He is an old white man with a long white beard . . .
sitting on a golden throne in heaven,
surrounded by clouds. . . .
At His feet is a heavenly host of angels in white
robes, with harps. (Once the harps were swords and
the heavenly hosts were the army of God defending
His heavenly palace.) . . . God loves the world and
its creatures. But He sometimes gets angry and
unleashes His wrath on the sinners. . . .
If we do not follow His will, we will be punished
by being sent to hell to be burned in eternal flames,
along with Satan.

Carol Christ on the "Old White Man" God in traditional Christianity; from *She Who Changes*[1]

CHAPTER

1

CONFUSING GOD WITH "AUTHORITY"

In a move reminiscent of Friedrich Nietzsche's prophet Zarathustra, who proclaims the death of God to anyone who will listen, Pullman "kills" God in one of the climactic moments of *The Amber Spyglass.* Pullman's false God—the first angel that lords over the parallel worlds of Lyra and Will's universe—is a paper-thin, ailing fake, who expires with a gasp of relief into the molecules of the atmosphere. But his presence (and the Authority is unmistakably a *he*) lords over the trilogy. Any writer who plays so fast and loose with God—describing him as a pretender and then killing him off—knows he is making a statement. But surely part of that statement is that God is to be taken seriously.[2]

Of the Devil's Party?

Of course, given Pullman's choice to follow Milton's *Paradise Lost* in retelling the story of the Fall, God is going to have some part to play. Waging war on God (or the gods) is a story that stretches nearly as far back as stories themselves. As long

as there have been stories about gods, at least, there have been storytellers who challenge the authority of the gods and seek to overthrow them. Prometheus's theft of fire from and subsequent punishment by the ancient Greek gods is but one of many examples of the pervasiveness of war on the reigning deities. So Pullman's trilogy is not remarkable in this regard. Yet Pullman offers us an intriguing twist on this oft-told tale, because in this case God is not only defeated but his destruction is a blessing for the universe. Satan is not the villain for Pullman. God is the villain, making explicit in this version of *Paradise Lost* what many (Pullman included) have long suspected about Milton—that he was "of the Devil's party without knowing it."

Yet, as we say in the Introduction, *His Dark Materials* is far from godless; we think it is a contemporary Christian classic. And although Pullman's greatest inspiration for *His Dark Materials* may have been Milton's *Paradise Lost,* echoes of the death of God in Nietzsche's *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* ring throughout the trilogy. Zarathustra's proclamation of God's death by no means makes Nietzsche an atheist. The same is true of Pullman, whose concerns, like those of Nietzsche himself, closely track those of Christian liberation theologians. Exploring their similarities will help determine whether Pullman (at least as the writer of *His Dark Materials*) is really the atheist he makes himself out to be or a Christian theologian of a very contemporary sort.

The Fragility of "Authority"

When Nietzsche put "God is dead" on the lips of his cryptic prophet Zarathustra, he sealed his own fate as an atheist, even among those who have never read this nineteenth-century

German philosopher. But the three words Nietzsche is most remembered for uttering are some of the most misunderstood in the history of philosophy. With a little theological exploration, it is all too easy to see why Nietzsche is not really an atheist—like the Death-of-God theologians of the 1960s—but is rejecting an outmoded Christian understanding of the divine.

The God who dies in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* is very similar to the Authority who "dissolves into nothing"—"a mystery dissolving into mystery" (AS, 411)—in *His Dark Materials*. The divine figure that Zarathustra pronounces dead is someone who kills imagination, creativity, and self-development—a god who paralyzes human will, buries us in fears of sin, and otherwise keeps us from really living. Feminist theologian Sallie McFague offers a description of a similarly authoritarian divinity whom Pullman calls "the old one" (AS, 410) and that she terms the monarchical God:

> God as king is in his kingdom—which is not of this earth—and we remain in another place, far from his dwelling. In this picture God is worldless and the world is Godless: the world is empty of God's presence for it is too lowly to be the royal abode. Time and space are not filled with God: the eons of human and geological time stretch as a yawning void back into the recesses, empty of the divine presence; the places loved and noted on our earth, as well as the unfathomable space of the universe, are not the house of God. Whatever one does for the world is not finally important in this model, for its ruler does not inhabit it as his primary residence, and his subjects are well advised not to become too involved in it

> either. The king's power extends over the entire universe, of course, but his being does not: he relates to it externally, he is not part of it but essentially different from it and apart from it.[3]

For Nietzsche, and for many contemporary feminist and liberation theologians like McFague, this kind of remote-ruler God is not really worthy of the title. His objective is keeping his subjects under his thumb, in endless submission to his authority. This kind of blindly narcissistic authority, however, is also very fragile; it lasts only as long as one's subjects agree to their subordination. As soon as an individual becomes aware of having been made party to the laws and rule of another, that person tends to rebel, that is, to pursue, as the German philosopher Hegel put it, "the fulfillment of his own immediate will and natural impulses," quite apart from the hold of the larger authority.[4]

This same predicament, of course, bedevils Pullman's God figure—the Authority—whose rule is made fragile by a rising awareness among a few individuals that they can choose not to follow his whims. The Authority, so old, senile, and impossibly withered by the time Lord Asriel mounts armies against his rule, has only his Regent—the second most powerful angel, Metatron—to defend his last shreds of power and maintain his kingdom in the clouds. It is difficult not to wonder: Has the Authority been so weakened by maintaining this long charade that his once robust effort to guard his rule has sapped him of all energy and will? And though the Authority is oft-mentioned by the time readers reach *The Amber Spyglass,* he is spoken of in name only. By the end of the trilogy, when we finally meet this famously feared figure, it becomes

questionable whether he still holds enough power *to still be an authority.* We can't help but think that he is entirely "spent" and must have ceded the job of holding his subjects in check to Metatron long ago.

Readers first learn of Pullman's Authority figure in *The Subtle Knife,* during a conversation between Lord Asriel's servant Thorold and the witch Serafina Pekkala. "But you know about our God?" Thorold asks the witch queen—"the God of the Church, the one they call the Authority?" Thorold knows that the witches have other gods—that the so-called God of the Church is not the only god worshipped in the universe. "Well Lord Asriel has never found hisself at ease with the doctrines of the Church, so to speak," Thorold continues, explaining his theories concerning Lord Asriel's disappearance:

> It's my belief he turned away from a rebellion against the Church, not because the Church was too strong, but because it was too weak to be worth the fighting. . . . I think he's a-waging a higher war than that. I think he's aiming a rebellion against the highest power of all. He's gone a-searching for the dwelling place of the Authority Himself, and he's a-going to destroy him. (SK, 45–46)

This passage alludes not only to the epic battle between Satan and God in *Paradise Lost* but also to the biblical book of Revelation, more specifically to the Ruler who rules from a throne. As with Carol Christ's old man who lives high in the clouds and Sallie McFague's God-king, whose dwelling is somewhere far from earth, Pullman's Authority lords over the worlds from a hidden domain—the Clouded Mountain,

where he is not vulnerable to an attack by those who resist his reign, where he can maintain an aura of mystery around him and perhaps even hide his tired state.

Yet little else is said of this God of the Church, who will soon see his reign collapse, until Pullman reveals the truth behind this imposter God in *The Amber Spyglass*. After Will asks the angel Balthamos whether the Authority really is God, Balthamos responds with a definitive no:

> [The Authority] was never the creator. He was an angel like ourselves—the first angel, true, the most powerful, but he was formed of Dust as we are. . . . The first angels condensed out of Dust, and the Authority was first of all. He told those who came after him that he had created them, but it was a lie. . . . And the Authority still reigns in the Kingdom. (AS, 30–31)

The Authority's reign has hung for thousands of years on a single, fragile circumstance: although the Authority was an angel, he was not known as one. Because of the simple fact that he preceded all the others, the Authority was able to deceive his fellow angels (and, eventually, almost every intelligent creature in the universe) into believing that he was their creator. The Authority was able, by the force of this lie, to coerce them into submission and the whims of his desires for order, and the ways not only of life but also of death—at least at first. With the help of other angels, the Authority set up the church in Lyra's world (where it still holds great power) and others, including Will's (where by the time of the trilogy, its existence is barely evident), to communicate his deception

to all sentient beings, using force and violence to secure obedience from those unconvinced by the lies.

So for thousands of years the Authority got away with portraying himself as the god that created the universe and all the "lesser" creatures in it, promising to watch that creation, protecting creatures in it in return for their trust and obedience. But even once we meet Will in his Oxford, it becomes clear that science has begun to trump any effective church rule, and in Citagàzze the church rule seems absent altogether, implying that in at least some worlds, the Authority retains only a whisper of power, if any at all.

In other words, by the time of the trilogy, the Authority is poised to "Fall."

The "Fall" of "Authority" or the Death of God?

The Authority's original deception from which all other deceptions flow hangs on a single thread, which becomes frayed as the truth begins to leak out. The Authority's original lie is gradually unmasked in Lyra's world over the course of the trilogy, and as the truth begins to spread throughout his kingdom, it becomes evident that the true Fall in *His Dark Materials* is the fall of the Authority himself. As evidence of the Authority's lies builds and chatter about his true nature spreads, he grows quiet and moves into seclusion. The Clouded Mountain, once a throne of great power, increasingly becomes a hiding place for this would-be God—a movable fortress that allows the Authority to run away as his power is challenged. Of the Clouded Mountain and its growing occlusion, Balthamos explains:

> It's sometimes called the Chariot. It's not fixed, you see; it moves from place to place. Wherever it goes, there is the heart of the Kingdom, his citadel, his palace. When the Authority was young, it wasn't surrounded by clouds, but as time passed, he gathered them around him more and more thickly. No one has seen the summit for thousands of years. (AS, 28)

By the time Lord Asriel goes to battle against "God" in *The Amber Spyglass,* the Dust particles that constitute the Authority's being are so tenuously linked that he is protected by a seemingly impervious, hollow glass globe.

A strikingly similar tired and grandfatherly God appears in Nietzsche's *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*—one who in his youth was a vengeful ruler but is now weakened—and emasculated—by age and made weary by humanity. As Nietzsche's pope character explains:

> He was a concealed god, addicted to secrecy. . . . When he was young, this god out of the Orient, he was harsh and vengeful and he built himself a hell to amuse his favorites. Eventually, however, he became old and soft and mellow and pitying, more like a grandfather than a father, but most like a shaky old grandmother. Then he sat in his nook by the hearth, wilted, grieving over his weak legs, weary of the world, weary of willing, and one day he choked on his all-too-great pity.[5]

The Herculean effort required to maintain such a grand deception for thousands of years reduces Pullman's dimin-

ished Authority and Nietzsche's ailing God alike to virtual nothingness. Exhausted, these "Authorities" finally become as vulnerable to death as their subjects.

In a key battle scene in *The Amber Spyglass,* Metatron moves the Authority away from the heart of the fighting. Metatron does so on the sly, using only a few guards and a miniscule caravan. Lord Asriel's forces do not notice this retreat, but some ugly vulture-like creatures looking for war spoils to pick at—the cliff-ghasts—do. When Will and Lyra stumble upon the Authority, he appears to be simply another angel, though a frighteningly aged one. The cliff-ghasts have already killed all his guards and are trying to break the glass globe protecting him. But Will scares the ghasts away with the subtle knife. Afterwards Will and Lyra stare into the globe and have pity on the diminished and demented being known as the Authority.

> "Oh, Will, he's still alive! But—the poor thing. . . ."
>
> Will saw her hands pressing against the crystal, trying to reach in to the angel and comfort him; because he was so old, and he was terrified, crying like a baby and cowering away in the lowest corner.
>
> "He must be so old—I've never seen anyone suffering like that—oh, Will, can't we let him out?"
>
> Will cut through the crystal in one movement to help the angel out. Demented and powerless, the aged being could only weep and mumble in fear and pain and misery, and he shrank away from what seemed like another threat.
>
> "It's all right," Will said "We can help you hide, at least. Come on, we won't hurt you."

> The shaking hand seized his and feebly held on. The old one was uttering a wordless growing whimper that went on and on, and grinding his teeth, and compulsively plucking at himself with his free hand; but as Lyra reached in, too, to help him out, he tried to smile, and to bow, and his ancient eyes deep in their wrinkles blinked at her in innocent wonder.
>
> Between them they helped the ancient of days out of his crystal cell; it wasn't hard, for he was light as paper and he would have followed them anywhere, having no will of his own, and responding 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. Only a few moments later he had vanished completely, and their last impression was of those eyes, blinking in wonder, and the sigh of the most profound and exhausted relief. (AS, 410–411)

Little more than a ghost himself at this point, the Authority returns in this moment to the universe—Dust to Dust—the way ghosts emerging from the Land of the Dead dissolve into the atmosphere. The æsahættr, the God-destroyer (the other name for Will's subtle knife), performs this task, not out of malice but out of love. Using the hands of two children, Pullman has scripted for his readers what is now one of the most controversial moments of *His Dark Materials*—a scene that has led some to label him "the most dangerous author in Britain."[6]

Pullman: A Theist After All?

Unlike Pullman, who in this climactic moment banishes the divine from the universe, Nietzsche allows himself to imagine, through the voice of Zarathustra, the sort of god who would be to his liking:

> I would believe only in a god who could dance. And when I saw my devil I found him serious, thorough, profound and solemn: it was the spirit of gravity—through him all things fall.
>
> Not by wrath does one kill, but by laughter. Come, let us kill the spirit of gravity!
>
> I have learned to walk: ever since, I let myself run. I have learned to fly: ever since, I do not want to be pushed before moving along.
>
> Now I am light, now I fly, now I see myself beneath myself, now a god dances through me.
>
> Thus spoke Zarathustra.[7]

For Nietzsche, the idea that somehow one omnipotent God is the sole source of creativity in the universe sucks the life out of humanity by disassociating all value from humanity and placing it elsewhere (with God). The God of traditional Christianity—external, static, and wholly other—acts like a chain on humanity, restricting every person's "will to power" (to use another famous Nietzchean phrase) or, to put it in language common to liberation theologians, their will *to be empowered.* For Nietzsche, it is not every understanding of God but this *particular* understanding of God that must pass away so that humanity may be empowered and its creative

potential liberated. The "superman" (or "overman," depending on the translation) is "capable of doing more than just experiencing value as a separate object." He (or she) can encounter the world as if "spirit and nature are no longer opposed to one another," and "is capable of giving birth to an alternative human project," explains one Nietzschean interpreter.[8]

When Nietzsche wrote at the end of the nineteenth century, there was little theology available that would cotton to his tastes or to his understanding of God. When an old magician speaks to Zarathustra of the angst brought on by the loss of god, Nietzsche reveals his sense that the death of even this traditional God is a tragedy for humanity. Yet it is a necessary tragedy, since it opens up space for a new sense of the divine to emerge in the old God's place. Nietzsche's magician comments quite prophetically: "Of all of you, who like me, are suffering of *the great nausea,* for whom the old god has died, and for whom no new god lies as yet in cradles and swaddling clothes."[9]

True, a god dies in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra.* But in that same text the seeds of a "new god" are sown—an alternative vision of the divine that makes room for becoming, imagination, creativity, and all those other things that Nietzsche valued. Today that "new god" can be seen in a wide variety of alternative theologies that were themselves unimaginable in Nietzsche's time: the panentheism of Alfred North Whitehead that envisions the evolution of the world as the evolution of God, the liberation theologies of Gutiérrez and Boff and others that re-frame Christianity to be a source of empowerment and not oppression, and even (though Nietzsche was no feminist) the feminist theologies of Catherine Keller and Sallie

McFague, which take panentheism and transform it into a theology that seeks justice for all creatures.[10]

His Dark Materials, of course, came into the world more than a century after Nietzsche pronounced God dead and prophesied the emergence of a new divine better suited to humanity's creative and imaginative capacities. Pullman wrote this trilogy during a theological era when alternative visions of the divine abound, so it is hard to understand how Pullman overlooked all these available alternatives and why he seems unable—or at least unwilling—to consider his own alternative divinity in the trilogy. Pullman has by no means killed off God in general. He has killed off only one understanding of God—*God-as-tyrant*—and an oddly antiquated and unimaginative one at that. Pullman has done away with the malicious, lying, controlling, manipulating being in charge of his universe in order to put an end to unjust cruelty and domination. But he says nothing about the many other gods that are worshiped across the world's religions or about more sophisticated understandings of the Christian God.

On the surface, Pullman looks like a protest atheist. Protest atheism is a category in the study of religion used to name a person or tradition that explicitly rejects a particular notion of God—the trinitarian God of Christianity, for example, or a Jewish God who allows the Holocaust to occur.[11] Zen Buddhists are told, "If you meet the Buddha, kill the Buddha."[12] In other words, do not elevate anything into the ultimate authority. Do not let anything—even God—interfere with your quest for enlightenment. When asked whether there was a god, Siddhartha, the historical Buddha, refused to answer. If you are shot with an arrow, he elaborated, you do not bother with a series of philosophical questions about

who shot the arrow or at what angle or speed. Instead, you pull out the arrow and reduce your suffering. In this life then, one should not be concerned with metaphysical speculation about gods or the afterlife; one should be concerned with ending suffering here and now. The Buddha does not say there is no god. He simply says that existing notions of god are not relevant to his project of reducing suffering.[13]

Although Pullman seems to fit the heading of "protest atheist," he diverges from this category in one crucial way. Protest atheists do not reject one god in order to offer up another in its place. And that is precisely what Pullman does in *His Dark Materials*. Pullman clearly rejects a particular notion of God in *The Amber Spyglass,* but he goes on to offer an alternative interpretation of the divine. The name of this divinity is *Dust,* and Pullman gives over its study to people in Lyra's world, whom he refers to as "experimental theologians."