Chancellor’s Lectures 2009

God’s Storytellers – from Milton to C.S. Lewis and Philip Pullman

Lecture Four, Tuesday 19 May 2009

Good evening, ladies and gentlemen, and welcome to the fourth in my series of Chancellor’s lectures for 2009: *God’s Storytellers – from Milton to C.S. Lewis and Philip Pullman.*

Last week we focussed on C.S. Lewis, and heard how an intellectually bruising encounter with the philosopher Elizabeth Anscombe persuaded Lewis to focus his creative energies not on rational theological *argument*, but on the kinds of writing at which he truly excelled: using storytelling, imagery and metaphor in exploring the Christian vision. I argued that this was in no sense a regression, but a positive use of his knowledge, experience and particular gifts.

The first part of tonight’s lecture is about a writer who has no doubt about the value of storytelling, and of whom I have made regular reference in these lectures: Philip Pullman. He has said ‘stories are the most important thing in the world. Without stories, we wouldn’t be human beings at all.’ The significance of storytelling, particularly as a medium for exploring questions of truth and meaning, is of course a key theme for the series as a whole. I will offer some reflections on this in the second part of my lecture, along with other issues that have arisen since we began just three weeks ago.

Before I go any further, perhaps I could make brief mention of the question and answer session to be held a fortnight hence; same time but different place, as the venue is Vicar’s Hall. All are most welcome, but it will help to make a better evening of it if your question could be written down and delivered to the Cathedral Office. By the morning of Tuesday 2nd June please, so I’ve at least the afternoon to look over them. Spontaneous questions and comments on the night will of course also be welcome.

Over the last few weeks many of you have said to me, ‘I’m looking forward to what you’ve got to say about Pullman’ and are obviously familiar with his work. Others have said, ‘Who *is* Philip Pullman?’ so I’m clearly going to have to give some basic information as well addressing some of the challenging issues raised by his writing.

Philip Pullman is currently one of the most successful and celebrated authors for children and young adults in the world. He is also widely read by adults, particularly his most acclaimed work, the trilogy *His Dark Materials*. These have sold millions of copies worldwide, been adapted into a two part six hour play by the National Theatre, and a Hollywood film *The Golden Compass* has been made of the first book – which originally had the title *Northern Lights*. The second book is *The Subtle Knife*, and the third *The Amber Spyglass*. They have won a number of major literary awards; and in 2002 *The Amber Spyglass* was the first title for young people to win the overall Whitbread Book of the Year Award.

The trilogy is a sprawling epic narrative, with a central character named Lyra Belacqua. Lyra grows up in Oxford (Pullman's own city) – and yet this is Oxford both like and unlike the one we know, for it exists in a parallel universe. Through the books she moves between different worlds, pursued by a sinister organisation known as the Magisterium. Amongst the friends and allies she makes are Will Parry, a twelve year old boy from Winchester (this time it is the city we know) and a talking, armoured bear named Iorek Byrnison. Will and Lyra's relationship, it turns out, is central to the destiny of the world; for this, like C.S. Lewis's *Perelandra*, is a retelling of *Paradise Lost*, and Lyra is a young Eve. In this retelling, part war story, part love story, the rebel angels are the unambiguous heroes. The villain is God and his Church, who stand for all that is repressive and oppressive, and in the final book God is defeated, indeed God dies, his kingdom comes to an end, and the 'republic of heaven' begins.

If you don't know the books, a summary like this can hardly tell you why they have been so successful. Let me come at this another way, by talking about two of Pullman's most striking narrative inventions: *daemons* (that's d a e m o n) and *dust*.

In the opening pages of *Northern Lights*, the reader discovers that Lyra has a daemon named Pantalaimon. A daemon is as a person's soul or spirit, the essence of who they are, manifested as an animal. Pullman has explained this with reference to a painting of Leonardo da Vinci, *Lady with an Ermine*. Think of any portrait you've seen in which the sitter is holding an animal, and in which there seems a natural connection between human and creature. In Pullman's work a daemon is opposite in gender to the human with whom it's inseparably bound, and during childhood continually changes shape to reflect emotions, events, hopes, fears and desires. At puberty the daemon settles on the animal that best reflects the person's fundamental character and identity. John Pridmore, our Holy Week preacher earlier this year, in an essay on what he terms the 'spirituality of *His Dark Materials*', contrasts Pullman's invention of the daemon with the rather clunking language used in official guidelines for schools about spiritual development. 'With the image of the child's ever-changing daemon,' Pridmore writes, 'Pullman has succeeded where definitions fail in conveying the fluid and dynamic character of spiritual growth. The spirit of the child cannot be pinned to a board.'[1]

What Pullman means by 'Dust' is harder to convey, but central to his story. Think first of what we are made; a slightly different version of Genesis 3 is incorporated into Pullman's story, but like the real thing, it includes the text: 'for dust thou art, and to dust thou shalt return.' But in *His Dark Materials*, dust is not just the raw material for life, but somehow the essence of what human life should be when it is developing, learning through experience, and gaining in wisdom. That is why dust particularly gathers around individuals as they become adults, moving from innocence to experience.

More even than this, dust is something cosmic, flowing continually through the universe. In the second book we learn that Dust has existed for 33 thousand years. The significance of this seemingly has to do with the period in which conscious human life came into being, as we evolved from our primeval ancestors. It turns out, in a strange juxtaposition of Milton and Darwin, that the rebel angels have intervened in the evolutionary process, seeking vengeance on the 'Authority' by introducing his creatures to free choice. In *His Dark Materials,* the Church believes that Dust is due to original sin, for freedom is simply being free to err and sin. Human beings becoming self-aware, self-conscious, is due to the knowledge of good and evil gained through eating from the forbidden fruit in the Garden of Eden.

You may have a sense by now of why Pullman says, 'I pay my readers the compliment of assuming they are intellectually adventurous.' I will say no more about dust at this point, but I want to return to the notion of the daemon, which many consider to be Pullman's most striking invention. Considering it a little more will give us an insight into Pullman's worldview and how this relates to Christianity.

Like almost everything in Pullman, the germ of the idea is found in other literary works. Daemon comes from the Greek work *daimon*, used by Homer and Plato (amongst others) to refer to divine spirits that mediate between the Gods and humanity. For Socrates his *daimonion* was a kind of guiding star encouraging him in his search for truth and wisdom. So it is for Pullman's characters and their daemons.

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[1] John Pridmore, "'Just tell them stories' – The Liberation Spirituality of Philip Pullman's *His Dark Materials*' in *The Way*, 44/1 (January 2005) p49.

In the New Testament, the word demon (d e m o n) represents something evil that can take possession of human lives. That Pullman's daemon is exactly the opposite, something good, is not simply down to its roots in Greek literature. For Pullman's intention is precisely to subvert the Christian story and turn it on its head. If you heard my second lecture, you may remember Pullman's story of a country squire being read Milton's *Paradise Lost*, and exclaiming, 'By God… this Lucifer is a damned fine fellow, and I hope that he may win!' 'My sentiments exactly,' says Pullman, for he sees God as an oppressive authority, actively working to prevent liberty and wisdom. In this sense the devil, and his demons, are 'damned fine fellows' working as they are for liberation, freedom and truth. Similarly, Pullman's readers are clearly expected to empathise with Lyra's father, Lord Asriel, who leads the rebel angels in battle against the forces of the 'Authority'. The figure of Dr Mary Malone, former nun turned research scientist, is also sympathetically drawn. Like Lewis' Weston in *Perelandra*, it is again a scientist who takes the role of Satan in the garden, for Mary Malone helps Lyra and Will to realise their love for each other, through telling the story of how she fell in love and left her convent. As they embrace, the dust that has been draining from the universe is diverted from its course and destruction avoided.

Here is how Pullman describes this moment, seen by Mary Malone through the eponymous 'Amber Spyglass' which enables Dust to be seen:

> The terrible flood of Dust in the sky has stopped flowing. It wasn't still by any means; Mary scanned the whole sky with the amber lens, seeing a current here, an eddy there, a vortex further off; it was in perpetual movement, but it wasn't flowing away any more. In fact, if anything, it was falling like snowflakes… Mary turned, spyglass in hand, to see Will and Lyra returning… She nearly put the spyglass to her eye, but held back, and returned it to her pocket. There was no need for the glass; she knew what she would see; they would seem to be made of living gold. They would seem the true image of what human beings always could be, once they had come into their inheritance. The Dust pouring down from the stars had found a living home again, and these children-no-longer children, saturated with love, were the cause of it all.[2]

I will return to the great themes of Pullman's trilogy, but for the moment let's briefly consider who it is that has written a story like this? And is he really, as the journalist Peter Hitchens has asserted, 'the most dangerous author in Britain' a sinister propagandist and 'the anti-Lewis… the one the atheists would have been praying for, if atheists prayed'?

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[2] Philip Pullman *The Amber Spyglass* (London: Scholastic, 2000) pp496-7

Pullman was born in 1946, four years before the publication of *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*. His father, who was in the RAF, died when he was seven (two years younger than C.S. Lewis was when his mother died), and he and his brother spent a period living with grandparents near Norwich. Grandfather was a vicar, and so the boys settled into rectory life, which they loved. And so the young Philip went to Sunday School, attended Church, and was influenced by the straightforward faith of his grandparents. It is because of them that he would later say, 'I love the language and the atmosphere of the King James Bible and the 1662 *Book of Common Prayer*.' This love survived the rejection of the Christian faith that occurred in Pullman's teenage years.

Pullman read voraciously from a young age, and in my second lecture we heard how a secondary school teacher introduced him to *Paradise Lost*. Amongst his reading must have been the tales of both C.S. Lewis and Tolkien, both of which he would later strongly criticise. He went on to read English at Oxford; a mixed experience for him, as can be seen from his assertion that he learnt more about the novel from a morning trying to write one than he had from the three years of his degree. Eighteen years of teaching followed, twelve in middle schools and six lecturing to trainee teachers at Westminster College, Oxford; after which he turned to writing full-time.

The breadth of Pullman's reading comes through in the wide variety of influences detectable in *His Dark Materials*, and not only the obvious suspects such as Milton and Blake, but also quantum physics and the notion of multiple universes. One absolutely key text, according to Pullman himself, is an early nineteenth century short essay by Heinrich von Kleist called, 'On the Marionette Theatre'. In Kleist's essay, perhaps more accurately described as a meditation, one of the characters says that both puppets and animals have a grace lacking in human beings, because human beings tend to be literally 'self-conscious', and so are inhibited in what they do. Self-consciousness, however, is a consequence of eating the fruit in the Garden, and cannot be undone, because God has barred us from returning to Eden. Kleist's suggestion is that the only solution is to go forward, embracing consciousness, in the hope that we may find an unguarded door back into Eden. That is, to carry on growing in consciousness, awareness and wisdom until eventually the quality of grace reappears, and we are reborn into the purity of puppets and animals.

Here is another retelling, or perhaps deciphering, of *Paradise Lost*, and one that Pullman has made his own. Notice that Kleist's essay makes no reference to the incarnation. In this version of the Fall, salvation is not achieved through the 'new

Adam', that is Christ, but in embracing the consequences of the Fall. It is through increasing in wisdom and awareness that human beings can find a way back into Eden, that is the state of grace which they have lost, through an 'unguarded back door.'

This kind of view has a long pedigree. In the early Christian centuries it was known as 'gnosticism', from the Greek word for 'knowledge'. Adherents saw the world as a place of illusion and evil, in which salvation was won through enlightened teaching and wisdom. They, too, saw the serpent, Adam and Eve as positive figures. They even had their own creation myth, in which the Creator of material things is an inferior deity, separate from the Creator of the spiritual realms. Pullman's 'Authority', or 'God' is less even than this, being simply the most powerful of the angels. Only, so, presumably, is this 'Authority' able to die.

You can see from all of this why Archbishop Rowan, while welcoming the success of Pullman's books, is nonetheless concerned that teachers are equipped to tease out what in Pullman's world is, and is not, reflective of orthodox Christianity. When he and Pullman met and conversed on the National Theatre stage, the first question the Archbishop asked was about the absence of Jesus from *His Dark Materials*. The Archbishop commented that the portrayal of the Church is of an institution with no redemption to offer, but one that is entirely about control. 'If only', was his tongue in cheek response to this.

Intriguingly, Pullman responds by saying that Jesus is the likely subject of his next book, which subsequently has even been given a title, *The Book of Dust*. He doesn't really answer the question about the Church, but talks about his sense that the Fall is, and I quote,

> …like any myth… not something that has happened once in a historical sense but happens again and again in all our lives. The Fall is something that happens to all of us when we move from childhood through adolescence to adulthood and I wanted to find a way of presenting it as something natural and good, and to be welcomed and… celebrated, rather than deplored.

The Archbishop, is his courteous way, responds that adolescence is, from his perspective, something neutral; it's just what happens. For, I hope it is needless to say, the Church has does not deplore adolescence. As we discussed last week, however, Pullman criticises C.S. Lewis on precisely this point; that the adolescent Susan is excluded from Paradise for being 'too keen on being grown up' and 'interested in nothing nowadays except nylons and lipstick and invitations.' I argued that Lewis need not be read as deploring adolescence, but even if he were, he hardly speaks for the Christian tradition on this point.

Lewis is arguably more concerned with how, in adulthood, one can recapture the spiritual receptivity of the child; actually not that different a question from Heinrich von Kleist's exploration of how adult human beings can attain the grace seen in puppets and animals. And indeed Kleist, Pullman and the Archbishop all agree that the way back to Eden is barred, and that the only is forward.

The question then becomes, well, what is to resource us on our journey? For Christians, the resources of their faith, Scripture, worship, doctrine, ethics, music, stories and poetry; all the various aspects that contribute to the Christian vision and worldview, are precisely there as nourishment for moving forward from Eden to our destiny in the new Jerusalem, the heavenly city pictured in the final pages of the Bible, in the book of Revelation. What then, for Pullman and other atheist, are *their* resources for the journey?

In a lecture given at the University of East Anglia, Pullman has argued that 'we can learn what's good and what's bad, what's generous and unselfish, what's cruel and mean, from fiction'; there is no need to consult scripture. I can go a little way with Pullman on this one, being convinced that that theatre and literature do indeed have much to teach us. But this clearly will not do. Quite apart from where this leaves those who don't read much, one of the themes that have emerged through this series is how works of literature can be interpreted in completely opposing ways. The lens or worldview though which the reader interprets is crucial.

For the Christians, the lens is Christ shaped, and his Christ's story is privileged over all others. If Pullman or anyone wants to reject this, it is fair to ask what story they have put in its place. Pullman, as I far as I can tell, offers a story that is a combination of Gnosticism and the European enlightenment, seeing human growth as emerging from studying and thinking, from experience and the attainment of wisdom, without any controlling authority save our own reason and imagination, as the way forward. And in this he wants to find allies in figures such as Milton and Blake.

In these lectures I have argued that Blake's statement that Milton was 'of the Devil's party without knowing it', a view wholly embraced by Pullman, is based on a misreading of *Paradise Lost* and thoroughly mistaken. The ultimate irony is to be found in the last sentence of *His Dark Materials*, where Lyra proclaims that after the great task now is to build the 'republic of heaven'. The 'republic of heaven' is precisely how Milton saw the purpose of the English revolution. For from involving the death of God, he saw this as God's will for the English nation, and a turning away from God as the reason for its failure.

So finally, why have I included Pullman as one of God's storytellers, despite his atheism? Several reasons. Because his inversion of the Christian story, as Archbishop Rowan has suggested, can be a positive resource for those who want to understand the real thing. The Scripture Union has produced a Bible study on *His Dark Materials*, on that basis that engaging with the work should encourage Christians 'to dig into their Bibles, and get to know them better.' Some atheists, I have found, are fascinated by theological themes and questions of transcendence and meaning, and Pullman is one such. As a story-teller, just like Milton and Lewis, he is seeking to imaginatively explore the truth about the human condition. I am sure he would have loved to have been a member of C.S. Lewis' circle of Inklings (like him, all Oxford residents) where he would have found others as in love with Milton and the sheer power of storytelling as himself, for all the fierce debates he would have engendered.

Pullman's faults as a story-teller in fact mirror those of Lewis. Last week I used Keats phrase about readers instinctively disliking work that has a 'palpable design' on them; that is when an underlying agenda disturbs the flow of the story. This sometimes happens in Lewis, and it is exactly this fault that marrs the final book of *His Dark Materials*. An example is when Mary Malone explicitly describes Christianity as a 'mistake.'

On the other hand, Pullman does see himself as a 'story-teller' rather than a 'story-maker', having spoken about feeling like the 'servant of the story'. In this sense, although he would not be happy with the implicit theology, he is a 'sub-creator' like Lewis or Milton, working away at a story which he has not invented from scratch, but which is somehow looking to be expressed through him. The fact that his most famous work is a reworking of themes from Genesis 1-3 only adds to this.

You may remember that in my first lecture I posed a series of questions, and for the remainder of this lecture I propose to revisit these. One of these was precisely about storytellers as 'sub-creators' and whether stories really could be regarded as, potentially at least, vehicles of divine truth.

I hope that as we've engaged successively with Milton, Lewis and Pullman, we've seen that stories can indeed be a medium for exploring the deepest questions about both humanity and divinity. But just in case you still doubt this, let's think for a moment about Holy Scripture. Today we hear much about the authority of the Bible, and yet it's not the sort of book most people would associate with the word *authority*. For a start, it's not a list of rules, although it does contain many commandments in various places. Nor is it a set of doctrines, although it does proclaim great truths about God, Jesus and the world. Most of its books, both in the Old Testament and the New, can best be described as story, as narrative.

So how can a *story* be authoritative? A commanding officer who begins, 'Once upon a time…' will not retain his authority for long. If a company accountant sends out a short story rather than a definitive set of accounts, they are likely to find themselves unemployed. On the other hand, if the commanding officer is briefing his soldiers before going to Afghanistan, giving them the background to their task, what has happened before, what the plans are now, will be essential if they are to carry out their mission effectively. And if the accountant, having failed to persuade individuals and departments to curb their spending, sends out the story of a similar company recently made bankrupt, that might make the point more effectively than any set of figures.

There are many other ways in which narratives do indeed exercise authority, and change the way people think and behave. A well told story, whether on radio or TV, in print or at the cinema or theatre, has the potential to open the imagination, to enlarge understanding, and offer new insights about the human and divine. And the Bible, while made up many individual books, does (through the lens of Christ) tell one overarching story, from creation to consummation, and individuals are invited to shape their lives in the light of it.

The main chapters in this story are set out in the Christian creeds. Far from being a simple list of propositional beliefs, the creeds are narrative in structure, telling those who say them from whence they've come, the difference made by Christ, and where they are headed. In this sense, to refer to another of the themes from my first lecture, the stories and doctrines of the Christian faith are not separate things, but bound up with another. Doctrines help to decipher stories, and stories to illuminate doctrines.

My opening lecture made the point that many contemporary critics of contemporary Christianity, such as Richard Dawkins, do not get this at all. They assume that Christianity is all about dogmatism, proposition and rationality, and fail to engage with the Christian worldview and the Christian imagination. I mentioned Archbishop Rowan's book on the Russian novelist Dostoyevsky, partly written to offer a riposte to the Dawkins' of this world, showing how the Christian worldview and imagination have shaped the writings of a particular creative mind. In my own way I have tried to show how the Christian vision has influenced and informed the life and work of Milton, C.S. Lewis and indeed Philip Pullman, for all his atheism.

We have seen how all three of these have engaged with the doctrine of the Fall, in a way that I hope has illuminated yet another of the questions from lecture one: what significance we might find nowadays in the Fall, and in the associated doctrine of original sin. In *Paradise Lost* Milton used it to explain to himself the failure of the English revolution; in *Perelandra* Lewis drew on it to explore how a totally free being, without divine manipulation, can freely carry out what God desires; and in *His Dark Materials*, Pullman finds in it a way of dramatising what it is to be fully human, as we move from childhood to adulthood.

The multiple ways in which the Fall and original sin can illuminate the most difficult contemporary problems is beyond the scope of this series. I will mention, however, as an example of what I mean, an excellent book by Alastair McFadyen called *Bound to Sin – Abuse, Holocaust and the Christian Doctrine of Sin*. It explore two concrete situations: the sexual abuse of children, and the holocaust; drawing on secular ways of analysing and exploring both, while also offering the distinct perspective that arises from the Christian understanding of sin. Mention of such traumatic issues may also help us to see that Pullman's notion of 'going forward' sustained only by literature and our developing experience and wisdom, is likely to be insufficient in tackling our deepest and most intractable problems.

Last year I read a short article on mission by the Revd Michael Wilkie, currently working for a mission agency in Argentina. His conclusion is that 'it's the stories – not the doctrine – that people want to hear.' I understand the sentiment, but would want to qualify it by saying that the two are not as separate as his statement implies. But perhaps Michael Wilkie means something like Archbishop Rowan, in dialogue with Pullman, commenting on religious education in schools:

> I've seen some RE text books which do give you that rather uncomfortable impression that you're looking [at faith] from outside. 'Ooh, isn't that interesting?' And it doesn't really give you much sense of what it feels like to be religious, why it's difficult to be religious, why it hurts to be religious, why people want to stop being religious, and why people want to start being religious. And one of the ways you can do this is by personal narrative, which is why I'm interested in the role of fiction and autobiography in religious education.

Fiction and autobiography, on this view, are not peripheral to communicating the Christian faith, but have a key role in evoking what it feels like to be a person of faith. I think that when I read C.S. Lewis as a child, the Narnia stories gave a sense of this, long before I had any notion of their Christian content; at their best they evoked a strange feeling, a landscape, of what Lewis called 'Joy', of that which is both frightening but also powerfully attractive. A shame, perhaps, that Pullman must have first read these stories with the eyes of an adult. It is hard not to see his strong criticism of Lewis's storytelling as overbound up with his rejection of Christianity; and given that the Narnia stories, with their multiple worlds, helped to prepare the ground for Pullman's own stories, not to see this is rather ungracious.

In my first lecture I wondered if understanding the significance of *story* for Christianity is key to the mission of the contemporary Church, as it seemed to have been central in the conversion of C.S. Lewis. You will be in little doubt by now that in my view twenty-first century mission does indeed hinge on the storytelling abilities of the Church, both corporately and individually. I agree with the American theologian and ethicist Stanley Hauerwas, who argues that stories have a key role in shaping communities. A nation, a school, even a company or any social grouping, defines itself by telling a common story. More than this, the stories a community tells itself will effect what that community considers to be ethical. So, for example, Jesus' story of the Good Samaritan is more powerful and helpful than an abstract moral principle about helping other people. The Church, then, whatever else it may be, is a community telling the stories that make the Christian virtues possible. Where is the equivalent community for atheists, and what story will they tell?

Churches up and down the country, not least this cathedral church, are therefore called to be 'communities of the story', embodying the story of Jesus Christ in their common life, worship, and serving of the society in which they are set. In terms of Christian mission, Pullman's own mantra, 'Tell them stories' is sound advice.

Many other writers, it seems to me, are needed to follow our Archbishop's lead, and show the impact of the Christian imagination and worldview on all manner of people. They might be writers, or ordinary people caught up in dramatic events, or even politicians, celebrities, scientists or comedians. Teachers of religious education should be encouraged to tell the great Biblical stories to their classes, rather than focusing on abstract ethical issues or comparative religion. And I don't know if our generation is likely to raise up storytellers of the calibre of Milton or C.S. Lewis to help us, but I'd love to see this happen - and I'm encouraged by the recent success of William Paul Young's *The Shack*, a novel which centres on a powerful and concrete portrayal of God as Trinity.

May I end on a personal note. Preparing these lectures has been a personal odyssey for me, and I've learnt in a huge amount in the process. I cannot tell you how grateful I am, in my debut series as Chancellor, to have had such a sympathetic and responsive audience. I hope what I'm about to say won't make you groan, but I can now say much more confidently than four lectures ago, that I can envisage doing this again next year! I'm already pondering topics, and if you want to name a subject you'd like to hear addressed, why not write it down and pass it my way – in addition to, or instead of, a question for the session in a fortnight's time.

Well, I'm done. For now I've no more to say about *God's Storytellers – from Milton to C.S. Lewis and Philip Pullman*. Thank you once again for your attendance and attention.