

**Believing in the Unreachable:  
Philip Pullman's *His Dark Materials* as a Religious Utopia**

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## Introduction

Phillip Pullman's *His Dark Materials* is not only celebrated by critics and readers, but has turned from a trilogy into a franchise, spawning several spin-off books such as *Lyra's Oxford*, *Once Upon a Time in the North* and the still in development "The Book of Dust". There have been several adaptations, to theatre and the screen, with most recently *The Golden Compass*, an adaptation of the first novel, *Northern Lights*, under the American book title. In other words, the trilogy by Pullman has captured the imagination of a vast audience to this day.

The story follows Lyra on her travel through parallel worlds. She goes on a quest to unravel the secrets of Dust, and eventually to overthrow the corrupt God-figure called 'the Authority' by freeing the ghosts from the world of the dead in the final instalment of the trilogy. Dust, here, is capitalised by Pullman for its religious and scientific importance in the trilogy: it is the particle that stands for the basis of self-awareness and has been connected to the Fall of Man in Pullman's narrative.

In this thesis, an argument will be made in which the trilogy by Phillip Pullman is not only interpreted as part of the utopian imaginative mode, but also as part of a radical tradition that desires to change the way we see religion. To do this, we will first establish Phillip Pullman's *His Dark Materials* as part of the crossover genre, which has been presented by Rachel Falconer as a genre that not only shows overlap in target audience – for example young adults and adults alike – but also crossovers between known genres, like the Bildungsroman and science-fiction. This concept will be the first step in understanding that *His Dark Materials* is not just part of the science-fiction or fantasy tradition. It also crosses over to the utopian imaginative mode, which means that it follows a similar narrative pattern to many canonical utopian works and discusses similar themes. In chapter one these patterns and themes will be distilled from the canonical utopian works found in the Early Modern era: *Utopia* by Thomas More, and *The Blazing-World* by Margaret Cavendish. Here, we also

introduce the connection to *Paradise Lost* by John Milton and will establish how Milton's epic poem is connected to the utopian imaginative mode as well: even though it is not usually considered part of the utopian canon it can be considered part of this literary and imaginative mode. These works still echo in contemporary literature and the connection between these three works and *His Dark Materials* will be examined in chapter 2. In chapter 3, the trilogy by Pullman will be examined in the light of religious radicalism as found in Milton's work. In this chapter the argument will be made that *His Dark Materials* can be seen as a religious utopia by tying it to both the utopian imaginative mode and religious radicalism.

Chapter I: The Place of Philip Pullman's *His Dark Materials* in Literature

Before we are able to discuss Philip Pullman's *His Dark Materials* trilogy as part of the utopian imaginative and literary mode, with a special focus on the religious themes woven into the novels, it is useful to establish the trilogy's place within the wider literary tradition, and moreover, in connection to the phenomenon of crossover-literature.

*His Dark Materials* has been considered a work of children's fiction, but appears to be placed among adult literature. Philip Pullman has received the Astrid Lindgren Memorial Award, a Swedish literary award solely rewarded for works in the category of children's literature, as recognition for his work in the genre. Moreover, the final book in the trilogy, *The Amber Spyglass*, won the Whitbread Book of the Year-award in 2001, and was subsequently chosen as book of the year; it was the first time a book from the 'children's literature' genre won this award. *The Amber Spyglass* was also the first children's book to be longlisted for the Man Booker Prize.

This shows that Philip Pullman's *His Dark Materials* is not just enjoyed by children and possibly young adults, but also has a large adult readership, being sold in both a children and an adult edition. It is also striking to note the 2008 protest against branding children's books with an age recommendation, and Philip Pullman leading the protest against this branding. He stated in *The Telegraph* after signing a petition to stop this practise: "I write books for whoever is interested. When I write a book I don't have an age group in mind." (Singh). When the audience, the author and his peers all show no interest in that label of children's literature, it can be suggested there is more to the *His Dark Materials* trilogy than it being an example of children's and young-adult literature only.

Rachel Falconer cites Philip Pullman as a harsh critic of the fantasy genre, suggesting that it "does nothing... except construct shoot-'em-up games" (qtd. in Falconer, *Crossover Novel* 74). Falconer continues here with a citation which elaborates on how Pullman considers

*His Dark Materials* as a work of realism, because it deals with “what it means to be human, to grow up, to suffer and learn.” (*Crossover Novel* 74). Even though the theme of coming-of-age is common in young adult literature, it has a different function according to Falconer: Pullman uses it to draw out the human understanding of morality with age, and she suggests that: “the dialectic of genres comes to be mapped onto a narrative of coming of age.” (*Crossover Novel* 77). In other words, the genre of moral storytelling and the Bildungsroman are crossed with the imaginative mode of fantasy; *His Dark Materials* therefore does not only cross the boundaries of target audiences by speaking to children, young adults and adults alike, it also shows crossover in literary mode.

Anne-Marie Bird puts forward the idea of a ‘levelled’ story, which includes: “On a simplistic level, the books can be read as straightforward adventure stories in that they involve difficult journeys in which the protagonists must confront numerous challenges in the search for some object, place, or person. On a deeper level, the texts are an exploration of the fundamental themes of the Fall.” (112). This shows a dualistic type of story, which leads to a simplistic storyline fit for children, and a mature storyline fit for adults. Both types of story interpretation, however, can be enjoyed by both groups, but it emphasizes the possibility of speaking to two kinds of target audiences. In other words, it further establishes a crossover between the coming-of-age adventure story and the religious reinterpretation of the Fall of man.

Falconer continues her argument to accept Philip Pullman’s *His Dark Materials* as an example of crossover fiction, meant for both children and adults, by zooming in on the transition from childhood to adulthood in Pullman’s main characters Lyra and Will. Pullman underlines the importance of becoming an adult as a fixed point of character, and is cited by Falconer as sceptical towards major changes in character in later life, suggesting that “their basic stance towards the world is pretty constant.” (qtd. in Falconer, *Crossover Novel* 83). In

his fictional world, Pullman establishes this worldview by letting the dæmons of people gain a fixed appearance at puberty: this shows off their personality and will no longer change after this point. This is a somewhat curious standpoint if we examine Lyra's and Will's behaviour a little more closely. As Falconer points out, their behaviour is both childlike at times, and mature at others. She shows examples of their adult behaviour (even though their dæmons have not settled on a permanent form yet and they are therefore still considered children in Pullman's fiction) by pointing towards Lyra's use of her feminine charms on the false king of the bears Iofur Raknison in *Northern Lights*, and Will's mature ways as a result of having to care for his sick mother at the beginning of *The Subtle Knife* (*Crossover Novel* 81). This can be considered another piece of evidence in establishing a crossover identity for *His Dark Materials*.

Rachel Falconer makes another observation in respect to the genre of crossover young adult-literature: the importance of the beginning of a journey. She illustrates this characteristic by showing the example of the first window Will cuts with the Subtle knife in the second part of the trilogy (*Crossover Phenomenon* 90). However, this is not the first example of the start of a journey encountered in the *His Dark Materials* trilogy. It can even be said that this theme is established instantly, by citing John Milton's *Paradise Lost* at the beginning of *Northern Lights*. The excerpt Pullman cites consists of lines 910 to 920 from book 2 of *Paradise Lost*, which shows Lucifer standing "On the brink of Hell" where he is "Pondering his voyage" (2.918-9). This underlines the theme of a journey to be undergone by a character. Although both Lyra and Will undergo a journey which even leads them to the afterlife, there is another clear starting point in *Northern Lights*: the 'Bridge to the Stars' Lord Asriel creates in chapter 23 of the first part of the trilogy. At this point, Lord Asriel and Mrs Coulter discuss crossing it together, and eventually Mrs Coulter refuses to come along with him.

This scene, however, does suggest a different theme as well: that of the search for a better place. Lord Asriel's main motive to use the Bridge to the Stars is to find and establish his own perfect world, only to find out later on that this is not an option since humans can only survive for a maximum of 10 years in any other world than the one they were born in. His desire to build a perfect society in a parallel universe is therefore unfulfillable.

This search for and the subsequent unreachableness of a perfect world is a main theme in a different mode of literature: utopian literature. The introduction already established the goal of this thesis: to discuss whether Philip Pullman's *His Dark Materials* trilogy can be accepted as part of the utopian imaginative and literary mode, more precisely by looking at the religious themes in these novels. In the introduction the three primary texts as part of the utopian tradition chosen as a point of reference were Thomas More's *Utopia* and Margaret Cavendish's *The Blazing-World* as primary utopian texts, and John Milton's *Paradise Lost* as a text not usually considered part of the utopian canon, but which, this thesis argues, has many utopian elements. To connect *His Dark Materials* to the utopian tradition, it is useful to establish what overlapping themes these works show.

Gregory Claeys and Lyman Tower Sargent give an analysis of utopian literature, establishing several aspects of utopian fiction after the term utopia had been coined by Thomas More in his 1516 work *Utopia*. This includes the themes of 'religious radicalism' and the creation or discovery of new worlds influenced by sea voyages, where contact with new, unfamiliar cultures led to questions concerning Christianity and the role of religion for these new cultures. Furthermore, there is room for description of a society other than our own, and the role of humans in these societies (3-4). This leads to three common themes as part of the utopian imaginative and literary mode: travel, the discovery and creation of new worlds, and an outline of the social structures within these worlds.



Fátima Vieira discusses the term 'utopia'. This term contains strong tension between the two meanings of 'u'; not only does the term 'utopia' refer to Eutopia – 'the good place' – it also refers to Utopia – 'the no-place'. She establishes this tension as being embedded in literature in delineating a world that cannot be reached, but is still searched for (3-5). This gives shape to another characteristic of the utopian imaginative mode: a world that is both perfect and unreachable. She goes on to describe the narrative pattern in utopian literature as follows: a completely unknown world for the protagonist, which he or she reaches after a journey by either sea, air or land. He or she then continues to describe this world, its political constructs, its religion, and the social and economic conventions in this new society. Here, she also notes that it is a human-centred world, and is established by humans alone. No interference of the divine is used to create this utopian society in literature, according to her, and this is an interesting aspect of the utopian imaginative mode (7-9). In chapter three, a case will be made that this lack of divine interference is not as strict a criterion for a work to be considered utopian as Vieira suggests.

This gives us the following aspects to construct a conceptual map of the utopian imaginative and literary mode: firstly, it has to be a place that is subject to a certain tension, between a desire to attain it and its unattainability or unreachability. Furthermore, it is a society that is established by humans, no divine or alien creature, and the narrative will explain social rules and structures of this world, and possibly the problematic aspects of this compared to our own world. Religion is put forward as a common theme, and so is the influence of new developments within our own society, such as the sea voyages and development of technology. Another important aspect is that of the protagonist reaching this place by a way of travel; the protagonist needs to undergo a journey to reach utopia.

The next chapter will further analyse these themes as present in Philip Pullman's *His Dark Materials* trilogy, and will attempt to connect these novels to the utopian canon through

means of similar thematic aspects. While there will be a continued focus on the role of religion in the third chapter, an analysis will be made of other aspects of Lyra's original society and the one she encounters in the worlds she comes across on her voyage.

## Chapter II: Utopian Themes in *His Dark Materials*

This chapter will focus on creating a close comparison to three core texts within the genre to understand *His Dark Materials* as part of the utopian literary and imaginative mode. These texts will be two canonical texts, firstly *Utopia* by Thomas More, which coined the name of the genre, and secondly Margaret Cavendish's *The Blazing-World*. A third text that is part of this tradition is John Milton's *Paradise Lost*, which is not always considered part of the utopian canon, but which can nonetheless be seen as part of the utopian imaginative mode, following similar patterns; this will be argued in this chapter as well. The conceptual map established in the previous chapter will now be used as a tool in analysing *His Dark Materials* in comparison with the aforementioned canonical utopian texts.

Firstly, the theme of travel provides us with a vast number of materials for comparison. Angelika Bammer considers this theme as part of the “rudimental plot” of the utopian texts and explains: “the narrative begins as the narrator/protagonist leaves his world to visit utopia and it ends when he leaves utopia and returns home” (16). To Bammer, this part of the utopian literary and imaginative mode is central, because it “provides readers with a protagonist who, like them, lives not in utopia, but in a ‘real’ world, and with whom, therefore, they are presumed to share a set of assumptions about the givens of reality.” (16). This gives the reader a way to emphasize with the protagonist of the story. It is common in both canon and secondary utopian texts, and in both classic utopian literary works and contemporary works within the young adult genre. Jonathan Swift lets his Gulliver travel to Lilliput, Brobdingnag, Laputa and more, and the country of the Houyhnhnms by ship, and the full title of the book emphasizes not only the voyage, but also the form of travel: *Travels into Several Remote Nations of the World. In Four Parts. By Lemuel Gulliver, First a Surgeon, and then a Captain of Several Ships*. The sea voyage and subsequent shipwreck is also central in William Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, leading to Antonio, King Alonso, Ferdinand and their

companions getting stranded on the island ruled by the magic of Prospero. Although not all travel takes place by sea, the theme is also still found in other works; the plane crash in Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *Herland* is a striking example of that, and another is to be found in H.G. Wells's *The Time Machine*, where there is a journey in which the option to return is put under pressure when the Time Traveller loses his time machine. In the contemporary dystopian young adult trilogy *The Hunger Games* by Suzanne Collins, the main character Katniss is also taken on this journey into the unknown with immense obstacles to return home when she is taken from District 12 to the Capitol, to serve in a gladiator-style competition where only one of 24 children will survive. This range of examples already shows a greater scope of literary and contemporary texts that can be seen as part of the utopian imaginative mode.

In Thomas More's *Utopia*, a journey is undertaken through a sea voyage by Raphael Hythlodæus. This leads him to the island of Utopia and its unfamiliar society. This theme of travel by sea is also found in Margaret Cavendish's *The Blazing-World*, although the journey of the Lady in that text is not voluntary; she is kidnapped by a Merchant who fell in love with her, and after the ship she was taken on crashes on the North pole, she is the sole survivor; her further travel leads her to a parallel universe in which she is considered a Goddess. In John Milton's *Paradise Lost*, too, this theme of travel and sea voyage can be found. In book 2, it is shown how Lucifer contemplates his upcoming "voyage" while he stands on "the brink of hell", or at the start of this journey to a better world for him (2.918-9). It is telling that precisely this excerpt from *Paradise Lost* is quoted at the beginning of Pullman's *Northern Lights*, the first instalment of his trilogy.

The theme of a sea voyage is visible in *Northern Lights* in Lyra's quest to save her friend Roger from Mrs Coulter's operation to separate the mental link between dæmon and child. She undertakes this journey by travelling with the gypsies at first, then by foot or while

riding Iorek Byrnison over the icy poles of the North. However, there is another aspect of this voyage that resonates with the utopian canon, and that is the location of the North pole. Moreover, Lord Asriel opens his Bridge to the Stars here, and he and his daughter Lyra enter new, parallel worlds through this precise location. In *Northern Lights*, the witches seem aware of the multitude of universes and how they exist next to each other. During the conversation between Farder Coram and the Consul for the witches, the latter explains the witches' knowledge of the prophecy about Lyra as a result of living close to the North pole: "Because they live so close to the place where the veil between the worlds is thin, they hear immortal whispers from time to time, in the voices of those beings who pass between the worlds." (149; pt. 1, ch. 10). The goose-dæmon of the witch Seraphina Pekkala further explains the existence of multiple worlds: "Here, on this deck, millions of other universes exist, unaware of one another..." (158; pt. 1, ch. 11). He states that all these worlds are "interpenetrating with this one", but are always unaware of the influence or actions of other universes apart from in the Northern lights (158; pt. 1, ch. 11).

This strongly echoes the explanation Cavendish's narrator gives about parallel universes and how they touch at the North pole at the beginning of *The Blazing-World*; here, it is explained how all the men on the ship froze to death because of the cold of two poles combined, and this is explained by stating that it is "joined close to it" (6; pt. 1). The Lady is forced into this new, parallel world "because the Poles of the other World, joining to the Poles of this, do not allow any further passage to surround the World that way" (6-7; pt. 1). Just as in *His Dark Materials*, *The Blazing-World* proposes a worldview in which parallel universes do not only exist, but the gateway to these universes is found at the exact same location: the North Pole.

The significance of the location of the North pole is even more compelling when considering the role of women in power in both Cavendish's *The Blazing-World* and

Pullman's trilogy. About this untouched location to place utopia, Jane L. Donawerth and Carol A. Kolmerten state the following: "A blank white space, largely uninhabited in history or fiction, seems an apt location for the inscription of new dreams." (16). It is therefore not a surprise that Mrs Coulter, who desires to change the possibility for her to gain power, chooses this location for her experiments. It is the case that Mrs Coulter seeks power, but is unable to find this in the traditional way because of her gender. She attempts to solve this in two possible ways; firstly, she marries a politician, Mr Edward Coulter, to gain influence. When that marriage fell apart after she had an affair and a child with Lord Asriel, she attempted to gain power through the church and was actually able to gain leadership of the Oblation Board: a strong sign of power through marriage and religion (106-7; pt. 1, ch. 7). In *The Blazing-World*, the power position of the Lady follows a similar pattern; she is considered extremely beautiful, just like Mrs Coulter, and as a result the Lady is considered a Goddess by the Emperor at first. When she tells him she is "mortal", he marries her instantly, granting her power as Empress to rule the World she saw fit (13; pt. 1). Here, the female character is able to gain power by being placed in an influential position in the world's religion, but she also gains this power through marriage. This is in line with Mrs Coulter's rise to power. There is, however, another echo present here: in Thomas More's *Utopia*, there is mention of how "sometimes the women themselves are made priests", which is rare but only happens to the most extraordinary women (pt.2, ch. 16). In Pullman's trilogy, this rarity of women in power positions in the church is put forward several times. This shows a clear similarity between the social constructs or structures found in these two core utopian texts and *His Dark Materials* when considering the role of women in society.

In the utopian imaginative mode, there is room for the establishment of new worldviews as a result of developing new sciences or discovering new worlds. Both Pullman and Cavendish incorporate science as a new development here. Jane L. Donawerth and Carol

A. Kolmerten further argue that the “challenge to traditional philosophic ideas by the discoveries of the ‘new science’ (...) enlarged the space for speculation in ‘natural philosophy’” (17-18). They mention the source of inspiration of “such a changing intellectual climate” for Cavendish (18). Pullman, in addition, adds to this line of scientific change by not only adopting Dust as a central force in his work – and letting this function as a quantum particle found in physics – but even emphasises this further by referring to what appears to be experimental physics as ‘experimental theology’. Not only does this blur the line between philosophy and science, but it also incorporates the developments of new sciences as part of the philosophical search for utopia.

The sea voyages, discoveries of new, unknown lands and their original inhabitants that were so important in Early European culture were a source of inspiration for utopian narratives, as noted by Gregory Claeys and Lyman Tower Sargent in their introduction to *The Utopian Reader*. This is evident in the placement of Raphael’s journey to the island in Thomas More’s *Utopia*, which is linked to the explorations of Amerigo Vespucci (More, “introduction”). Both Jonathan Swift and Thomas More show that these voyages have had an impact on how we construct knowledge. Jenny Mezcimens argues that both authors provide us with a similar character: “In both works the utopian vision is experienced by an idealist, Hythlodaye and Gulliver, who is not the author, and who has not come to terms with the distinction between ideal and actual, time and the timeless” (21). Here, two mind-sets come together: that of the idealist and the gatherer of knowledge. Another instance of this idealist who wants to find this utopian vision is found in both Pullman’s *His Dark Materials* and Milton’s *Paradise Lost*. Where Lucifer bravely dares to leave Hell behind to find a better world than the horrors he has been condemned to, as shown in book 2, Lord Asriel follows a similar desire. Both characters leave the world that condemned them behind to find this utopian vision and, as Lord Asriel finds, cannot reach it due to the rules of parallel universes.

The perfectionistic protagonist desiring to find this unreachable perfect place will eventually find out the paradox: utopia is something other than what we live in and therefore unreachable, as argued by Louis Marin: “When More said ‘Utopia’, this name performativity created that ‘otherness’.” (411).

That ‘otherness’ is, however, not only to be found. A theme in the utopian literary mode is that this ‘other’ perfect place can also be created. Cavendish is fairly clear about this possibility to create worlds on your own, and lets her narrator suggest creating and dismissing worlds until they find the one they consider perfect: “I’ll take your advice, reject and despise all the Worlds without me, and create a World of my own.” (63; pt. 1). Although it can be argued that Thomas More does something similar in writing down and creating the society of Utopia, Milton and Pullman, like Cavendish, take this a step further: their characters are also found creating this perfect world in reality rather than just as a work of fiction. In the striking quotation Pullman chose as an epigraph to *Northern Lights*, the name of the trilogy is referred to: “Unless the almighty maker them ordain / His dark materials to create more worlds” (2.916-7). This can be found in Lord Asriel’s desire to create a better world in a parallel universe. In book 7 of *Paradise Lost*, the initial title of the book (and American title of *Northern Lights*) is mentioned: “He took the golden compasses, prepared / in God’s eternal store, to circumscribe / This universe, and all created things.” (7.225-7). Just like Cavendish’s protagonist desires almost spiritually to create that World of her own, Lucifer and Asriel desire the same thing. Religion and spirituality here are part of a yearning for the infinite, a utopia that brings this ideal to life; this exact desire unites Cavendish, the feminist Christian writer inspired by the development of new technology, Milton, the Christian epic writer and Pullman, the contemporary writer critiquing religion. This is the first step in discovering the religious utopian desire found in Pullman’s *His Dark Materials*, which will be further examined in chapter 3.



### Chapter III: Establishing *His Dark Materials* as a Religious Utopia

Now that we have established Phillip Pullman's *His Dark Materials* not only as part of the crossover genre, but also as part of the utopian imaginative mode, a further argument can be made as to what kind of utopian world the trilogy is concerned with.

An important influence in Pullman's trilogy has been the writings of William Blake, as often stated by Pullman himself; in a column written for *The Guardian* Pullman refers to several works, including those by Blake, as vital for his understanding of the self: "thanks to [Blake's work et al], I discovered what I believed in." (Pullman, "Blake and Me").

Blake, known for his extensive poetry and his radical religious visions as portrayed in, for example, *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, has been a controversial writer in his own right, known for his radical religious views. This radicalism in religion is relevant to Pullman's critique of religion in *His Dark Materials*, radical as well. However, to suggest Blake's work are part of the utopian imaginative mode as well is quite a leap, and even though there could indeed be some truth in his, considering Blake to be part of this narrative mode deserves a study of its own. However, we can take from this clearly stated influence the extreme vision of religion, and the desire to radically reform it, which can indeed also be found in *His Dark Materials*.

John Milton is also a writer known for his radical religious views. His epic poem *Paradise Lost*, we established in chapter 2, indeed incorporates the utopian imaginative mode by following the same narrative themes. Furthermore, *Paradise Lost* can be seen as radical for the religious viewpoint in portraying Lucifer differently than the church tends to do; for someone like the present writer, raised in a Christian background, it is surprising that Lucifer gets such a powerful voice and a vision, surely a radical choice. It is not only this one work of Milton that shows his radical desire to reform society and its rules and conventions; his

*Areopagitica* calls for revisions in the field of divorce, freedom of the press and the principal right to freedom of expression. For Milton, choice is an important value.

The connection between *Paradise Lost* and *His Dark Materials* is not only made evident through the origin of the title of Pullman's trilogy in book 2 of *Paradise Lost*, but even highlighted by the use of that specific quotation from book 2 of *Paradise Lost* as epigraph, making not only the voyage Lucifer is to undertake the very first one that the reader sees, but also underlining the religious themes and creation of new worlds by pointing directly towards them in this chosen excerpt (thesis 9). Pullman not only refers to the utopian imaginative mode of creating and finding new worlds through a voyage, but also puts forward the religious character of the book and therefore focusses on the divine themes in the book: the utopian imaginative mode and religious themes are already brought together here by Pullman.

However, although Pullman's choice of both the utopian and the radical view of religion is brought forward so directly, a problem arises when considering the utopian imaginative mode. As Fátima Vieira has argued, the utopian society or world cannot be created with interference from the divine (7-9), which would mean that *His Dark Materials* is not following these rules set for the utopian narrative. However, a different perspective can be taken in respect to the divine, non-human characters: they do behave and react in a human-like way, and their biology even shows humanoid aspects. For this, one can take a closer look at the two main divine entities in the trilogy: the angels and the Authority, considered the 'false god' by many other angels. The line between man and angel is proposed to be fairly thin, as is the case with Baruch and Balthamos, the two angels that accompany Will at the beginning of *The Amber Spyglass*; they are said to be in a loving, same-sex relationship with each other, and this is noticed by Will. However, this human-like showing of affection Will picks up on is not the strongest representation of the humanoid identity of the angels. In a

conversation between Will and Balthamos found in the second chapter of the final novel, Will asks Balthamos: “Are you a man? You sound like a man.”, to which the angel replies with: “Baruch was a man. I was not. Now he is angelic.” (610; pt. 3, ch. 2). From these statements we can understand that, of the two divine creatures, one appears human in behaviour according to Will, and the other one even once was a man. The conversation continues to be about this process in which men can become angelic, but no answer is given by Balthamos in this respect. Even though it is left unclear how Baruch, and later Metatron as well, underwent this process of becoming divine creatures rather than ending up in the afterlife, a hint is given later on in the chapter as to Baruch’s transition: he is “what once was the ghost of Baruch” saved by Balthamos from being sent to the world of the dead (623; pt. 3, ch. 2). There is no reason given for this, but a possible answer is the romantic bond the two angels have: in other words, an emotional, irrational and most profoundly human motive. It is evident that the angels cannot be considered simply divine in their interference: they behave as humans.

Even more can be said about the Authority, who is considered the oldest angel and has presented himself as god, the creator. Balthamos reflects on this as well in chapter 2 of *The Amber Spyglass*:

The Authority, God, the Creator, the Lord, Yahweh, El, Adonai, the King, the Father, the Almighty – those were all names he gave himself. He 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, and Dust is only a name for what happens when matter begins to understand itself. Matter loves matter. It seeks to know more about itself, and Dust is formed. The first angels condensed out of Dust, and the Authority was the first of all. He told those who came after him that he had created them, but it was a lie. One of those who came later was wiser than he was, and she found out the truth, so he

banished her. We serve her still. And the Authority still reigns in the kingdom, and Metatron is his Regent. (622; pt. 2, ch. 2)

So if the Authority can be considered an angel as well, the same rules can be applied as were applied to the consideration of Baruch and Balthamos by Will: the god-creature presented here by Pullman is humanoid. This is even more evident in the aging-process the Authority is subject to. He is turning senile over time as well. Pullman stated himself in an interview that he solely followed the Bible in this respect, which showed evidence of God's aging by walking with Adam and Eve at first, and later being referred to as 'Ancient of Days': "He's shown as growing older," is Pullman's conclusion (Cooper 355). However, as Jonathan and Kenneth Padley note, this is an incorrect statement by Pullman, and they put forward that: "'I the Lord do not change,' says God in Malachi 3:6, and the letter of James 1:17 proclaims that there is 'no variation or shadow due to change' in the Father of lights." (330). Although this poses problems with regard to Pullman's statement about God as an aging identity in the Bible, this does not change the fact that his interpretation of God was still based upon a human aging process, and his interpretation of the texts he cites in the interview with Cooper can still be seen as evidence for his reading of the divine creature.

To sum up, in Pullman's interpretation of the Bible the God-character does follow a human process; since He shows signs of a humanoid identity he cannot fully be considered a divine creature. Vieira's argument about utopia and divine intervention does not remain significant against *His Dark Materials* as a utopian text, in this case with a religious theme. Even aside from this, a further argument can be distilled from Balthamos's lines: the Authority was, just like the angels and humans, a result of Dust clustering together; they are made of the same basic ingredient and can be considered to be on the same level of existence.

Considering the angels, humans and the Authority in line with each other opens up a study of these creatures in the framework of a utopian search of a religious nature, for we already established the utopian mode to be present in Pullman's trilogy. However, the religious utopian idea can be seen in two layers: that of Lord Asriel's desire, and that of Lyra's accomplishments. Both desire to find a destination set apart from the religious rules put forward by the Authority, but both protagonists try to achieve this desire in a completely different way. Lord Asriel's search is often connected to that of Lucifer in *Paradise Lost* and Van Heumen even argued that: "Lord Asriel resembles Milton's Satan in that he challenges the Authority and builds his own Pandemonium." (44) and although she considers Lucifer to be the Romantic interpretation of the real protagonist in *Paradise Lost* (44), this might not entirely be the case for Lord Asriel, who attempts to establish his own utopian world, ridden of religion and the grip of the Authority, but also fails, since all creatures are only able to survive for 10 years in a world they are not born in. Lyra, however, is able to establish another form of utopia: one found in the afterlife. Her heroic deeds in the world of the dead leads to one window being opened through which the spirits of the dead are able to escape after they tell a true story to the harpies: no longer are they stuck in the afterlife, or 'Hell'.

This descent to the afterlife and hell provides a radical religious viewpoint of its own. The journey Lyra undertakes to the world of the dead bears resemblance to the journey in Greek mythology, in which the Styx needs to be crossed. However, there is nothing remaining from the Greek imagery of the afterlife in *His Dark Materials* apart from Lyra crossing the river resembling the Styx; instead, Lyra stops at what appears to be a human depot where all need to wait until they are led to the actual afterlife in chapter 21, which bears the image of a human depot as well, guarded by harpies. Pullman's afterlife is placed within the classic image of the afterlife at first, but does not resemble it.

Where Asriel failed to build a religious utopia freed from of the Authority's influence, Lyra succeeds in overcoming the Authority by letting the ghosts of all living creatures out: "This will undo everything. It's the greatest blow you could strike. The Authority will be powerless after this." (847; pt. 3, ch. 23) One possible option is to just interpret this as an overthrow of the Authority's power, but it might even be more elaborate than that; Rachel Falconer argues that Hell can be either a place or an experience in contemporary Western literature since 1945. Since there is an absence of Heaven as reachable afterlife for humans in *His Dark Materials*, the world of the dead can indeed be interpreted as Hell; George Steiner is quoted by Falconer as saying that Hell has become a metaphor in Western society. Since it has lost a location, both Heaven and Hell needed to be recreated as a metaphorical concept: "To have neither Heaven nor Hell is to be intolerably deprived and alone in a world gone flat. Of the two, Hell proved easier to recreate." (qtd. in Falconer, *Hell in Contemporary Literature* 16). And Hell is, indeed, recreated in *His Dark Materials* as the human depot guarded by harpies until Lyra interferes; then, another transition takes place. The afterlife, as stated before, intertwined with the concept of Hell in *His Dark Materials* is no longer a location after Lyra opens the window and the ghosts can become part of all the worlds of the living again; instead the afterlife becomes an emotional state, which follows Falconer's argument as well: "In the Western imaginative tradition, even more important than the notion of Hell as a sacred space is our belief in the *journey* through Hell, the idea of the transformative passage, the destruction and rebirth of the self through an encounter with the absolute Other." (*Hell in Contemporary Literature* 1). Lyra provides through her actions the possibility for that: rebirth as evaporation after a visit to the harpies, in which every part of a human ghost becomes part of a new world again. In this scenario, the religious utopia is found in building it ourselves after this encounter with the absolute Other in the world of the dead, and a religious utopia freed from the influence of the Authority is not found in a location, as Lord Asriel desired, but

in a state of being in which he no longer has that authority over humans: in the form of Dust. While this location of a religious utopia fails, Lyra achieves a different kind of utopia in her victory in the world of the dead. Those who do not lie to the harpies are allowed to become part of all universes again, and go back to the state of Dust of which all creatures are made off, including the angelic characters and the Authority Himself. The key here is choice: the choice to lie or tell the truth to the harpies will give you entrance to this utopic state of being which is not reachable in our lifetime, in contrast with Lord Asriel's desires, but in the afterlife alone. The 'otherness' of the utopia is reachable by becoming that other: by becoming Dust again.

## Conclusion

This thesis has shown that Philip Pullman's trilogy *His Dark Materials* not only crosses over in target audience, but also in genre. The trilogy that radically criticizes religion does more than just that, it also shows a desire in finding a place beyond that religion it criticizes. This desire is envisioned in Lord Asriel's search for a world to build out of reach of the power of the Authority: a utopia freed from the religious influences. He fails because utopia is 'other' per definition and therefore unreachable. Lyra, however, bypasses this definition in her own establishment of a religious utopia in the afterlife in her descent to the world of the dead, a form of being that is 'other'; there is a choice central to becoming part of all worlds again in the form of Dust, and only in this utopic state of being one is free from the chains of religion: a religious utopia is reached.

For further research one can look into how the Romantic ideal fits within this utopian imaginative mode; Pullman himself has often stated the importance of Blake as an influence in his work and further literary study could place Blake's writings in the framework of a utopian imaginative mode. The utopian imaginative mode also strongly incorporates the social structures of worlds other than our own, as said in chapter 1, and a further reading could be made in how *His Dark Materials* and its different worlds portrayed (not only Lyra's original world, but also Cittàgazze and the world of the mulefa visited by Mary Malone) fit within the construction of utopic societies. In chapter 2 the role of gender in Lyra's world as compared to *The Blazing-World* is discussed, but gender is not the only aspect of utopic society, and aspects of law, divorce and so forth can also be considered in a close reading. Lastly, further study can resolve the contradictory imagery of the Christian Authority who established a world of the dead that only shows Classical imagery of the afterlife such as the river Styx. Dante's *Divina Commedia* shows a harmony between Christian and Classical



imagery in the *Inferno*, and therefore a possible link can be made between Dante's writing and the image of the afterlife Pullman shows the reader.

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