago when they harnessed the technology of using seed-pods as wheels. The point is interesting: it suggests that the kind of consciousness represented by Dust is of the same order as scientific inquiry. By connecting this with the assumption of settled forms by *dæmons*, however, Pullman maximizes the concept, extending it beyond the fields of scientific research to a very life-principle. The reasoning wisdom that lies behind scientific discovery is what is (or ought to be) actualized in adulthood, as such reasoning wisdom helps us to attain our own personal identity.

For the Church of Lyra's world, however, Dust is regarded as the very essence of original sin. Two contrastive retellings of the Fall account of Genesis 3 in the trilogy help to communicate this and also to develop Pullman's criticism of the Church. The first is found in *Northern Lights*, where Asriel tells Lyra the account of Genesis 3 and how the Church in her world understands it. Concerning the forbidden fruit, in this version of the story, the serpent tells the woman:

“For God doth know that in the day ye eat thereof, then your eyes shall be opened and your *dæmons* shall assume their true forms, and ye shall be as gods, knowing good and evil.”¹⁶

The account continues:

And the eyes of both of them were opened, and they saw the true form of their own *dæmons*.¹⁷

The name for Dust itself, Asriel explains, is drawn from Genesis 3:

“For dust thou art, and unto dust thou shalt return ...”¹⁸

Asriel mentions that some believe this should be translated as “thou shalt be subject to dust,”¹⁹ so that the assumption of the true forms of the *dæmons* is connected to the presence and effect of Dust, both being seen as part of the out-working of original sin. With the discovery of Dust, elementary particles found

16. *Northern Lights*, 372.

17. *Ibid.*, 372.

18. *Ibid.*, 373.

19. *Ibid.*, 373.

upon those whose dæmons have settled, the Church believes it has discovered the very essence of original sin. Brutal experiments are conducted in the north: if people can be severed from their dæmons, perhaps they can be delivered from sin. Of course, those who “survive” the experience are lifeless, hopeless wretches. This point surely develops the polemic, pointing toward a Church that creates mindless zombies in its efforts to make people “better.” The Church demonizes the dæmon, and in doing so destroys an important element of human identity.

A counterpoint is achieved by the second retelling of Genesis 3. The *mulefa*—*sentient* creatures of another world—tell Mary Malone how they first came to know Dust (or *sraf*, as they call it):

One day a creature with no name discovered a seed-pod and began to play, and as she played she—

She?

She, yes. She had no name before then. She saw a snake coiling itself through a hole in a seed pod, and the snake said—

The snake spoke to her?

No! No! It is a make-like.²⁰ The story tells that the snake said What do you know? What do you remember? What do you see ahead? And she said Nothing, nothing, nothing. So the snake said Put your foot through the hole in the seed-pod where I was playing and you will become wise. So she put a foot in where the snake had been. And the oil entered her foot and made her see more clearly than before, and the first thing she saw was the sraf. It was so strange and pleasant that she wanted to share it at once with all her kindred. So she and her mate took the first ones, and they discovered that they knew who they were ...²¹

The account continues, with further allusions to the Genesis account. The clear and obvious point is that wisdom is not portrayed as sinful. Moreover, the technology of which it speaks is part of a wider “nature-harmony” or symbiosis between the *mulefa* and the seed pods: their technology does not abuse nature. By contrast with the Church of Lyra’s world, the *mulefa* tell a story that presents Dust as a positive reality, not something to be feared. By using parallel versions of the Genesis

20. That is, a metaphor.

21. *The Amber Spyglass*, 236–7. The italics are original.

3 story, Pullman cleverly brings this contrast to the forefront of his narrative. In doing so, he reinforces the reader's negative view of the Church.

1.2 *Yahweh, Metatron, and Enochic Literature*

Pullman's criticism of Christianity is further developed by means of his depiction of Yahweh and his use of the Enoch-Metatron tradition. Lyra and Will, who appear in the second novel and become central characters, find themselves caught up in the rebellion of Lord Asriel, Lyra's father, against Yahweh's kingdom of Heaven. Yahweh is "the Authority." He is not, however, the Creator: instead, like the other angels, he coalesced from Dust and subordinated other angels to himself, telling them that he had made them.²² The original rebellion of the angels against the Authority was led by Xaphania, a Sophia figure who discovered the truth about the Authority's real nature and who, within the story, epitomizes the liberty that wisdom brings. She later helps Lyra and her friends, including the witch Serafina Pekkala, who recounts to Mary Malone her meeting with the angel. Their conversation is as follows:

"She said that all the history of human life has been a struggle between wisdom and stupidity. She and 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. She gave me many examples from my own world."

"I can think of many from mine."

"And for most of that time, wisdom has had to work in secret, whispering her words, moving like a spy through the humble places of the world while the courts and palaces are occupied by her enemies."²³

In the story, then, the authoritarianism of the Church proceeds from the essential character of the deity it venerates. In reality, perhaps Pullman would prefer to suggest that it flows from the character of the deity it has constructed. When we encounter the Authority himself, however, we find instead a withered, aging, and pitiful thing, kept unnaturally alive in a crystal box by his vicegerent Metatron:

"Oh Will, he's still alive! But—the poor thing ..."

Will saw her hands pressing against the crystal, trying to reach to the angel and comfort him; because he was so old, and he was terrified, crying like a baby and cowering away into the lowest corner.

22. *The Amber Spyglass*, 33–4.

23. *Ibid.*, 506.

Such a discovery is anticipated by Mrs. Coulter, as she begins to reject the Church's authority under interrogation in Geneva:

“At the beginning of the world, God walked in the garden and spoke with Adam and Eve. Then he began to withdraw, and Moses only heard his voice. 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 rotten 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?”²⁴

In the end, this aged figure ceases to be a figure of tyranny and evil. As Lyra seeks to help him from his crystal litter, he tries to smile and bow,

“and his ancient eyes deep in their wrinkles blinked at her with innocent wonder.”²⁵

He responds, “to simple kindness like a flower to the sun. But in the open air there was nothing to stop the wind from damaging him, and to their dismay his form began to loosen and dissolve ... their last impression was of those eyes, blinking in wonder, and a sigh of the most profound and exhausted relief.”²⁶

The death of Yahweh thus serves as a focus for Pullman's portrayal of religion, but it also provides a corrective to caricatures of his polemical tendencies. In terms of Pullman's critique of religion, the reader is left with a belief that God has had his day and that the idea of God should be allowed to die—remembered warmly perhaps, but only remembered, not worshipped, and certainly not perpetuated as a symbol of power. At the same time, the undeniable tenderness with which Pullman narrates Yahweh's death suggests a genuine respect for the idea of God, or for its memory, and serves as a corrective to those who would portray his work in starkly polemical terms. A similar point will be made below, as we discuss the Republic of Heaven.

The true power in heaven lies with the angel Metatron, the regent of Yahweh. Metatron is, in fact, Enoch—the seventh from Adam—who has become an angel, and hence renamed, and now rules from the Clouded Mountain, the Merkabah throne of God.²⁷ Pullman here is drawing upon traditions that are scattered throughout Jewish and Christian traditions, from the early tractates that would

24. Ibid., 345.

25. Ibid., 432.

26. Ibid., 432.

27. A description of Metatron's awesome glory is found on page 418 of *The Amber Spyglass*.

eventually be collected into *1 Enoch*, to the later rabbinic traditions and *Sefer Hekhalot* (*3 Enoch*) and including the problematic material in *2 (Slavonic) Enoch*, for which it is difficult to establish a provenance. Within these traditions, Enoch becomes a visionary, then an exalted figure, then an angelic figure, and eventually the highest of all angelic figures, the lesser Yahweh, the angel of the Presence, the one who has privileged access to the glorious God. There are difficulties in determining how these traditions may have developed: was there a direct line of evolution in the idea of Enoch's transformation to a heavenly figure—“From Son of Adam to a Second God” to borrow the title of Philip Alexander's article²⁸—or did several discrete traditions coalesce, so that Metatron was originally an independent heavenly being who only became associated with Enoch at a relatively late stage?²⁹ To a large extent such questions are irrelevant to an examination of Pullman's writing, since by his own confession he engages in little researching, preferring to “read like a butterfly and write like a bee.”³⁰

Metatron is a self-contained figure in the story and does not in any simplistic sense function as a representation of the Church. Nevertheless, Pullman's depiction of this character may be seen as developing his critique of Christianity: God may be dead, but tyrannical authority continues to be exercised by someone who hides behind the myth that God is both alive and well and falsely claims to have been entrusted with his power. There are latent implications for the Church and for Christianity: truth, wisdom, and diversity continue to be suppressed by those whose own personal power is threatened by them and who maintain that power by hiding behind a necessary falsehood.

1.3 Hypocrisy

In addition to their intellectual tyranny, both the Church and Metatron are portrayed as being morally twisted and hypocritical, willing to do unconscionable things as a consequence of their beliefs or in order to maintain their power. The depiction of the experiments of the General Oblation Board is an obvious example

28. P. Alexander, “From Son of Adam to a Second God: Transformation of the Biblical Enoch,” in *Biblical Figures Outside the Bible*, ed. M. E. Stone and T. A. Bergen (Harrisburg: Trinity Press International, 1998).

29. In particular, connections are often seen between Metatron and the archangel Michael: Philip Alexander has suggested that these were originally the same figure. Alexander, “3 Enoch,” in *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha, Volume 1: Apocalyptic Literature and Testaments*, ed. J. H. Charlesworth (New York: Doubleday, 1983), 243–4; and the point may be supported by their connection in *Sefer Zerubbabel*. See M. Himmelfarb, “Sefer Zerubbabel,” in *Rabbinic Fantasies: Imaginative Narratives from Classical Hebrew Literature*, ed. D. Stern and M. J. Mirsky (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1990), 71–81. There are also strong links with Yahoel, whose myths seem to have been absorbed by the Metatron traditions. See Gruenwald, *Apocalyptic and Merkavah Mysticism* (Leiden: Brill, 1980), 196.

30. “Acknowledgements,” *The Amber Spyglass*.

of this: the Board severs children from their dæmons and effectively consigns them to death, essentially because of the doctrine of sin. While the Board may claim justification by some notion of higher good, the reader is in no doubt that its actions are evil. Similarly, when the Church issues “pre-emptive atonement” for a priest licensed to kill Lyra, lest she become another Eve and bring about another Fall, the reader is struck by the willingness of the Church—the self-appointed custodians of morality—to suspend morality when it suits them. There is a clear hypocrisy implied: the Church that claims such moral purity and authority is, by any reasonable standard, twisted and rotten.

Hypocrisy is also seen in the area of sexuality. The Church opposes any free expression of sexuality, a stance reflected in the experience of Mary Malone³¹ in our world and in the efforts of the Church to prevent the sexual union of Lyra and Will, a union that proves to be beautiful, natural, and indeed redemptive. This contrasts with an earlier incident in *The Amber Spyglass*,³² where a Russian priest gives Will shelter: Pullman strongly insinuates a pederasty in the man’s physical contact with the boy, which is almost presented as groping. Understated as it is, the suggestion remains that the enforced celibacy of the priest and the repression of his sexual instinct have led to a perversion of that very instinct. Similarly, Pullman also depicts Metatron as driven by the very passions he—or his Church—would condemn in others. Immediately after he has condemned Mrs. Coulter as “a cess-pit of moral filth,” she plays on her beauty and his weaknesses and offers to be his consort:

She trusted ... to the strange truth she’d learned about angels, perhaps especially those angels who had once been human: lacking flesh, they coveted it and longed for contact with it. And Metatron was close now, close enough to smell the perfume of her hair and gaze at the texture of her skin.³³

This becomes part of his ultimate downfall, as he is driven by his lusts to follow her to the Abyss where she and Asriel will kill him. Again, hypocrisy and repression are closely connected in Metatron’s downfall and, as with the incident with the Russian priest, the comparison that Pullman surely invites us to make is with the wholesome experience of Will and Lyra.

31. *The Amber Spyglass*, 464–71.

32. *Ibid.*, 101–7.

33. *The Amber Spyglass*, 420. It is interesting that Pullman portrays Metatron as slightly resentful of the Authority’s condemnation of the fallen angels and of the fact that he himself was made to prophesy their doom. Is there perhaps a sense of tyranny breeding tyranny, of a cycle that perpetuates itself?

1.4 Pullman's Alternative: The Republic of Heaven

The development of these themes lies at the heart of Pullman's critique of Christianity. His critique is further developed by his alternative to the tyranny of the Church: The Republic of Heaven. It is such a Republic that Asriel seeks to establish by dethroning Yahweh, removing him and his Church. As King Ogunwe comments:

"We're not going to invade the kingdom, but if the kingdom invades us, they had better be ready for war, because we are prepared. Mrs. Coulter, I am a king, but it's my proudest task to join Lord Asriel in setting up a world where there are no kingdoms at all. No kings, no bishops, no priests. The kingdom of heaven has been known by that name since the Authority first set himself above the rest of the angels. And we want no part of it. This world is different. We intend to be free citizens of the democratic republic of heaven."³⁴

The idea is one that Pullman has talked about elsewhere, for example, in his interview with Third Way.

The kingdom of heaven promised us certain things: it promised us happiness and a sense of purpose and a sense of having a place in the universe, of having a role and a destiny that were noble and splendid; and so we were connected to things. We were not alienated. But now that, for me anyway, the King is dead, I find that I still need these things that heaven promised, and I'm not willing to live without them. I don't think I will continue to live after I'm dead, so if I am to achieve these things I must try to bring them about—and encourage other people to bring them about—on earth, in a republic in which we are all free and equal—and responsible—citizens.

Now, what does this involve? It involves all the best qualities of things. We mustn't shut anything out. If the Church has told us, for example, that forgiving our enemies is good, and if that seems to be a good thing to do, we must do it. If, on the other hand, those who struggled against the Church have shown us that free enquiry and unfettered scientific exploration is good—and I believe that they have—then we must hold this up as a good as well.³⁵

An important aspect of the idea is that it does not reject whole-scale everything that religion has advocated: it retains the genitive "of Heaven" as a way of indicating that there is much that is commendable within religion, particularly within Christianity.

34. *The Amber Spyglass*, 210–1.

35. <http://www.thirdway.org.uk/past/showpage.asp?page=3949>.

It serves, therefore, to lend depth and balance to Pullman’s portrayal of religion, countering the suggestion that this is a mere caricature. This is paralleled by Mary Malone’s admission that she deeply misses the God in whom she once believed, and particularly the sense of “connectedness” that her faith gave her.³⁶

Still, we are left in no doubt that Pullman regards the idea of monotheism as outdated: “The King is dead.” Similarly, Pullman sees Christian eschatology as an immoral deferral or avoidance of the need to act in the present. The Republic of Heaven will have no deity and it will have no delay.

1.5 Drawing Together the Strands

Drawing these strands together, we can conclude that Pullman’s criticism of the Church revolves around the coercion of identity that takes place within human power-play. We will encounter similar themes in Hal Duncan’s writings. In Pullman’s case, however, the construal of identity is influenced in basic ways by modernism and Enlightenment values. The actualization of identity that is frustrated by the Church’s oppression is one founded upon reason and wisdom, of a kind epitomized in scientific inquiry. It is perhaps no coincidence that two of Pullman’s key heroes—Asriel and Mary Malone—are scientists. Pullman’s is not a rage against meta-narrative or any sort of overarching belief system, but rather a scathing criticism of anti-intellectualism, where this is understood as more than simple ignorance, as a violation of the potential of each individual affected by its tyranny. So central is religious system to his narrative and to the generation of oppression therein, that we cannot avoid the conclusion that for Pullman, religious systems inevitably create this kind of coercion of identity. The answer to their power is to establish a Republic of Heaven, to tear down the symbols and structures that create or maintain such oppression and replace them with an egalitarian society led by human wisdom.

It is striking, though, that in all of this, nothing is said of Jesus. The Christianity that is portrayed by Pullman is, fundamentally, Christless. This means that Pullman’s depiction of Christianity lacks the central focus of all true Christian thought, worship, and life. It may be tempting for some to suggest that this is a deficiency in Pullman’s writing, but before such an accusation is made, it is worth considering whether the deficiency actually lies in the Christianity that Pullman has experienced.³⁷ Perhaps it has been a Christless Christianity; or if Christ is not absent, he has at least been decentered. These are thoughts to which I will return below.

36. *The Amber Spyglass*, 471.

37. It must be noted that Pullman has nothing negative to say about his grandfather, a parish priest. He strongly disowns any suggestion that his rejection of Christianity was a reaction against his grandfather. See Tony Watkins, *Dark Matter*, 43. By “the Christianity that Pullman has experienced,” I mean the reality of the Church as seen throughout history in public life.

2. Hal Duncan, *The Book of All Hours*

As with *His Dark Materials*, Hal Duncan's *The Book of All Hours* is preoccupied with themes revolving around the coercion of identity and the oppression of the non-conforming. Where Pullman uses the image of the dæmon as a narrative device to develop the theme of identity and to make it central to his polemic, Duncan achieves such a goal using the concept of pre-written life stories combined with the image of the tattoo or "graving."

The Book of All Hours shares with *His Dark Materials* the idea of multiple worlds, but whereas in Pullman's story this is essentially a scientific concept, constructed upon string theory, in Duncan's tale these multiple worlds are different versions of reality, created by folds in the story of the universe, the Vellum. Within the various versions of reality live angelic beings, constantly bound into pre-determined roles within stories, roles that are represented by inscriptions or tattoos that the angels bear upon their flesh—"gravings" is Duncan's term—and which are written down in *The Book of All Hours*: a book which by containing all of these gravings also, therefore, contains the full story of the Vellum, constantly being unfolded in each reality. Some variations may emerge in the stories within each world, but their conclusions remain constant. Thus, the novels initially center on the brother and sister Thomas and Anna, whose gravings mark them out as Tamuz/Dumuzi and Innana of Sumerian legend: the story they are bound to live, over and again in different realities, is one in which Thomas dies, betrayed by his friend Seamus (Shamash) and in which Anna dies and is resurrected, as both Tamuz's lover and sister.³⁸ The key element within this story is Anna's ultimately disastrous attempt to break herself and Thomas free from the inevitability of their story by attempting to re-write their gravings.

38. The author makes the following comments in an interview on his website (www.halduncan.com), reproducing an interview on <http://www.fantasybookspot.com/node/1187>:

"If you want a comparison, think of it as how shared stories like myths work. You have a story like that of the Greek god, Dionysus and his run-in with King Pentheus. Euripedes gives us one version of this in his play *The Bacchae*. It has a beginning, a middle and an end—one temporal dimension, the frontal. But another playwright might tell the story slightly differently, because in the city-state he's from, this character did something else here, that character did something else there. Most Greek myths have multiple versions like this, as you can see if you read, say, Robert Graves. Is any one of them right? No. You have to look at the story as a whole and say, OK, it has another temporal dimension—the lateral dimension. But there's also the fact that Euripedes's telling was a retelling of the story as he heard it from a storyteller who heard it from someone else who heard it from someone else and so on, down and down through the third dimension—I call it residual because the story sort of builds up in layer upon layer, the original palimpsested by the versions laid down on top of it.

So what is the story of Dionysus and Pentheus? Is it the straight line of *The Bacchae*? The wide field of alternative versions? Or this solid shape which has not just length, but breadth and depth as well. If you can see that as a metaphor for time, then you understand the Vellum. Your story, your personal history, isn't just this short thin line from cradle to grave. It's also all the other versions, the ones to this side or that who did things slightly differently, and the ones before or beneath, who did the same thing, whose story you're replaying, building upon. The Vellum is the media the 3D timespace in which that wider, deeper story takes place."

As a narrative device, the concept of gravings and of their relationship to a pre-determined story facilitates reflection upon the need for freedom and for the self-determination of identity. It also, though, opens the door for a sophisticated examination of the problem of human coercion and oppression. As stories are told and retold in different realities, the common factors are so often human prejudice and victimization. Moreover, as Anna succeeds in breaking down the inevitability of the destiny represented by the gravings, what ensues is not freedom but rather a chaos characterized by violence and violation.

The angels in Duncan's novels are known as "the unkin." Duncan portrays them as human beings who become angelic, rather than being a different order entirely, thus allowing him to use the unkin as representations of human instincts, tendencies, and behavior, as well as being realistic victims of human behavior. In several key ways, we can see Duncan's development of these elements as presenting a rather different understanding of the problem of human coercion to that found in Pullman's books.

2.1 *The Republic of Heaven, Violent Egalitarianism and Oligarchy*

As in *His Dark Materials*, the character of Enoch-Metatron plays a significant part in Duncan's duology. Metatron is the architect of the Covenant, a union of angels formed with the clear purpose of ending the mastery—the kingship—of individual angels over one another:

He was tired of being vizier to one megalomaniac after another, Enlil, Marduk, Ninurta, Ada, this Baal or that. All he wanted was peace, and there were enough like him that when they signed themselves into the Covenant, it really looked like it was going to work.³⁹

The leaders of the Covenant meet around a table at the head of which is an empty chair, a symbol of the fact that they have no king, no single ruler. Metatron's goal, realized in the Covenant, is the establishment of a republic:

For Metatron, for all the unkin, Heaven is the republic that they've spent three thousand years trying to build.

But there are always those who see that empty throne and want to sit in it.⁴⁰

39. *Vellum*, 191.

40. *Ibid.*, 192.

This looks rather like Pullman's Republic of Heaven, but in Duncan's hands, the concept becomes darker. Metatron aggressively forces the unkin to bind themselves into the Covenant, or be deemed enemies of it; his pursuit of his goals—noble as they are—involves a willingness to engage in violence of the most appalling sort. We encounter something of this violence in Duncan's version of the death of Yahweh, and are given, in the process, an insight into the bloody birth of Metatron's republic. In a deep underground city, explorers find innumerable corpses, their graving-marked skins flayed from their bodies and hung as banners. In the center is that of Yahweh himself, portrayed, as by Pullman, as a tyrant:

I don't have to look at the name on his face to know that this is the first murderer and the first rebel, the first among these mortal angels, the first to declare himself above all else, to turn on those around him and, with his own name, carve a terror into their souls that was beyond all reason.⁴¹

Far, though, from there being a sense of justice or triumph in the description of the corpse of Yahweh, Duncan imbues the finding with horror, juxtaposing the description with the account of the arrest, branding, and death of an academic in Auschwitz.

Hobbsbaum was interred in Auschwitz in July of 1941, receiving the prisoner number 569304 tattooed on his left forearm. His actual death, is not recorded, but we can reconstruct it—the way the Nazis stripped their prisoners of everything they owned, even gold teeth the way they took a person apart, spiritually as much as physically ... there is a strong possibility ... his tattooed skin would have been flayed from his body to be made into a lampshade.⁴²

In some sense, the flaying of Yahweh, tyrannical as he may have been, is paralleled by the Nazi violence toward Hobbsbaum. The identities of both are connected to their tattoos—one a God, the other a Jewish prisoner of war—and in both cases the violence they experience is directed toward or focused upon their tattoo: their identities are deliberately violated in their death. Where Yahweh's death in *His Dark Materials* is a beautiful moment of release and relief, in *The Book of All Hours* it is evidence of the worst instincts of revenge. As readers, we are left with a sense that this Republic was born in shameful, retributive violence instead of justice.

The harsh assessment of the birth of the Republic is matched by a harsh assessment of its sustainability. In the wake of Anna's disastrous attempt to free herself from her destiny, Metatron's Covenant breaks down into oligarchy, as the various

41. *Vellum*, 422.

42. *Ibid.*, 423.

archangels lay claim to sections of a dissolving reality. Gabriel symbolically seats himself in the empty throne:

—So what do we call you now? says Azazel with disdain. Prince Gabriel? Lord Gabriel? King?

Gabriel stares at him as he sits down. At the head of the table. The angel of fire on the throne of God.

—Not king, he says. And not just me, but all of us here in this room, if you'll stand behind me. We'll be ... dukes.

Not dukes, thinks Metatron, but Dukes.⁴³

It is perhaps no surprise that the second volume of the duology, *Ink*, revolves to a large extent around the stories of Jack Carter, Jack Flash, a terrorist anarchist rebel who was formerly part of the Covenant, now rejecting the rulership of the Dukes. There is no attempt to evade the wrongness of Jack's violence, but the reader cannot help but sympathize with his subversion of the world of the Dukes.

Pullman's description of the Republic of Heaven is founded on a fundamentally optimistic view of human nature and reason; it sees the end of ecclesial dominance as the crucial step to freedom and the fulfillment of identity. Duncan's description of the Republic of Heaven is founded on a much less optimistic view of humanity: the violent end of one system of dominance merely leaves space for another to claim its throne. The tendency to oppress or coerce is engrained in the human makeup.

2.2 Prejudice and Fear of the Other

This assessment of human nature emerges in a range of sub-narratives within *The Book of All Hours*, united by the common factor that each reflects upon the ugly reality of prejudice and violence toward the "other," the non-conforming. Most commonly, this ugly reality is directed toward gays. In one single chapter of *Vellum*, Duncan relates with sparse brutality the true story of Matthew Shepard,⁴⁴ a victim of anti-gay violence in Wyoming in 1998.

On a cold October 7th 1998, just after midnight, in the area of Sherman Hills, east of Laramie, Wyoming, a twenty-one-year-old first-year political sciences student named Matthew Shepard was bound to a split-rail

43. *Vellum*, 377.

44. See the website, www.matthewshepard.org.

fence, beaten and burned, stripped, pistol-whipped and left for dead. Eighteen hours later, at 6:22 p.m. on Snowy Mountain View Road, a passing cyclist noticed what he, at first, assumed to be a scarecrow. Another scarecrow, a real scarecrow, was later paraded through the streets by students of Colorado State University, with a sign hung round its neck saying, I'm gay, and the words, Up My Ass, painted on the back of its shirt, a few miles from the bed in Poudre Valley Hospital where Shepard died, on October 12th at 12:53 a.m., never having regained consciousness.

On the website www.godhatesfags.com, Reverend Fred Phelps counts the days of Matthew Shepard's eternity in Hell, beneath an animation of his face among the flames.⁴⁵

At this point, the narrative emphasizes the place of prejudice and violence in religion and echoes what we have seen in Pullman. The story, however, serves as the realistic anchor for an exploration of prejudice that is played in a faery realm. Shepard's story is retold as the murder of Thomas Messenger, Anna's brother, who is also called Puck and who is crucified by two WASPS (in this world White Anglo-Satyr Protestants) for being a fairy. While the reference to Fred Phelps may emphasize the role of religion in fuelling the fires of prejudice, what the faery narrative brings to the fore is that the problem is more basic, that of difference:

In that time while he was still aware, which was the worse, I wonder: the agony of his physical torture or the horror of their utter hatred, of their moral certainty that he was so beyond the bounds of what they could accept that he deserved not just a death but one of such brutality, such inhumanity, as would make the seraphs who burned Sodom bow their heads in cold respect. What is it like, I wonder, to learn the full capacity of hatred in a lesson hammered home with bone broken on wood and skin ripped on barbed wire.⁴⁶

What the retelling of the story emphasizes—partly through the choice of perpetrator, partly through the obvious parallels with Christ's death, and partly through Duncan's portrayal of the reluctance of the police to acknowledge this as a hate crime⁴⁷—is that such hate is not merely present in extremist religion, but is present in the White, middle class society that sees itself as "normal." This point is driven home by the punctuation of the scene with recollections of a lecture by Hobbsbaum.

45. *Vellum*, 185–6.

46. *Ibid.*, 170.

47. *Ibid.*, 174.

Oscillating between, on the one hand, the Rationalist idea of Reason as liberator from the sensual passions and, on the other hand, the Romantic concept of Passion as escape from the proscriptions and prescriptions of a dogmatic, legislative intellect, do we actually miss the fact that both Romanticism and Rationalism, and all the fantasists and realists of those schools of thought, gain their power, in fact, from the very act of division, of discrimination, founded on and feeding off of the very exclusions they create and the fear of and desire for the Other that those exclusions inspire.⁴⁸

Such an understanding of the problem and ubiquity of human prejudice probably stems from Duncan's own hard experience of being a gay in small-town Ayrshire, indeed generally in contemporary Scotland. It is kept, though, from lapsing into a stereotype of prejudice, or into a shallow self-pity, by being understood in relation to wider realities of prejudice and violence. In *Ink*, for example, Duncan writes:

Red guard vigilantes of the Cultural Revolution tear down all that's old, the palaces and temples, ancient artifacts, the intellectuals, teachers and administrators, children in red armbands murdering their parents—in Vietnam 800 tons of bombs fall every day and Johnson tells the troops to nail the coonskin to the wall—Egypt and Sudan attack and lose to Israel in six days—the oil refineries of Suez city blaze—the chief of the South Vietnam police holds his revolver to a prisoner's head and pulls the trigger—bang!—Robert Kennedy—bang!—Martin Luther King—bang!—Helter Skelter on a door in blood—Kill the Pigs! Make them squeal like the dead babies of My Lai: well they might have had bombs strapped to them. Crazy? Like Bukovsky locked up as insane for protesting the Soviet use of psychiatry on dissidents ... Mercy becomes a luxury as Pinochet seizes Chile, seizes students and professors, union leaders, all protestors must be tortured or they will not sing, he says.⁴⁹

There are echoes here of Foucault, not least in the reflection upon Bukovsky's imprisonment.⁵⁰ As such, it is hard not to see Duncan's reflection upon gay or

48. *Ibid.*, 184.

49. *Ink*, 195–6.

50. Duncan has said that he regards his work as “pulp modernism” rather than “postmodernism”: “But what I wanted to do was create something that crosses the whole spectrum of literary modes, because if you're writing about a book-that-contains-all-books, well, the narrative should itself embody that diversity. It should have comedy as well as tragedy, parables and prophecies, ripping yarns and witty anecdotes. The end result is not so much Post-Modernist as Pulp Modernist, I think; the pastiches and homages are playful, but they're not arch. I'm much more sympathetic to the Modernists' abstract aims than to the Post-Modernists' ironic games” (<http://writerunboxed.blogspot.com/2006/07/author-interview-hal-duncan-part-1.html>). These comments, however, bear on the artistic style of the book rather than its intellectual underpinnings, which are clearly in the postmodern vein.

queer⁵¹ prejudice as influenced by the assessment of humanity that underpins much postmodern thought.⁵²

2.3 Drawing Together the Strands

Duncan's work is challenging to analyze. The lack of linear plot is disorienting for any reader but has the effect of emphasizing the individual paragraph or section, an effect reinforced by the use of multiple sub-headings within chapters. What this achieves is to heighten the impact of passages such as those quoted above. These passages leave us with a profound sense of the problem of prejudice, of the power of fear, of the dangerous need to *describe* identity, in the sense of marking off the boundary between "insider" and "outsider." Coercion and violence are preoccupations within this narrative, as they are in Pullman's, and religion is recognized as a potential fuel for hatred toward "the other." It is not, however, portrayed as the ultimate source of hatred, and perhaps not as the most important of fuels. Duncan's narrative recognizes that the human tendency to coerce is propelled by difference and the fear thereof. Such recognition underpins the postmodern reflection on the tyranny of systems, of metanarratives, whether religious or not. While formally, then, Duncan may not see his own work as postmodern, intellectually it surely is so.

3. Toward a Christian Hearing of Pullman and Duncan

In the first two sections of this article we have listened to the voices of Pullman and Duncan. What those voices have communicated in their narratives is uncomfortable for the Church to hear, since both reflect upon the ugly realities of coercion and exclusion, particularly as they are played out in religious contexts. For Christians to deny or to minimize these realities would be ignorance of the worst sort. Whether historically (the Inquisition, the Monkey-Scopes trial, *et cetera*) or contemporaneously (the disturbing aggressiveness of the Creation-Science movement, the homophobia of Fred Phelps, *et cetera*), there are countless examples of Christianity exercising a censorious influence over the beliefs and lifestyles of those who live under, or within range of, its authority, official and otherwise. The response that the Church must make to these realities is one of remorse and repentance, not denial; I will explore this further below. By reading the two works together, however, and considering some important points of contrast between them, we are afforded the opportunity to reflect in a more nuanced and sensitive way on the nature of the problem that we must repent of and deal with.

51. Queer Theory sees the term "gay" as itself too narrow, preferring "queer" as denoting anything deviating from what was traditionally defined as "normal."

52. When this point is noted, it becomes interesting that the character who eventually comes closest to being a villain is Joey Pechorin, the arch rationalist in the novels.

The issue of identity is clearly pivotal to the problem. The narratives of Pullman and Duncan explore the nature of identity through their images of “dæmons” and “gravings,” and it is specifically the identity that is coerced, oppressed, or violated in their stories. Both authors consider the significant role played by religion in the formation or disfiguring of identity, but where Pullman seems to understand the issue in modern Enlightenment terms, Duncan seems aware of the complex discussions that lie within the intellectual foundations of postmodernity.⁵³ Such discussions are preoccupied with the question of the self and the other, which inevitably becomes the question of boundaries. A proper Christian reflection upon this question—as, indeed, upon all questions—must be centered upon the life and death of Jesus,⁵⁴ though whether in actuality Christians have considered the implications of these is part of our problem and will be considered below.

3.1 *The Life and Death of Jesus as Paradigmatic for Christian Attitude*

The gospel narratives revolve around someone who continually chose to enjoy the prohibited company of those who had been labeled unclean by the religious authorities—official and unofficial—and came into conflict most often and most obviously with those authorities, over their use of religious laws in boundary construction. Research into the New Testament has, over the last thirty or so years, increasingly recognized that the polemic mounted in different ways by Jesus and Paul against contemporary Jews was not a rejection of an ossified *Spätjudentum*, characterized by a “works-oriented” view of salvation.⁵⁵ Rather, scholars now recognize that Jesus and Paul both rejected the nationalistic, ethnic, and religious boundary-maintenance that was epitomized by, though not confined

53. Zygmunt Bauman, *Life in Fragments: Essays in Postmodern Morality* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1995); Zygmunt Bauman, *Modernity and the Holocaust* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1989); Michel Foucault, *History and Sexuality*, 3 vols., trans. Robert Huxley (Oxford: Penguin, 1990)—originally published as *Histoire de la sexualité*, 3 vols: *La volonté de savoir*, *L'usage des plaisirs*, and *Le souci de soi* (Paris: Gallimard, 1976); Michel Foucault, *Madness and Civilization: A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Random House, 1988)—originally published as *Folie et déraison* (Paris: Gallimard, 1966).

54. John Howard Yoder, *The Politics of Jesus. Vicit Agnus Noster* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972), 97, draws attention to the singular importance of the Cross for Christian Ethics, though Miroslav Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness and Reconciliation* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1996), 22, notes that actually most of Yoder's book reflects upon the life of Jesus. The point is well taken: mature Christian ethics must draw upon both the life and death of Jesus.

55. For a discussion of the development of the notion of “Late Judaism” in biblical scholarship and the steady breakdown of the paradigm, see Adam Becker and Annette Yoshiko Reed, “Traditional Models and New Directions,” in Adam Becker and Annette Yoshiko Reed, *The Ways that Never Parted: Jews and Christians in Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2003), 1–34. Important contributions to this breakdown were made by E. P. Sanders, *Paul and Palestinian Judaism: A Comparison of the Patterns of Religion* (London: SCM, 1977) and J. D. G. Dunn, *Jesus, Paul and the Law* (London, SPCK, 1990). Both authors have, of course, contributed much more extensively to the discussion than just the books listed.

to, the Pharisees.⁵⁶ Identity, of course, is always constructed at the boundaries,⁵⁷ and boundaries are not inherently wrong: to be unbounded is not to be truly open but to be without form.⁵⁸ The problem with the Pharisees, according to many contemporary interpretations of Jesus' teachings, was that they defined those boundaries with ever more precise legal rulings that would allow them to pronounce with authority who was an *insider* and who was an *outsider*—a pressing problem in a diverse society such as first-century Palestine, with a spectrum of Jewish reaction to Hellenization—with a view to excluding all deemed “outsiders” from the community. This was seen by Jesus as running counter to the role of Israel in God's work of global salvation, precisely because the purpose was exclusion: it ensured that no one who was not already an “insider” could ever become a part of the community, so that the global blessing promised to Abraham⁵⁹ would never be realized. This essentially sociological observation, when understood in the theological context of the Biblical narrative, becomes profoundly unsettling for the contemporary Church: the social-identity pressures faced by first-century Jews parallel those facing the Church today, as it struggles with its own internal diversity and with the problem of how its identity is to be maintained in an increasingly globalized culture. Like the Pharisees, we can obsess to ever more minute detail about the boundary-markers that separate the “real” Christian insider from the “false” Christian outsider; such issues lie at the heart of denominationalism. Paul's polemic against both factions and legalism is a recognition that the identity of the Christian must be understood as something that emerges from their union with Christ, rather than from the borderlines that describe them from others, his eschewing of circumcision and Jewish ritual fundamentally a rejection of such a concept of identity markers.

The problem of the boundary remains, however, even if we recognize the dangers of defining identity at the boundaries; a true sense of identity, individual or corporate, may not be founded upon boundaries, but it will still be bounded. There will still be a sense of differentiation between the *self* and the *other* and there must be space left for the *other* to be deemed “wrong” if aspects of their life or thought

56. Dunn, *Jesus, Paul and the Law*; N. T. Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God* (London: SPCK, 1992); N. T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God* (London: SPCK, 1996).

57. This notion is now almost a cliché. It is drawn from the pioneering anthropological work of Frederik Barth, *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries* (Oslo: Universitetsforlaget, 1969).

58. Exploring the role that boundaries play in social oppression, and challenging the demolition of boundaries advocated by Foucault, Volf notes: “Without boundaries we will be able to know what we are fighting against, but not what we are fighting for. Intelligent struggle against exclusion demands categories and normative criteria that enable us to distinguish between repressive identities and practices that should be subverted and non-repressive ones that should be affirmed.” Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace*, 63.

59. Gen 12:3: “And in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.”

are unacceptable by our own moral standards. Pullman and Duncan justifiably retain the right to condemn those who violate the identity of others, as do the most ardent of postmodernists. How, then, do we overcome the ugly problems of exclusion and coercion that are generated by our boundaries?⁶⁰

It is here that the Cross must shape Christian life and thought. It has not been simply “Christ,” but also “Christ crucified” that has been proclaimed by the Church through the ages.⁶¹ The Cross has been seen from the earliest theologians onward as the fundamental revelation of God’s nature and love and as definitive of the paradigm of Christian life. Properly understood in terms of Incarnation and redemption, it reveals how God, in Christ, relates to the *other* who is unacceptable to him. In Christ, God crosses the boundary that demarcates him from sinful humanity and does so with a view to reconciliation. This reconciliation is achieved by the openness of God to bear the worst that human evil can inflict upon him. The Cross thus reveals God’s love for the outsider and his will to de-alienate the other. Yet it does not do so by ignoring or minimizing the problem of the “unacceptable” in the life of the other: the Cross remains a condemnation of, and judgment upon, human evil.⁶² Taken together, these elements reveal a God who does not decide how worthy we are of his love and embrace on the basis of our acceptability, but simply on the basis of his free and unconditional love.

As the paradigm of the Christian life,⁶³ the Cross subverts all of our instincts and tendencies, so that we “view no-one from a worldly point of view.”⁶⁴ The Cross forces us to re-assess ourselves, firstly, as those whose status “in Christ” is the result of God’s redeeming work and not our own performance of Christian identity. It forces us, secondly, to re-assess the *other*, neither minimizing nor fearing those aspects of their life which we personally regard as unacceptable and not allowing those aspects to determine whether or not we reach out to embrace them. Drawing these two points together, we might further note that the Cross constantly reminds us of our

60. In the discussion that follows, I am heavily indebted to the work of Miroslav Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace* (For details, see footnote 54).

61. 1 Cor 1:23, 2:2.

62. In a sense, this point arises from Jürgen Moltmann’s discussion of the Cross as atonement in *The Spirit of Life: A Universal Application*, trans. M. Kohl (London: SCM, 1992), 132–8. Moltmann eschews a penal interpretation of the Cross (p. 135) but sees the Divine Son as bearing the God-forsakenness of humanity and the pain of the Father. This, though, is precisely an affirmation of the problem of sin and is a judgment upon it: evil is affirmed as evil by the Cross, and enmity as enmity, but neither evil nor enmity is allowed to stand in the way of God’s reconciling love. See also Moltmann’s *Der gekreuzigte Gott* (Munich: Kaiser, 1973), chapter 6.

63. Mark 8:34: “Whosoever will come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow me.”

64. 2 Cor 5:16.

ongoing need for grace and of our own potential existential *wrongness*. Every judgment we make concerning someone else is that of someone who also stands under judgment and who may, as a sinful human, be mistaken in any given instance.

All truly Christian theology and ethics—all that is worthy of the name “Christian”—is shaped by the narrative of Jesus’ life and by the Cross, with radical consequences. Yet, as is reflected by the narratives of Pullman and Duncan, much is done by the Church or under the banner of Christianity that contradicts this. To some extent, this must be seen as a consequence of the fact that the Church remains a collection of sinners, still capable of behaving in a way that is unacceptable. All such behavior is challenged by the gospel. We may, however, consider the possibility that in at least some of these cases a failure to properly reflect upon the Incarnation and the Cross lies at the root of the problem.

3.2 Failures of Reflection

First, if we remove from the Cross the divine identity of its victim, it ceases to be subversive of our values. If we de-divinize the Lamb, we lose the astonishing reconstruction of the enthroned God that so subverts the concepts of power and the notions of authority in early Christian writings such as Ephesians, Galatians, and Revelation.⁶⁵ It is significant that in German biblical scholarship, some of the worst manifestations of anti-Semitism came in the nineteenth-century Lives of Jesus, as scholars stripped away the “supernatural nimbus”⁶⁶ from Jesus, and transformed him into a mere philosopher who rejected the darkness of *Spätjudentum*: such a depiction left no room for the Cross to subvert prejudice and power systems. These depictions of Judaism, of course, reflected an identification of Christianity with German post-Enlightenment national and cultural identity and later would

65. On this point, see Richard Bauckham, “Only the Suffering God Can Help: Divine Passibility in Modern Theology,” *Themelios* 9, no. 3 (1984): 6–12. This is an important, but easily overlooked article, in which Bauckham traces the abandonment of the doctrine of divine impassibility and argues that, in fact, only a belief in a suffering God can provide an adequate theological basis for hope in the face of evil and suffering. Bauckham draws heavily, though not exclusively, upon Moltmann, who similarly recognizes the importance of our construal of God being redefined by the Cross (*Der gekreuzigte Gott*) (Munich: Kaiser, 1973), especially chapter 6.

66. The phrase is Albert Schweitzer’s, *The Quest of the Historical Jesus: A Critical Study of its Progress from Reimarus to Wrede*, trans. W. Montgomery from the first German Edition, *Von Reimarus zu Wrede*, 1906 (London: A&C Black, 1910), 4: “For hate as well as love can write a Life of Jesus, and the greatest of them are written with hate: that of Reimarus, the Wolfenbüttel Fragmentist, and that of David Friedrich Strauss. It was not so much hate of the Person of Jesus as of the supernatural nimbus with which it was so easy to surround Him, and with which He had in fact been surrounded. They were eager to picture Him as truly and purely human, to strip from Him the robes of splendor with which He had been appareled, and clothe Him once more with the coarse garments in which He had walked in Galilee.”

be adapted to undergird the Nazi movement. It is worth noting that as Karl Barth challenged the nationalistic identification of the Christianity of Germany in the early 20th century, he did so precisely on the basis of the significance of the Incarnation as revelatory. A proper understanding of the Incarnation balanced the “wholly otherness” of God and his solidarity with humanity in Christ.⁶⁷ As the Nazi movement grew in power, Barth saw the Liberal Christianity of his teachers, such as Harnack, as entirely incapable of standing against such nationalism.⁶⁸

Second, if the doctrine of atonement is truncated to simply one of penal substitution we will also lose something of the challenge of the Cross.⁶⁹ If we fail to appreciate what the Cross reveals of God’s solidarity with the victim, with the outsider, if we fail to see what it reveals of his attitude to the “other,” if we fail to see it as a demonstration of the shape of love, and if we fail to see it as the central paradigm of Christian life, then we can remain detached from the demands that the Cross makes upon our own fundamental instincts. To do so, however, would be to ignore the teaching of Jesus to take up our own Cross in following him,⁷⁰ the significance of baptism into the death of Jesus⁷¹ and of filling the measure of his sufferings⁷² in Pauline thought, and the portrayal of Christians as martyrs in Revelation, itself a work subverting the craving for vengeance.⁷³ Such a truncation of the doctrine of atonement is observable within large segments of Evangelicalism—indeed, it has become a defining characteristic of this movement—and while it would be a great mistake to dismiss that entire movement,⁷⁴ it is certainly true that some of the worst examples of prejudice and exclusion are seen therein. The observation highlights for us the importance of a rounded understanding of the atonement. It also suggests that a constructive response to prejudice and coercion within such circles is to call attention to broader aspects of the atonement. Evangelicalism

67. For this point, see the Preface to his commentary on Romans: *Der Römerbrief* (Munich: Chr Kaiser, 1924). The stress on the “otherness” of God that marked Barth’s early theology was the basis for seeing God as standing over and against all human systems. Such a stress is balanced by Barth himself in his later work, notably in *The Humanity of God*, trans. T. Wieser and J. N. Thomas (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1960), 37–68, where he emphasizes the significance of the humanity of God understood as the Incarnation rather than *Religion*, as in Harnack and others. Thus, God’s otherness and his solidarity are both emphasized by Barth, with the Incarnation as central.

68. See Clifford Green, “Karl Barth’s Life and Theology,” in Clifford Green, ed., *Karl Barth: Theologian of Freedom* (London: Collins, 1989), 20.

69. In saying this, I am not denying that there is such a dimension to the atonement; merely that it is only one aspect of it.

70. Mark 8:34 and parallels.

71. Rom 6:3. Cf. 2 Cor 1:5; 2 Cor 4:8–12; 1 Pt 4:13.

72. Col 1:24.

73. See my article, “No Monuments in Heaven: Miroslav Volf and the Forgetting of Suffering,” *Bible in TransMission: A Forum for Change in Church and Culture* (Spring 2007).

74. I write myself from within this tradition, as does Volf, whose work in this area is so significant.

is a significant sociological movement with substantial influence in America and Britain. If we are to address oppression and violation in the contemporary world, we must address Evangelicalism. If we are to *constructively* address the movement, in a way that will not simply buttress its boundary markers, we must converse with its theology and seek to nuance it.

Conclusions

In this article, I have sought to host an inter-textual conversation, listening to the narratives of Philip Pullman and Hal Duncan as voices speaking important truths and then offering my own reflection upon them from within the Church. Ultimately, this conversation serves to expose the decentered nature of much that purports to be Christian. Although Pullman and Duncan seem to write with different underlying assumptions about the nature of the problem of religion—Pullman’s understanding reflecting Enlightenment values and Duncan’s reflecting postmodern thought—they each articulate an intelligent appraisal of the impact of religious systems upon the identity of the individual. Their voices speak hard truths to those of us who are Christians and raise sobering issues for our consideration. These issues may not undermine Christianity, but they do challenge us to think about whether much that calls itself Christian is worthy of the name: for it shows no evidence of the subversive challenge of the Incarnation and the Cross.

We find, then, a certain common theme in our conversation: the death of God. In Pullman’s work, God is allowed, at last, to die: his death speaks of the passing of the old and outdated. In Duncan’s work, he is the victim of a violating desire for vengeance: his death speaks only of endless cycles of brutality. In Christian theology, God gives himself over to death, victim and victor at once, showing solidarity with the other, the victim, and love for the enemy and showing definitively his expectation of the thought and conduct of his people.

At the same time, however, the death of God is not the last word for Christian theology. If that were the case, there would indeed be a hollowness to the message of the gospel. As Richard Bauckham has noted, “it is no consolation to the sufferer to know that God is as much the victim of evil as he is himself.”⁷⁵ That would, indeed, be nothing more than a tragedy.⁷⁶ Rather, the death of God, in all its significance, is taken up into the eternal life of God. Taken “into God’s own

75. Richard Bauckham, “Only the Suffering God Can Help,” 12. My discussion here is indebted to this article (also mentioned above, in footnote 65), which masterfully develops the historical and contemporary discussions of divine impassibility.

76. As powerfully stated by Jürgen Moltmann, *Experiences of God* (London: SCM Press, 1980), 53.

‘Trinitarian history’ in *hope* for the joy of God’s eschatological future,”⁷⁷ the tragedy of the Cross is itself transformed. It is this transformation that we encounter in the Resurrection, as “death is swallowed up in victory.”⁷⁸ This is a profound truth and not simply the grounds for hope for the future. For Christian theology, the staggering transformation of values that the Cross requires in the present is made possible by the Resurrection, as our own lives are taken up into the victory of God, through our union with Christ⁷⁹ and through the presence in our lives of the very Spirit that raised Jesus from the dead. Thus Paul can say:

If the Spirit of the one who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, then he who raised Christ Jesus from the dead will give life also to your mortal bodies through his Spirit which dwells in you. Therefore, brothers, we are debtors—but not to the sinful nature (the flesh), to live according to it.... For those who are led by the Spirit of God are the children of God.⁸⁰

The breaking of sin’s power, the healing of our damaged instincts and values, the possibility of truly loving the other, even when the other is the enemy; all of this is found in the Resurrection. It is the ground of all Christian hope, for our present as much as for our future.

While I have here offered my own thought as a third voice in this conversation, the narratives of Pullman and Duncan demand a greater response. Ultimately, they must be engaged by the voice of Christ, speaking through a Church that is the embodiment of Christ crucified in this world. For such a response to be made, however, the Church itself must come to terms with the challenge of preaching not just “Christ,” but “Christ crucified” and, indeed, “Christ risen.”⁸¹

77. Bauckham, “Only the Suffering God Can Help,” 12.

78. 1 Cor 15:54. This verse speaks of the final end of death at the final resurrection of believers, but it seems appropriate to use it here, since these two events—the resurrection of Jesus on the first Easter and the great eschatological resurrection—are portrayed in the New Testament as part of the same reality. Jesus is the firstborn from among the dead (Col 1:18; Rv 1:5).

79. For this point, see Rom 6:1–23.

80. Rom 8:11–14.

81. I am grateful to my friend and colleague Trevor Hart for critical feedback on earlier drafts of this article. I am also grateful to Nathan Baxter for the insightful comments he made on an earlier draft, which strengthened the work immeasurably.