

# His Controversial Materials: Philip Pullman and Religious Narrative Identity

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## Introduction

Philip Pullman's *His Dark Materials*, a popular fantasy trilogy following the adventures of an adolescent protagonist through parallel worlds, has garnered both fierce praise and ardent opposition in recent years. Pullman's literary achievements were recognised in 1996 when he was awarded the prestigious Carnegie Medal for the first novel in the trilogy *Northern Lights*. He concluded his acceptance speech with the declaration:

All stories teach, whether the storyteller intends them to or not. They teach the world we create. They teach the morality we live by. They teach it much more effectively than moral precepts and instructions... We don't need lists of rights and wrongs, tables of do's and don'ts: we need books, time and silence. Thou shalt not is soon forgotten, but Once upon a time lasts forever.<sup>1</sup>

This paper will focus on the popular criticism of Pullman's trilogy and examine the claim that lies at the heart of the controversy, that reading the novels is somehow dangerous to a reader's religious identity. Through the examination of the popular controversy surrounding *His Dark Materials*, this work will explore the relationship between stories and religious identity by constructing the concept of religious narrative identity; a framework developed through the application of Ricoeur's mimetic narrative identity to narratives with religious implications, and will subsequently argue that a narrative has the power to alter an individual's religious narrative identity.

Written over seven years, Pullman's *His Dark Materials* is approximately thirteen-hundred pages long and is comprised of the novels *Northern Lights*, *The Subtle Knife*, and *The Amber Spyglass*. The trilogy draws on wide ranging and disparate sources including ancient Greek philosophical concepts, the Bible, John Milton, a Finnish telephone directory, quantum physics, and superstring theory.<sup>2</sup> *His Dark Materials* follows orphaned Lyra Belacqua as she traverses fantastic worlds in a quest to overthrow the

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<sup>1</sup> Philip Pullman, 'Carnegie Medal Acceptance Speech', *Philip Pullman: His Dark Materials*, at <http://www.randomhouse.com/features/pullman/author/carnegie.html>. Accessed 24/12/09.

<sup>2</sup> Nicholas Tucker, *Darkness Visible: Inside the World of Philip Pullman* (Cambridge: Wizard Books, 2003), p. 89.

oppressive forces of the Church and establish a new order based around mysterious golden particles known as Dust.

Among the wider public Pullman's narrative is considered a classic, receiving both widespread media attention and critical acclaim, including the presentation of the Carnegie Prize for literature and the esteemed Whitbread award.<sup>3</sup> The trilogy has also been adapted into a number of media, including a BBC Radio play, a Royal Theatre production and the film, *The Golden Compass*, and has also spawned numerous reading companions and guides.<sup>4</sup> *His Dark Materials* has emerged as one of the most widely read fantasy series produced in the past decade, trailing only J. K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* in popularity.<sup>5</sup> In a contest that surveyed the British reading public in 2003, Pullman's trilogy was held to be the third most popular book in Britain, ranked behind J. R. R. Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* and Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*.<sup>6</sup>

### **The Religious Controversy Surrounding *His Dark Materials***

By 2002 Pullman's trilogy had escaped much of the religious controversy that had plagued Rowling's *Harry Potter*. Pullman, baffled by Rowling's censure on the grounds of Satanism and his perceived escape of religious condemnation, commented:

I've been surprised by how little criticism I've got. Harry Potter's been taking all the flak... Meanwhile, I've been flying under the radar, saying things that are far more subversive than anything poor old Harry has said. My books are about killing God.<sup>7</sup>

The author, it seems, spoke too soon. Up until this point Pullman's greatest critic had been Peter Hitchens who characterised the trilogy as the sort of work that that atheists would pray for if atheists prayed, and dubbed Pullman "the most dangerous author in Britain".<sup>8</sup> In 2003 the film options to *Northern Lights*

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<sup>3</sup> Donna Freitas, and Jason King, *Killing the Imposter God: Philip Pullman's Spiritual Imagination in His Dark Materials* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2007), p. xi.

<sup>4</sup> See Laurie Frost, *The Elements of His Dark Materials: A Guide to Philip Pullman's Trilogy* (Buffalo Grove, IL: The Fell Press, 2006); Paul Simpson, *The Rough Guide to Philip Pullman's His Dark Materials* (London: Rough Guides Ltd, 2007); Claire Squires, *Philip Pullman Master Storyteller: A Guide to the Worlds of His Dark Materials* (London: Continuum, 2007).

<sup>5</sup> Kurt Bruner, and Jim Ware, *Shedding Light on His Dark Materials* (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 2007), p. 8.

<sup>6</sup> Freitas and King, *Killing the Imposter God*, p. xi.

<sup>7</sup> Steve Meacham, 'The Shed Where God Died', *The Sydney Morning Herald* (13 December, 2003).

<sup>8</sup> Peter Hitchens, 'This is the Most Dangerous Author in Britain', *The Mail on Sunday* (27 January, 2002), at <http://home.wlv.ac.uk/~bu1895/hitchens.htm>. Accessed 24/12/09.

were purchased by New Line Cinema, and controversy erupted in the form of newspaper, magazine and online commentary on *His Dark Materials* and the film *The Golden Compass*, fuelled by interviews and online observations provided by Philip Pullman.

Pullman and *His Dark Materials* have been condemned by a number of commentators who regard the trilogy as a text diametrically opposed to organised religion, especially the Christian faith. In an article evaluating the controversy surrounding Pullman, British author and journalist Nick Thorpe states that numerous “right wingers” and religious groups regard Pullman’s trilogy as a “semi-satanic” text that undermines Christianity.<sup>9</sup> Rupert Kay, the chief executive of the British Association of Christian Teachers, has condemned Pullman’s trilogy as “shameless blasphemy”.<sup>10</sup> It has been reported that in response to the controversy sparked by the film *The Golden Compass*, a school board in Canada has ordered the first novel of the series removed from school shelves.<sup>11</sup> One can only assume that the school board had the foresight to confiscate *Northern Lights*’ incendiary counterparts from the shelves, given that the final novels of *His Dark Materials* see the death of a pretender God explicitly affiliated with both the Jewish and Christian tradition and the subsequent destruction of the Judeo-Christian meta-narrative. Screenwriter and chairwoman of Act One, a mentoring organisation for Christians in Hollywood, Barbara Nicolosi, characterises the multi-verse of *His Dark Materials* as nihilistic and rooted in chaos. Nicolosi maintains that the trilogy is irreconcilable with Christian faith dismissing the novels as “an atheistic, angry and at times polemic story”.<sup>12</sup> Pullman’s novels explicitly condemn the Judeo-Christian religion and proffer a secular utopia in its wake, and to some extent Pullman’s detractors have a fair point, especially in light of Pullman’s

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<sup>9</sup> Nick Thorpe, ‘Philip Pullman’, *Times Online* (4 August, 2002), at [http://entertainment.timesonline.co.uk/tol/arts\\_and\\_entertainment/article1009649.ece](http://entertainment.timesonline.co.uk/tol/arts_and_entertainment/article1009649.ece). Accessed 24/12/09.

<sup>10</sup> Darren Devinet, ‘Pullman Film Set to Trigger Cries of Blasphemy’, *Western Mail* (5 September, 2006), at <http://www.hisdarkmaterials.org/news/his-dark-materials-movies/pullman-films-set-to-trigger-cries-of-blasphemy>. Accessed 24/12/09.

<sup>11</sup> The Telegraph, ‘The Devil in Philip Pullman’, *The Telegraph* (30 November, 2007), at <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/uknews/1571029/Profile-The-devil-in-Philip-Pullman.html>. Accessed 24/12/09.

<sup>12</sup> Peter Vere, ‘Atheism for Kids’, *The Washington Times* (25 October, 2007), at <http://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2007/oct/25/culture-atheism-for-kids/>. Accessed 24/12/09.

comment in the *Washington Post* in 2001 that revealed that he was “trying to undermine the basis of Christian belief” through the trilogy.<sup>13</sup>

In spite of the apparent diametric opposition of Pullman’s narratives to Christianity, not all Christian commentators weighing in on the novels are antagonistic towards the work. Indeed, Pullman has garnered praise from many Christian reviewers who acknowledge the trilogy’s anti-Christian themes and approach the novels as an opportunity for education and dialogue. Craig Detweiler, co-director of the pop culture and religious think tank Reel Spirituality, typifies the ‘liberal’ Christian response to the trilogy, acknowledging the power of writing and the validity of some of Pullman’s criticisms.<sup>14</sup> Detweiler applauds Pullman’s skills as an author commenting: “The writing of *His Dark Materials* is so masterful that it is bound to spark the spiritual imagination of anyone who reads it”.<sup>15</sup> His commentary concludes that, “Pullman takes license in pointing out the scary, false gods and destructive idols we’ve created... In that sense... he’s doing a great service”.<sup>16</sup> This opinion is echoed in comments made by Sister Rose Paccate, director of the Pauline Centre of Media Studies, acknowledging that Pullman’s books portray benevolence to children and a God figure, but one different to the Christian God. Paccate discourages Christian parents from boycotting *The Golden Compass* and Pullman’s books, stating, “If we have faith what are we afraid of?”<sup>17</sup> Affirming this line of thought, Karl Bastian, pastor and founding member of Kidology.org, a leading internet resource for those who minister to children, regards the Christian reaction to *His Dark Materials* as a “judgmental and self-righteous” in-fight over “something that isn’t ours to begin with”.<sup>18</sup> Bastian argues that “in our rush to ‘protect the children’” Christians abandon their calling “to reach a lost world for Christ”.<sup>19</sup> Bastian further calls for

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<sup>13</sup> CNN, ‘Is “Golden Compass” Selling Atheism to Kids?’ *CNN Entertainment News* (3 December, 2007), at

<http://edition.cnn.com/2007/SHOWBIZ/Movies/12/03/golden.compass.religion.ap/index.html>. Accessed 30/10/2008.

<sup>14</sup> Anon., ‘Nicole Kidman’s Film The Golden Compass Panned by Religious Groups’, *The Daily Telegraph* (30 October, 2007), at

<http://www.news.com.au/dailytelegraph/story/0,22049,22672031-5001026,00.html>. Accessed 24/12/09.

<sup>15</sup> Anon., ‘Nicole Kidman’s film The Golden Compass Panned’.

<sup>16</sup> Anon., ‘Nicole Kidman’s film The Golden Compass Panned’.

<sup>17</sup> CNN, ‘Is ‘Golden Compass’ Selling Atheism to Kids?’

<sup>18</sup> Karl Bastian, ‘A Golden Opportunity and an Open Letter to Philip Pullman’, *Kidology*, at [https://www.kidology.org/zones/zone\\_post.asp?post\\_id=4228](https://www.kidology.org/zones/zone_post.asp?post_id=4228). Accessed 24/12/09.

<sup>19</sup> Bastian, ‘A Golden Opportunity’.

tolerance, understanding, and dialogue for those like Pullman, who appear disillusioned with Christianity.

Author Donna Freitas has welcomed Pullman's questioning of the traditional image of God deeming online discussions on Christian websites "fearful to the point of hysteria".<sup>20</sup> The Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams, seems to agree with the importance of questioning religion, suggesting that the trilogy be introduced into religious education programmes in British schools, adding, "I only hope that teachers are equipped to tease out what in Pullman's world is and is not reflective of Christian teaching as Christians understand it".<sup>21</sup> This response demonstrates that the fear of Pullman's novels is not endemic in every Christian, and also speaks to the malleability of interpretation of the trilogy.

*His Dark Materials'* alternative ideology and censure of the Judeo-Christian tradition has been criticised, not only on the basis of theology, but on the level of the danger of the alternative message. Indeed, much of the outrage levelled at Pullman and his trilogy regards the transformative power of words and the perceived threat of the explicit anti-religious sentiment located within the narrative. Sophia Sproule, editor of the Catholic monthly magazine *This Rock*, views Pullman's novels as "a vitriolic denunciation of religious faith in general, especially of Christianity and most pointedly of the Catholic Church", that is "potentially damaging to the spiritual well-being of young readers".<sup>22</sup> Sproule further describes *His Dark Materials* as dangerous, contending that Pullman's novels represent "not merely a wholesale rejection of religion" but "an invitation to reject God".<sup>23</sup> Prominent Catholic defender of *Harry Potter*, Seattle blogger Mark Shea, does not display the same tolerance to Pullman's multi-verse as he lends to Rowling's boy wizard. Shea describes Pullman as an unsubtle "zealous atheist", who uses his novels to "proselytize for atheism".<sup>24</sup> He argues that it is Pullman's talent as a writer that makes *His Dark Materials* so "insidious", and he goes on to contend that Pullman is "dangerous" precisely because "he promotes atheism through a children's story", a genre

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<sup>20</sup> John Howell, 'Are Christian Reactions to *The Golden Compass* Hysterical or Justified?', *SFF Media* (20 December, 2007), at <http://sffmedia.com/content/view/159/38/>. Accessed 24/12/09.

<sup>21</sup> Robert Butler, 'The Dark Materials Debate: Life, God, the Universe', *The Telegraph* (17 March, 2004), at <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/arts/main.jhtml?xml=/arts/2004/03/17/bodark17.xml&page=1>. Accessed 24/12/09.

<sup>22</sup> Vere, 'Atheism for Kids'.

<sup>23</sup> Vere, 'Atheism for Kids'.

<sup>24</sup> Vere, 'Atheism for Kids'.

that individuals “pay attention to”.<sup>25</sup> Writing for the London Institute for Contemporary Christianity Mark Greene discusses the power of words and their danger in the hands of a gifted storyteller. He likens Pullman to the tempting serpent of the Fall, commenting:

you only need to go back to the Garden of Eden to see how dangerous it can be when a subtle wordsmith whispers in someone’s ear that God is not really good, that he does not have your best interests at heart, that he does not mean what he says.<sup>26</sup>

Greene suggests *His Dark Materials* is a vehicle Pullman has employed to fulfil his agenda of destroying Christianity. Greene’s fear of the transformative power of Pullman’s novels is echoed in the attitude of Pete Vere, co-author of *Pied Piper of Atheism: Philip Pullman and Children’s Fantasy*, who likens Pullman to Satan, and describes his novels as “a direct attack upon God and the Christian faith”.<sup>27</sup> Vere insists that *His Dark Materials* foists “dark ideas upon unsuspecting children”, arguing that Pullman is “the real enemy when it comes to subverting young people through literature”.<sup>28</sup> Journalist Claudia FitzHerbert encapsulates the critical negative response to Pullman’s novels, declaring “Christian parents beware: his books can damage your child’s faith”.<sup>29</sup> These critics suggest that Pullman’s alternative view of religion is dangerous, holding Pullman’s words to be powerful and somehow transformative upon an individual’s religious concepts.

The idea that a narrative can sway an individual’s religious beliefs is demonstrated within the popular controversy by the representation of Pullman and C. S. Lewis as diametrically opposed purveyors of fantasy propaganda. Pullman has been a vocal critic of Lewis’s *Narnia* series, launching a scathing attack on the novels in the critique *The Darkside of Narnia* in 1998.<sup>30</sup> In this essay he condemns Lewis’s work as “one of the most ugly and poisonous things” he has ever read, sighting the novels as racist, misogynistic, and loathsome.<sup>31</sup> Sarah Lyall, in the *New York Times* article, “The Man Who Dared Make Religion the Villain”, contrasted the work of the two authors, holding

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<sup>25</sup> Vere, ‘Atheism for Kids’.

<sup>26</sup> Mark Greene, ‘Pullman’s Purpose’, *The London Institute for Contemporary Christianity*, last accessed 30 October 2008 at <http://www.licc.org.uk/articles/pullmans-purpose>.

<sup>27</sup> Pete Vere, ‘Philip Pullman and the Seduction of Children’, *The Interim* (November 2007), at <http://www.catholiceducation.org/articles/arts/al0331.htm>. Accessed 24/12/09.

<sup>28</sup> Vere, ‘Philip Pullman and the Seduction of Children’.

<sup>29</sup> Claudia FitzHerbert, ‘This Author is Original but also Dangerous’, *The Telegraph* (22 January, 2002), at <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/uknews/1382385/This-author-is-original-and-also-dangerous.html>. Accessed 24/10/10.

<sup>30</sup> Philip Pullman, ‘The Dark Side of Narnia’, *The Guardian* (1 October, 1998).

<sup>31</sup> Pullman, ‘The Dark Side of Narnia’.

that Pullman's novels offer "an explicit alternative" to Lewis's series and "their pervasive Christian message".<sup>32</sup> Lyall asserts that *The Chronicles of Narnia* depict a world in which heroes find true happiness only after death when they are welcomed into heaven. Pullman is ardently opposed to such an idea and describes Lewis's message as "so anti-life, so cruel, so un-just".<sup>33</sup> Lyall contrasts Lewis's message with Pullman's argument for a Republic of heaven in which "people live as fully and richly as they can because there is no life beyond".<sup>34</sup> Journalist Erica Wagner, in her article "Divinely Inspired", discusses Pullman's attitude towards Lewis's novels, depicting Pullman as a writer intent on pulling "down the moral framework that has underpinned Western civilisation".<sup>35</sup> She expounds upon the idea of the two series being opposing forms of propaganda, citing Pullman's view of Lewis's novels as sly propaganda "slipped in by the back door" and subsequently calls the author to recognise that his trilogy could be viewed in the same light".<sup>36</sup> Pullman concedes Wagner's point, stating:

I suppose you could say that these books are an answer to the challenge thrown down by Lewis in the Narnia books. All books teach, whether they intend to or not. You can't help but reveal your world view in the story you tell.<sup>37</sup>

The idea that Pullman has written a narrative to be viewed in contrast to Lewis's *Chronicles of Narnia* is common among critics. Comparing the work of the two authors, Peter Hitchens describes Pullman as the "anti-Lewis", a man who writes children's literature that mocks God and ridicules the church.<sup>38</sup> Hitchens acknowledges the influence that reading *The Chronicles of Narnia* has on children's faith and states: "Children instinctively like Lewis's enthralling stories and often do not even notice their religious message, though it frequently goes deep into their mind and emerges later".<sup>39</sup> He goes on to

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<sup>32</sup> Sarah Lyall, 'The Man Who Dared Make Religion Villain', *New York Times* (7 November, 2000), at

<http://query.nytimes.com/gst/fullpage.html?res=9801E0DD1339F934A35752C1A9669C8B63&sec=&spon=&pagewanted=all>. Accessed 24/12/09.

<sup>33</sup> Lyall, 'The Man Who Dared Make Religion Villain'.

<sup>34</sup> Lyall, 'The Man Who Dared Make Religion Villain'.

<sup>35</sup> Erica Wagner, 'Divinely Inspired: Philip Pullman', *The Times* (18 October, 2000), at <http://www.ericawagner.co.uk/journalism.php?section=journalism2&id=14>. Accessed 24/12/09.

<sup>36</sup> Wagner, 'Divinely Inspired: Philip Pullman'.

<sup>37</sup> Wagner, 'Divinely Inspired: Philip Pullman'.

<sup>38</sup> Hitchens, 'This is the Most Dangerous Author in Britain'; Peter Hitchens, 'A Labour of Loathing', *The Spectator* (18 January, 2003), at <http://www.lewrockwell.com/spectator/spec11.html>. Accessed 24/12/09.

<sup>39</sup> Hitchens, 'This is the Most Dangerous Author in Britain'.

describe *His Dark Materials* as “an alternative and an antidote” to the “messages of faith, forgiveness, grace and resurrection” contained within the *Narnia* books.<sup>40</sup> The contrast between Pullman and Lewis elucidates a prevalent opinion among Christian critics that fantasy fiction is used to influence the beliefs of young readers in accepting Christianity.

The controversy surrounding *His Dark Materials* has characterised Pullman and his trilogy in a myriad of ways, condemning the novels as explicitly anti-religious, an opportunity for dialogue, a dangerous transformative text, and as a form of anti-Christian fantasy propaganda. The numerous representations of the series and its author demand the consideration of Pullman’s agenda in writing these novels.

Pullman has been an unflinching voice in the whirlwind of controversy evoked by *His Dark Materials*, displaying a sense of humour, intelligences and explicit anti-religious sentiment in turn. The author appears to believe that the idea that reading his books could be a threat to a reader’s concepts about religion is somewhat comical. He admits that he had received some abusive mail after the completion of the first two books:

I used to get letters accusing me of promoting witchcraft or Satanism, so my reply to that was ‘Wait until you’ve read all three books, and if you find that you’ve inadvertently become a Satanist, you can write to the publisher and get your money back’.<sup>41</sup>

In 2002 Pullman condemned the argument that he had an agenda as “laughable” and insisted that he was “not preaching a sermon” but rather “telling a story... showing various characters whom I’ve invented saying things and doing things and acting out beliefs which they have, and not necessarily which I have”.<sup>42</sup> Pullman has stated that he writes to tell a story, not with any political or religious aim in mind, but concedes that, “religion is part of what makes us what we are”.<sup>43</sup> Although he states that he is a “story teller” and *His Dark Materials* is not a sermon, he displays his overt antipathy towards organised religion and their role in morality:

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<sup>40</sup> Hitchens, ‘This is the Most Dangerous Author in Britain’.

<sup>41</sup> Anon., ‘I am of the Devil’s Party’, *The Telegraph* (29 January, 2002), at <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/core/Content/displayPrintable.jhtml;jsessionid=0DNOOAYUR52DXQFIQMFCEGAVCBQYIV0?xml=/arts/2002/01/29/bopull27.xml&site=6&page=0>. Accessed 24/12/09.

<sup>42</sup> Susan Roberts, ‘A Dark Agenda’, *Surefish* (November 2002), at [http://www.surefish.co.uk/culture/features/pullman\\_interview.htm](http://www.surefish.co.uk/culture/features/pullman_interview.htm). Accessed 24/12/09.

<sup>43</sup> Diane Roback, ‘Philip Pullman Confronts His Daemons in New York’, *Publishers Weekly* (1 November, 2007), at <http://www.publishersweekly.com/article/CA6496518.html>. Accessed 24/12/09.

The great lie the church has put out over the centuries is that all morality is due entirely to what God has said. We have the keys to all morality and if you don't believe us we'll kill you, and then you'll go to hell anyway just to teach you a lesson.<sup>44</sup>

Pullman is very much against anyone dictating how his novels are read, arguing for “the democracy of reading” a “space that opens up between the reader's mind and the book in a private space”.<sup>45</sup> Despite this “democracy of reading”, Pullman recognises the power of stories to “teach morality”.<sup>46</sup> Developing this argument, he states that individuals teach morality today the same way people always have by telling those “stories, fables and parable, examples and fairy tales” that “enlist the child's own imagination on the side of moral understanding”.<sup>47</sup>

As well as claiming that he is “trying to undermine the basis of Christian belief” Pullman has also acknowledged that the controversy would be likely to boost the sales of the trilogy.<sup>48</sup> Pullman has consistently stated that he is opposed to the horrors perpetrated in the name of organised religion and that anything valuable within the history of religion comes from humanity, not a remote god.<sup>49</sup> Whether or not Pullman is attempting to change the religious beliefs of a reader is unclear, however, he has displayed a feeling of hostility towards religion and has acknowledged that you “can't help but reveal your world view in the story you tell”.<sup>50</sup>

Pullman's distaste for organised religion alone may not alter the way an individual responds to the trilogy. As the controversy surrounding Pullman and his trilogy has shown, there is nothing contained within a novel that will be true for all people at all times. Pullman states:

We all negotiate the meanings of things as we read them... My reading of the book, while no less valid than anybody else's, is no more valid. If I were to say, this means that, or you must read it in that way, this would seem to have a particular authority that I don't want.<sup>51</sup>

Pullman seems to want individuals to approach his novels on their own terms, effectively undermining any agenda he may have possessed in writing the

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<sup>44</sup> Thorpe, ‘Philip Pullman’.

<sup>45</sup> Thorpe, ‘Philip Pullman’.

<sup>46</sup> Thorpe, ‘Philip Pullman’.

<sup>47</sup> Thorpe, ‘Philip Pullman’.

<sup>48</sup> Anon., ‘The Devil in Philip Pullman’.

<sup>49</sup> Philip Pullman, ‘I Must Create a System: Blake Society, 25 October, 2005’, *Philip-Pullman.com*, at [http://www.philip-pullman.com/assets\\_cm/files/PDF/i\\_must\\_create\\_a\\_system.pdf](http://www.philip-pullman.com/assets_cm/files/PDF/i_must_create_a_system.pdf). Accessed 24/12/09.

<sup>50</sup> Wagner, ‘Divinely Inspired: Philip Pullman’.

<sup>51</sup> Lyall, ‘The Man Who Dared Make Religion Villain’.

novels. This is not to say that Pullman's trilogy cannot alter the way an individual feels about religion. Deborah Forte, the co-producer of *The Golden Compass*, dismissed the controversy surrounding Pullman and *His Dark Materials* as a "tempest in a teapot".<sup>52</sup> And perhaps she was right; after all the final novel in the trilogy was published eight years ago, *The Golden Compass* performed reasonably at the box office, the trilogy has sold some 15 million copies, and no one has become a member of the Republic of heaven, or a Pullmanite. Indeed, more than fifty years has passed since Lewis's *Chronicles* were published, and the Church of Narnia does not exist either.

What does exist within the popular controversy, however, is a palpable fear of the transformative power of words, more specifically the transformative power of *His Dark Materials*, a work that explicitly decries organised religion and Judeo-Christian traditions, and offers in its wake a secular utopia. The validity of this fear as a reaction to the possible impact of the religious message contained within *His Dark Materials* is open to questioning. Doing so requires provoking the constructed concept of religious narrative identity.

### **Ricoeur and the Mimetic *Gravitas* of Narrative**

Ricoeur's initial contribution to the concept of narrative identity is located in the final volume of *Time and Narrative*, in which he ties the question of identity to narrative by asserting the response to the question "Who?" is to recount the story of a life.<sup>53</sup> Narratives make sense of identity in the context of time. Peter Brooks contends that:

Our very definition as human beings is very much bound up with the stories we tell about our own lives and the world in which we live.

We cannot, in our dreams, in our daydreams, our ambitious fantasies, avoid the imaginative imposition of form on life.<sup>54</sup>

What Brooks is suggesting here is that narratives are not simply articulations of an event but also the mental record of a life. Ricoeur argues that, "time becomes human time to the extent that it is organised after the manner of a narrative; narrative in turn is meaningful to the extent that it portrays the features of temporal existence".<sup>55</sup> The identity of an individual is predisposed by the designation of a name given on the basis of the conviction that the subject is constant through its diverse acts and words during its existence in

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<sup>52</sup> CNN, 'Is 'Golden Compass' Selling Atheism to Kids?'

<sup>53</sup> Paul Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, vol. 3, trans. Kathleen Blamey and David Pellauer (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), p. 246.

<sup>54</sup> Peter Brooks, 'The Law as Narrative and Rhetoric', in *Law Stories: Narrative and Rhetoric in the Law*, eds. Peter Brooks and Paul Gerwitz (New Haven: Yale, 1996), p. 19.

<sup>55</sup> Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, p. 3.

phenomenological time. The story told informs on the 'who' and the identity of this 'who' is known as narrative identity.

Ricoeur holds that there are two forms of identity, the amorphous narrative identity (*ipse*) and the constant identity of sameness (*idem*). Distinguishing between these two forms of identity Ricoeur contends that the narrative self is comprised of an ongoing process of self-constancy and self-rectification which relies on poetic imagination to fuse the different temporalities of the past, present and future. Ricoeur asserts that the identity of human subjects is recognised as a perpetual task of reinterpretation in the light of the narratives we tell ourselves and others.<sup>56</sup> His theory of narrative identity is influenced by Aristotle's understanding of how art, more specifically tragic poetry, imitates life. Ricoeur's concept of narrative representation draws upon the Aristotelian understanding of art as an interpretive imitation, *mimesis*, of the human world. Art, rather than being defective, is the interpretive expression of *mimesis* that deepens the meaning of the world, ordering it into a plot, *muthos*, and creating a world with its own independent form of narrative structure.<sup>57</sup> Narratives are seen as implements that render human reality more meaningful and understandable.<sup>58</sup> Further, according to Ricoeur, subjects, whether individual or communal, come to imagine and know themselves in the narratives they tell and are told through the concept of *Mimesis*, a framework which can be understood as cyclical interpretive and re-interpretive process.

*Mimesis* both constructs narrative identity and alters it through three mimetic meditations. *Mimesis I* or *Figuration* holds that human action always already prefigures narrative and concerns the world of action, or the pre-understandings of the reader. These pre-understandings refer to the implicit concepts that human beings possess regarding human action and its temporality. Ricoeur posits that even before reading a narrative an individual holds notions of human circumstance and action that order their world such as social rules and symbol systems. According to Ricoeur the world of action is structurally pre-narrative, as such any deliberate action, which can be understood by comparison to mere physical occurrences, implies a network of action concepts and practical understandings concerning them.<sup>59</sup> Therefore all

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<sup>56</sup> Richard Kearney, 'Narrative Imagination: Between Ethics and Poetics', in *Paul Ricoeur: The Hermeneutics of Action*, ed. Richard Kearney (London: SAGE Publications, 1996), p. 181.

<sup>57</sup> Theodore A Turnau, 'Inflecting the World: Popular Culture and the Perception of Evil', *Journal of Popular Culture*, vol. 38, no. 2 (November 2004), p. 386.

<sup>58</sup> Turnau, 'Inflecting the World', p. 386.

<sup>59</sup> Artio Laitinen, 'Charles Taylor and Paul Ricoeur on Self Interpretation and Narrative Identity', in *Narrative Research: Voices of Teachers and Philosophers*, eds Rauno Huttunen and Hannu Heikkinen (Jyväskylä: SoPhi 67, 2002), pp. 57-71.

readers bring with them life experiences, and concepts and understandings, that dictate the way they may understand a story.

Mimesis II or Configuration involves the imaginative emplotment of elements of human action occurring in Mimesis I into a narrative. Emplotment can be understood as the operation that draws a configuration out of a succession of events and transforms them into a narrative.<sup>60</sup> Emplotment operates in three ways: it mediates between individual events and the story as a whole; it integrates seemingly disparate elements such as agents, ends, means, interactions and circumstances; and it mediates the actions within time occurring within the narrative within time by both reflecting and resolving through its own temporal structure the paradox of temporality. Emplotment acts as the bridge between the pre-understandings of the temporality of practical action and the transfigured understanding of a re-ordered temporality achieved through Mimesis III.<sup>61</sup>

Mimesis III or Re-figuration, concerns the integration of the imaginative emplotment of human action into lived experience. Ricoeur's model for Re-figuration is based on Wolfgang Iser's phenomenology of reading that suggests that a narrative offers a set of instructions which the reader actualises or performs, whether passively or creatively.<sup>62</sup> It is the mediation where "the world of the text and the world of the reader" intersect, enabling the reader, to achieve a new evaluation of time and reality which will itself alter the world of action.<sup>63</sup> Mimesis III deals with "how we inhabit text worlds - and the effect of such habitation on the practical world of everyday life".<sup>64</sup> Ricoeur suggests three moments within the dialectic: i) Rhetoric of persuasion, the implied author's coercion or frustration of the reader; ii) Prescriptions for reading, the way in which the rhetorical persuasions are laced within the narrative in order to guide the reader and; and iii) Reader response, the way in which a reader responds to a narrative by actualising the text world and these actualisations impact upon the reader's world.<sup>65</sup> Ricoeur's concept of narrative identity possesses the idea of an interpretive tension between the author and the reader of the narrative. Turnau goes so far as to portray the implied author within Ricoeurian narrative identity as "a manipulator of worlds

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<sup>60</sup> Laitinen, 'Charles Taylor and Paul Ricoeur on Self Interpretation and Narrative Identity'.

<sup>61</sup> Mike Gray, 'Between Conversion and Subversion: Narrative Transformations in the *Harry Potter, Left Behind* and *His Dark Materials* Novels', *Accio.org.uk*, at <http://accio.org.uk/05/proc/mikegray.pdf>. Accessed 24/12/09.

<sup>62</sup> Kearney, 'Narrative Imagination: Between Ethics and Poetics', p. 182.

<sup>63</sup> Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*. vol. 1, p. 71.

<sup>64</sup> Turnau, 'Inflecting the World', p. 386.

<sup>65</sup> Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*. vol. 3, pp. 166-179.

and minds".<sup>66</sup> However, this author is not the only force at work within the framework of narrative identity. Ricoeur depicts the reader as an identity-in-process within a world in process.<sup>67</sup> The reader approaches the narrative through Mimesis I, and the subsequent patterns that order their existence. The narrative may upset these patterns, suggesting behaviours and instances in which the order of the reader's pre-narrative concepts is altered. This upset results in an increased complexity within the narrative itself, granting the reader new perspectives on the world of action. Ricoeur posits that it is within the world of the text that a reader possesses the ability to re-evaluate and perhaps alter their view of the world of action, risking no permanent consequences.<sup>68</sup> Ricoeur comments:

in the unreal sphere of fiction, we never tire of exploring new ways of evaluating actions and characters, the thought experiments we conduct in the laboratory of the imaginary are also explorations in the realm of good and evil.<sup>69</sup>

Therefore, though the reader of *His Dark Materials* will in all likelihood never kill a pretender God, re-enact the Fall, or save a multi-verse, it does not mean that these actions may not alter the way a reader feels about organised religion, sacrifice or death. A narrative provides an individual with a risk free kind of moral playground that affects an individual's assumptions about how their world works. Narrative identity is made, affected, unmade, and made again by the narratives which individuals are told and those they tell about themselves through the process of Mimesis.

This work in utilising the concept of narrative identity suggests that a narrative, in this case *His Dark Materials*, has the power to alter the beliefs and ideals of an individual. At the stage of Mimesis I, a reader approaches the text of the trilogy possessing patterns and notions that structure their world of action. At Mimesis II, Pullman has emplotted a succession of events into the narrative of *His Dark Materials*. Mimesis III concerns the intersection of the world of text and the world of action. Commentators contend that the novel's rhetoric of persuasion argues for a re-ordered concept of religiosity and this rhetoric is laced throughout the novels. However, it is up to the reader to actualise and re-order their pre-existing concepts in a type of thought experiment in order for Pullman's narrative to alter a reader's narrative identity.

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<sup>66</sup> Turnau, 'Inflecting the World', p. 386.

<sup>67</sup> Turnau, 'Inflecting the World', p. 387.

<sup>68</sup> Turnau, 'Inflecting the World', p. 387.

<sup>69</sup> Paul Ricoeur, *Oneself as Another*, trans. Kathleen Blamey (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1992), p. 164.

Ricoeur's concept of narrative identity illustrates the way in which a reader interacts with a novel and vice versa. Ricoeur holds that narrative identity is a subset of identity that is by its very nature inchoate and mutable. This malleability renders the concept difficult to define but also enables narratives to alter character and praxis. Accordingly Ricoeur's Mimetic concept of narrative identity is limited to narratives that possess a moment of impetus through which individuals are motivated to change their behaviour or opinions.<sup>70</sup> Pullman's *His Dark Materials* contains numerous moments of meaning making, character evolution and calls to action. The action throughout the trilogy drives "magnificent questions" concerning good and evil, beauty and brutality, love and hatred, god and nothingness and life and death, that can be seen as meaning making.<sup>71</sup> Pullman's impetus to change can be seen in Lyra's call to build the Republic of heaven through hard work and being "cheerful and kind and curious and patient".<sup>72</sup> Pullman's narrative, evinced by his protagonist's insistence, is not simply one which tells a story but also one that engages the reader as it provides meaning, calls for action, demands change, and as such qualifies as a narrative possessing a moment of impetus.

According to Ricoeur, the framework of narrative identity, although applicable to the moral implications of Pullman's narrative, stops short of altering a reader's religious sensibilities. Ricoeur is at great pains to divorce his work within the discourse of philosophy from theology, holding that religion surpasses the notion of narrative identity and contending that religion is somehow transcendent.<sup>73</sup> As such narrative identity focuses on the realm of ethical justice and the way in which narratives can alter an individual's ethical perspective and behaviour, rather than an individual's religious beliefs and ideas.<sup>74</sup> However, in a 1998 essay concerning the work of Ricoeur, Heinz Streib calls for religious educators to employ narratives in their teaching, citing the centrality of narratives in understanding religious concepts.<sup>75</sup> It is the

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<sup>70</sup> Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*. vol. 1, p. 248.

<sup>71</sup> Gregory Maguire, 'Featured Review: The Amber Spyglass', *Horn Book Magazine* (Nov./Dec. 2000).

<sup>72</sup> Philip Pullman, *The Amber Spyglass* (London: Scholastic Children's Books, 2000), p. 548.

<sup>73</sup> David E Klemm, 'Ricoeur, Theology and the Rhetoric of Overturning', *Journal of Literature and Theology*, vol. 3, no. 3 (1989), p. 273.

<sup>74</sup> David Tracey, 'Ricoeur's Philosophical Journey: Its Import for Religion', in *Paul Ricoeur: The Hermeneutics of Action*, ed. Richard Kearney (London: SAGE Publications, 1996), p. 202.

<sup>75</sup> Heinz Streib, 'The Religious Educator as Story-Teller: Suggestions from Paul Ricoeur's Work', *Religious Education*, vol. 93, no. 3 (1998), p. 314.

contention of this paper that the Ricoeurian concept of narrative identity can be altered by narratives possessing religious implications.

Porter Abbott traces the etymology of the word narrative to the Sanskrit *gna*, 'to know', and locates it among the Latin roots words *gnarus* knowing and *narro* telling.<sup>76</sup> This etymological study of narrative captures the dual essence of the term; a narrative is both a tool for knowing and telling. It is the articulation of knowledge and the vehicle by which one imparts such knowledge. This paper contends that religion and narrative are inextricably linked and further maintains that a narrative defined as a religious story may possess the power to change one's religious beliefs and ideas.

A number of scholars have argued that there is something innately religious contained within a narrative.<sup>77</sup> The way in which a narrative orders time and the experiences of a life can be viewed as falling under the purview of religion. In his 1975 work, Wesley Kort asserts that ordering time can be considered a religious act, and that the imposition of order and meaning upon a life by a narrative is an attempt to reach something other or a higher being. Kort further suggests that this otherness, stemming from a narrative's imposition of order upon chaos, can be viewed in various ways, including cosmic energy, the higher self, and God.<sup>78</sup> A narrative's plot can also be viewed as fundamentally religious. W. C. Roof asserts that the plot of a narrative marries fragmented moments of action, creating order in both "literary" and "lived" narrative, and links such acts of creation to the ineffable mysteries of mystics, visionaries and poets.<sup>79</sup> The innate religiosity of narratives, as suggested by Roof and Kort, can be linked to the narrative quest for coherence. A narrative possesses the capacity to bring things together, and to change and sharpen ideas.<sup>80</sup> However, this work does not suggest that a narrative is innately religious but rather, that it is the medium through which religious ideals are both understood and conveyed.

Philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre champions the relationship between religious beliefs and ideas and narratives. Describing the impact of a narrative upon an individual's beliefs he states:

It is through hearing stories about wicked stepmothers, lost children, good but misguided kings, wolves that suckle twin boys, youngest

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<sup>76</sup> Porter Abbott, *The Cambridge Introduction to Narrative* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), p. 13.

<sup>77</sup> Wade Clark Roof, 'Religion and Narrative: 1992 RRA Presidential Address', *Review of Religious Research*, vol. 34, no. 4 (1993), p. 2.

<sup>78</sup> Wesley Kort, *Narrative Elements and Religious Meaning* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1975), p. 4.

<sup>79</sup> Clark Roof, "Religion and Narrative", p. 3.

<sup>80</sup> Clark Roof, "Religion and Narrative", p. 3.

sons who receive no inheritance but must make their own way in the world and eldest sons who waste their inheritance on riotous living and go into exile with the swine, that children learn or mislearn both what a child and what a parent is, what the cast of the characters may be in the drama into which they have been born and what the ways of the world are.<sup>81</sup>

As MacIntyre contends and the Ricoeurian concept of narrative identity echoes, human beings engage with narratives in order to affirm who they are, their identity and purpose and give meaning to their existence. Paul Pruyser encapsulates the importance of narrative in the expression of ideas about the meaning of human existence, with the declaration: “Without stories, no religion”.<sup>82</sup> Religious identity is form of identity articulated and known through the narratives individuals tell and are told that are bound to notions of religion or meaning. The relationship between religious identity and narratives is demonstrated through the work of Andrew Greeley.

In *Religion and Poetics* Andrew Greeley posits a circular model of ‘religion genesis’ that focuses on the centrality of narratives.<sup>83</sup> Greeley sketches out the origins of religion in contemporary life and religious heritage.

At the core of Greeley’s model of religion genesis is his assertion that:

religion is story, story before it is anything else, story after it is everything else, story born from experience, coded in symbol, reinforced in the self and shared with others to explain life and death.<sup>84</sup>

Greeley defines religious stories as:

the stories you tell about what endows your life with meaning... narratives about past hope renewal experiences, which in turn predispose you perhaps for future experiences of grace.<sup>85</sup>

According to Greeley’s concept of religion genesis, religious stories are primal religion, narratives which endow an individual’s life with meaning and effect their character and praxis. He contends that, “there is no such thing as a story that is only a story”, and meaningful stories, religious stories are seen to be “religion raw and primordial”.<sup>86</sup>

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<sup>81</sup> Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981), p. 201.

<sup>82</sup> Paul Pruyser, *A Dynamic Psychology of Religion* (New York: Harper and Row, 1968), p. 5.

<sup>83</sup> Andrew M. Greeley, *Religion as Poetry* (New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 1995), p. 23.

<sup>84</sup> Greeley, *Religion as Poetry*, p. 40.

<sup>85</sup> Greeley, *Religion as Poetry*, p. 40.

<sup>86</sup> Greeley, *Religion as Poetry*, p. 41.

The controversy surrounding Pullman's trilogy has made apparent the fear of the transformative power of a narrative perceived to have competing religious messages. The concept of religion as storied or conveyed through narratives, as seen through Greeley's focus on the elemental religiosity of stories and his definition of religious stories as those which impart meaning, can be applied to the Ricoeurian concept of narrative identity. If narratives are seen to be the primary means of knowing and telling, and that reading narratives opens an individual's ideals to change, it then follows that an individual's concept of religious belief, a concept entrenched in narrative, can be altered through reading and can be represented by the mimetic framework of narrative identity.

Religious narrative identity is a composite of the Ricoeurian framework of mimetic narrative identity and the idea of a storied religion, or an individual's perception of religion known and conveyed through narrative. This theory holds that a narrative may alter an individual's religious beliefs through the framework of mimesis. Religious narrative identity can be understood as an identity made and unmade through the mimetic interpretation of narratives that individuals are told and tell about themselves; that they hold to imbue their life with meaning, and that challenges their character and praxis.

## **Conclusion**

Pullman's *His Dark Materials*, is considered a narrative falling within the literary category of the High Fantasy Fiction Novel.<sup>87</sup> Consequently, the trilogy can be considered to be a narrative and as such falls under the Ricoeurian framework of narrative identity. Greeley contends that religious stories must contain narratives that imbue one's life with meaning. What imbues a reader's life with meaning is entirely subjective, and is not the focus of this paper. However, this work contends that Pullman's narrative possesses "magnificent questions" and a meta-narrative that not only rejects the God of the Judo-Christian tradition, but that replaces it with a secular Republic of heaven.<sup>88</sup> Thus it is not outside the realm of theoretical possibility that a reader may regard *His Dark Materials* as a narrative that imbues their life with meaning. It follows that if a reader regards the trilogy as holding meaning, then it is possible that the narrative of the novels when viewed within the framework of religious narrative identity, may change an individual's religious beliefs and ideals. However, it does not follow that every individual's religious identity will be affected, nor that it will be affected in the same way by all readers.

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<sup>87</sup> David Gooderham, 'Fantasising It As It is: Religious Language in Philip Pullman's Trilogy, *His Dark Materials*'. *Children's Literature*, vol. 31 (2003), p. 155.

<sup>88</sup> Maguire, 'Featured Review: The Amber Spyglass'.

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Narrative religious identity does not lend itself to a black-and-white, all-or-nothing adoption of the criticisms of the Judeo-Christian faiths and the alternative ideologies contained within *His Dark Materials*. An individual's religious narrative identity is not solely linear, completely altered by opposing concepts or condemnation; indeed, it is a complex spiral of interpretations based around the interplay between the stages of Pre-figuration and Re-figuration, or rather new ideas and pre-existing beliefs. What an individual takes from Pullman's novels is reliant on what they bring to the narrative. A conservative Christian reader may find *His Dark Materials* confrontational, insulting and rife with profanity, while a more liberal Christian may read the novels and see the trilogy as an opportunity for dialogue and growth. Indeed both these responses were displayed within varied calls for condemnation and dialogue within the controversy. The framework of religious narrative identity is applicable to Pullman's trilogy, and, as such, demonstrates the theoretical ability of the narrative contained within the novels to alter the religious beliefs and ideas of a reader.