



The Good Man Jesus and the Scoundrel Christ

Tony Watkins

Reinventing Jesus

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When I interviewed Philip Pullman, I found him genial, generous and engaging. He has a sharp mind, a clever wit, and he's a brilliant writer. He has justifiably been acclaimed as one of Britain's finest writers, having won several awards including the Whitbread Book of the Year Award and the internationally prestigious Astrid Lindgren Memorial award, as well as receiving a CBE. Some years back, *The Independent* declared that Pullman is '*capable of lighting up the dullest day or greyest spirit with the incandescence of his imagination*'.

He's also capable of making Christians incandescent with indignation at some of the things he says. His best-selling *His Dark Materials* trilogy was very negative about the church, which irked some. It also contained an incident in which a being claiming to be God is killed, which really raised some hackles. Pullman also made some

particularly outspoken remarks in a couple of interviews. One of the most quoted is '*I'm trying to undermine the basis of Christian belief*', though he admits he was out to wind up the reporter. He told Bryan Appleyard in *The Times* recently that '*I'd be a complete idiot if I tried to undermine Christianity. It would mean undermining what I am as well.*'

It would undermine what Pullman is in the sense that he has always insisted that he is a '*Christian atheist and even more particularly, a Church of England atheist. And very specifically, a 1662 Book of Common Prayer atheist. I can't escape these influences on my background, and I would not wish to.*'

So, as Rowan Williams pointed out in an event at the National Theatre, Pullman was surprisingly quiet about Jesus in *His Dark Materials*. Pullman promised him that he would make this the subject of his next book. Then Canongate invited Pullman to contribute this volume to their Myths series. He went back to the Gospels and read them in three different versions (the Authorised Version, the New English Bible and the New Revised Standard Version). He also re-read Acts and Paul's letters, and was struck by how often Paul refers to 'Christ' rather than to 'Jesus':

Christ is an addition; he comes later. I reread Paul, and I counted 30 occasions when he refers to Jesus but 150-plus when he refers to Christ. Paul wasn't interested in Jesus, he was interested in Christ — in the God part, not the man part. Paul was an incomparable genius, literary and administrative, whose view of this entity he called Jesus Christ, strongly skewed towards the Christ part, is what the church has been founded on ever since.

So he decided to rework the story of Jesus to focus on this perceived tension by making them separate characters. In his version, Mary gives birth to twins: Jesus and a much weaker boy, who becomes known as Christ. Their lives remain intertwined, yet go on very different courses.

Once again, it appears that Pullman is out to shock. Even the title seems calculated to inflame Christians, and it's surely no accident that it's being published in Easter week – though that is Canongate's decision, not his. The back cover of

the book perhaps tries to defuse some of the attacks by declaring in big, bold letters, *'This is a story.'* But perhaps even that is slightly double-edged, suggesting that the source material is also a story and not necessarily a true one. It also points to one of Pullman's recurring themes: the process of telling stories.

Philip Pullman is, of course, a consummate storyteller. He frequently insists that all he's doing is telling stories, not trying to preach a message – though I think he introduces a false antithesis, because he clearly does both. This story, though, is a curious thing. To my mind it's far from Pullman at his best. Sometimes it is a respectful re-telling of incidents from the Gospels, and since Pullman has written in a spare, biblical tone, it feels very much like reading a somewhat old-fashioned translation of the Bible, with some extra details. At some other times, the stories are changed considerably, and at times are a complete distortion of what the original texts say.

It is clear that Pullman has done his homework. He cleverly fills in some of the background of the stories, explaining some of the details and suggesting motivations for why people acted in particular ways. It's also clear that he's been reading at least some bits of the Old Testament. But of course, he's not a Bible scholar, so, unsurprisingly, there are things he gets wrong or doesn't understand how they fit into the wider context of the Bible or of the culture of the day. He also occasionally draws on non-canonical gospels, particularly the Infancy Gospel of Thomas, despite the fact that this dates from around two centuries after the biblical Gospels.

From the outset, Pullman creates a great deal of ambiguity about the miraculous aspects of the story. Mary is visited by someone claiming to be an angel and told that she will conceive. She clearly believes him and Pullman never says otherwise, but the implication is that Mary is gullible and has been tricked. Nevertheless, when she gives birth in a Bethlehem stable, shepherds come to see the long-awaited Messiah in response to seeing a glowing angel telling them of his birth. Pullman makes no attempt to explain this angel away. Neither does he offer any rationalisation for astrologers arriving from the east in search of one who has been born to be king of the Jews.

As a child, Jesus is a normal, somewhat mischievous boy, while the weakly Christ is irreproachable. Interestingly, Christ performs miracles to rescue Jesus when he is in trouble. When Jesus gets lost in Jerusalem after the Passover, again Christ gets him out of trouble with the priests by giving clever answers.

Pullman has set up certain expectations in the reader about how Christ's story is going to develop. But he begins to subvert this at Jesus's baptism, when Jesus is inspired to focus his life on God as John had done. He goes into the wilderness to pray, where he is tempted, not by the devil, but by his brother. Christ wants Jesus to be a messiah figure, doing miracles to win disciples and building a powerful church which could spread throughout the world being a force for good. Jesus flatly rejects Christ's pragmatism; he is an idealist who preaches the imminent arrival of the kingdom of God.

Christ is a more complex character. On the one hand, he continues to love his brother deeply, though he stays in the background and has no contact with Jesus during his ministry. But on the other hand, he is calculating and manipulative, hungry perhaps to be the power behind the throne when Jesus, as he hopes, establishes an earthly system of churches and structures.

Then he is approached by a mysterious stranger, the identity of whom we never discover. Christ eventually concludes that the stranger is an angel, and he certainly seems to know an awful lot, but Pullman never quite says enough for us to know for sure. The stranger encourages Christ to watch Jesus very carefully and to write everything down for the future. He also urges him to see the spiritual 'truth' beyond the sometimes inconvenient historical events.

Pullman's point is that what we read in the Gospels is not what actually happened. The real historical Jesus – a good, inspiring man, but nothing more – has been smothered by inventions of the early church – in particular the incarnation and the resurrection. This is a well-worn attack on the Gospels – the Jesus of history versus the Christ of faith – though Pullman gives it a provocative new coat of paint. He says, *'I think my version is much closer to what Jesus would*

have said. The version in the Gospels is so different from what he said usually.' It's a great shame that he evidently has no idea of the very impressive evidence for the reliability of the Gospels.

Jesus eventually reaches Gethsemane realising that things are coming to a head and that public opinion is turning against him. And by that point he has lost his faith. He compares himself to the fool who says in his heart, 'There is no God,' and says, 'When the fool prays to you and gets no answer, he decides that God's great absence means he's not bloody well there.' He wonders whether Christ's dream of a church was right, but revolts against the idea, perceiving that it will lead to abuse of power, cruelty and conquest.

Pullman told Charlotte Higgins in *The Guardian*:

He is really speaking for me in that section. Of course I don't condemn speculative thinking, or organising people to help them do good, or setting up hospitals or giving hospitality to travelling strangers or educating people. But we have seen very recently how some aspects of all this can go wrong. People can abuse power.

The greatest excuse in the world is that 'God told me to do it': hence the Crusades. Once you are appealing to an authority that can't be checked, you are doing something dangerous.

This is a familiar theme in Pullman's work: there is no God; this world is all there is and it's wonderful; organised religion is a terrible thing which leads inexorably to abuse of power. At least, in *The Good Man Jesus and the Scoundrel Christ* he is not as simplistic as he was in *His Dark Materials*, in that here he does acknowledge the good which the church has done, as well as pointing to its failures.

It's easy for Christians to get defensive about such attacks on the church, but although Pullman overstates the case, it is true that there have been, and are, abuses of power and authority within church structures. It is a disgrace on the church and it brings the gospel of Jesus Christ into disrepute. But we shouldn't be surprised, because the church is made up of fallen human beings, who are not always very good at working through the implications of their faith. On the

iPhone app of the book, which has both text and audio book as well as extra features, Pullman says, 'My beliefs are those of Jesus as I have him expressing them in the Garden of Gethsemane. If there is to be a church, it should be a poor church. It should own no property and make no laws.' He has a point.

Eventually, the stranger seduces Christ into betraying Jesus (Judas is not mentioned), believing that like Abraham, he has to be willing to sacrifice the one he loves. He is distraught when he realises what he has done, but for the sake of the bigger story, he agrees to deceiving the disciples into thinking that Jesus has risen from the dead. Once again, Pullman is suggesting that the miraculous is an invention, a deliberate deception combined with gullibility, or at least suggestibility, but not something that could possibly be true.

Much of this is inevitable, given Pullman's atheism. He comes to the stories already convinced that miracles cannot happen and believing, like the philosopher David Hume, that there cannot ever be enough evidence to establish their truth. However, it is curious that Pullman seems unable to tell the story without occasionally bringing in some very mysterious goings-on, which do appear to be miraculous or angelic, even though he tries to deny or redefine such things. The angel appearing to the shepherds, for instance. He dismisses these elements as aspects of a fairy-tale, but he wasn't able to do without them altogether.

He sometimes portrays the miracles as simply a matter of someone's mental state, as with the paralysed man who 'was so strengthened and inspired by the atmosphere Jesus had created that he found himself able to move.' But there are other times when a healing is much more ambiguous, allowing for the possibility of something mysterious having taken place.

Pullman is clearly fascinated with the person of Jesus. He recognises that the Gospels don't read like novels or fairytales, though – because of his scepticism about the miraculous – he doesn't think they're history either. Pullman's Jesus is an extraordinary man, but he's nothing more than that. He does no miracles, makes no claims to divinity and remains irrevocably dead after his

crucifixion. Yet in much of the book, he remains a profoundly compelling character.

The story of Jesus as told in the Gospels is extraordinary. Its impact on human history has been incalculable, and people keep coming back to it even when they disbelieve its message. As Richard Baukham argued in his *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses: The Gospels as Eyewitness Testimony*, the Gospel accounts bear all the marks of having been written by, or at least closely based on the accounts of, people who were there at the time. These records, with their mind-boggling claims about Jesus being both God and man, and rising from death to prove it, cannot easily be dismissed as merely faith-based accretions on top of the story of a good man. There is good evidence for their reliability; the claims of Jesus are astonishingly far-reaching – they deserve to be listened to on their own terms, with an open mind. Charlotte Higgins's response is the right one: on her *Guardian* blog she writes that the book has '*sent me rushing back to the Gospels. I read Matthew over my lunchtime soup, ready to see with new eyes these fascinating and often startling documents.*'

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