

## Lesson Ideas

### ***His Dark Materials: The Nature of Good and Evil***

#### **OVERVIEW**

These learning materials do not require the teacher or learner to have read *His Dark Materials* or to have seen the National Theatre production.

Each activity comprises several short tasks related to the English Reading Programme of Study at Key Stage 3 and 4 and where relevant, video clips from the production.

The materials include:

- o Curriculum Context
- o Learning Outcomes
- o Plot Synopsis
- o Worksheets

#### **Activities:**

- 1. Introduction: understanding and reason**
- 2. Religious teaching about sin and disobedience**
- 3. Good and bad behaviour**
- 4. By whose authority?**

#### GENERAL INFORMATION ABOUT THESE LESSON IDEAS

##### **Learning Outcomes**

What students can expect to learn and achieve.

##### **Plot Synopsis**

A synopsis of the plot and background to *His Dark Materials*.

##### **Curriculum Context**

How the materials relate to the Programmes of Study for Religious Education at Key Stages 3 and 4.

##### **Documents to Download**

Word & PDF.

## Curriculum Context

There is no National Curriculum for religious education, or nationally set Programmes of Study. Agreed syllabuses for religious education are produced by local authorities following national government guidelines. These indicate that a number of religions have to be covered, with particular emphasis on Christianity but also including others such as Judaism, Islam, Hinduism, Sikhism and Buddhism. The attainment targets in the guidelines are:

AT1: learning about religions.

AT2: learning from religion (i.e. personal learning coming out of discussion of ideas, issues and principles).

These suggestions as a whole are best suited to KS4, but some tasks can also be used at KS3.

## Plot synopsis

*His Dark Materials* is based on Philip Pullman's trilogy consisting of *Northern Lights*, *The Subtle Knife* and *The Amber Spyglass*. Its two central characters, Lyra Belacqua (11) and Will Parry (12) come from different but parallel worlds. Will's world is essentially our world; but in Lyra's world invisible realities such as the soul have visible forms called daemons. A central 'reality' called Dust is the essential mystery of the plays.

## Paradise Lost

John Milton's *Paradise Lost* tells the story of the origin of sin, in which the first woman, Eve, disobeyed God, ate some forbidden fruit from the tree of knowledge of good and evil, and gave it to her partner Adam. She was tempted to do this by a serpent, who Christians later identified with Satan, the Devil. See **Issues - Sources and Influences**. In HDM, the Church or Magisterium in Lyra's world teach this view dogmatically. A newly discovered elementary particle is identified as 'sin' and called Dust in Lyra's world and the church wants it destroyed. Lyra comes to discover that Dust is actually good, a form of consciousness and wisdom. The church's view comes from The Authority (who is **not** the Creator) who wants obedient worshippers and not independent thinkers. The story is a struggle between unthinking obedience to an Authority; and personal discovery and imagination.

*It is not necessary for the teacher to read Milton in order to teach this unit.*

## Authoritarian religion

Authoritarian religion in the story demands a narrow-minded faith and unthinking loyalty, and it has shaped Lyra's world. The enemies of rigid thinking are described by the Magisterium as 'evil'. The church has ways of absolving sin, even murder, before it happens so that opponents can be assassinated without guilt or punishment. Dust is revealed to be human creative consciousness, the imagination, and its preservation gives the world new hope. In other words, the way forward for

humanity is not in religious or ideological authoritarianism, oppression and force, but in us having the freedom and ability to use our brains fully, purposefully and wisely.

### **The Wisdom of Eve**

Eve's original act interpreted as disobedience in the Genesis story (retold in *Paradise Lost*) was in actual fact the point when she began to develop her understanding and wisdom. Her choice of knowledge should have been praised as a sign of progress. Dogmatic religions emphasise disobedience and sin for reasons of control; rather we should focus on understanding, empowerment, wisdom and responsible free will.

### **The Ancient of Days**

Daniel, the latest Old Testament book, describes a vision of heaven: "thrones were set in place, and the Ancient of Days took his seat. His clothing was white as snow; the hair of his head was white like wool". This was the court of judgement. Then there came "one like a son of man [a human], coming with the clouds of heaven. He approached the Ancient of Days and was led into his presence. He was given authority, glory and sovereign power; all peoples, nations and [?men?] worshipped him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion that will not pass away, and his kingdom is one that will never be destroyed" (Daniel 7:9-10). In our story, The Authority is self appointed, and this human figure was Metatron, known in the Bible as Enoch, who did not die because "God took him" (Genesis 5.24). In *The Amber Spyglass*, the Ancient of Days is kept alive to be The Authority, very ancient now. When released, he just disintegrates and is blown away. Metatron is cast with Lord Asriel into the Abyss. With The Authority gone, people develop the 'Republic of Heaven' using reason and imagination in equal measure.

### **Learning Outcomes**

The main aim is to explore the possibilities of thinking for ourselves on deep matters of human importance, in the context of religious traditions that can be helpful but can also be authoritarian.

(AT1) *By the end of this unit students should have a knowledge and understanding of:*

- o The concepts of truth, goodness, evil, and sin
- o Doctrines of the consequences of behaviour (reward, punishment)
- o Religious teachings about human status value, relationships and ethical behaviour
- o Religious claims for authority and power

(AT2) *By the end of these lessons students should be able to reflect upon and evaluate:*

- o How their own concerns can be explored in story form.
- o Ethics, the consequences of actions.
- o Personal relationships.
- o Personal qualities and personal authority
- o Decision-making skills and making responsible choices

## **ACTIVITY 1: Introduction: understanding and reason**

### **Learning Outcomes**

(AT1) *By the end of these lessons students should have a knowledge and understanding of:*

The relationship between authority and freedom of thought in religious studies.

(AT2) *By the end of these lessons students should be able to reflect upon and evaluate:*

The connection between story and personal understanding.

### **How we learn from stories.**

*His Dark Materials* is a story with different levels of meaning. At the level of a simple story, we have an action-packed adventure across different parallel worlds, in which good (supporters of free will) defeat their opponents (supporters of authority). Alongside this simple story is a level of meaning which tells us something about ourselves and our world – about what kind of people we are, about good and evil and how difficult it is to tell which is which. Lyra is a girl growing up, finding she is not an orphan, with some very confused loyalties. Will is a troubled boy worrying about his mother's health and his father's absence, without friends, self esteem and in trouble with the authorities. They work things out, and we can learn from their journey.

### **Authority and Free Will.**

Pullman emphasizes the importance of people being able to use their reason and free will responsibly to solve problems. External authority takes away this ability for independent action and thought by demanding unthinking obedience. This happens in religion, politics and society. By the end of the story, the small band of authoritarian religious extremists are driven out of power and a more reasoned church organisation takes over. Their 'Authority' is revealed as a man-made interpretation of God and not the Creator himself. Religious extremism still has no room for personal freedoms. Secular authoritarian extremists in power, such as communism, also inhibit human creativity, imagination and freedom.

### **Task 1.1**

On *Stagework* go to **Issues - Faith, Truth and Blasphemy** and discuss these issues as a class.

This section discusses the position Pullman takes over Christianity and organised religion, and about the importance of a spirituality which involves the imagination.

a) Discuss the kinds of authority you have experienced (e.g. parents, teachers, doctors, police). Which elements of these have you found helpful and which have you found difficult? Explain why and give examples. (AT2).

b) Read and discuss the Ten Commandments (Exodus 20) and the Golden Rule as authorities for behaviour. (AT1)

- c) Discuss in what ways people are responsible for their own actions and behaviour. In what circumstances do you think you might know what is right but end up doing the opposite? (AT2)
- d) Young children are self-focused, demand what they want and resist authority. Tell a story, from experience or imagination, of children beginning to share.
- e) When should children obey adults, and why? (clues: health, safety). When should children **not** obey adults, and why?

### Plenary

Summarise and develop the views discussed on good and bad behaviour and experiences.

Reflect as a class on: issues of **being informed** and **being responsible**.

### Background Notes for Teachers

#### a) The story

The easiest way to read the story outline is to read the stage plays by Nicholas Wright: *His Dark Materials*, published by Nick Hern Books (2003, ISBN 1 85459 768 X). They can be read in an evening. Decisions on how to adapt three complex books are discussed on *Stagework* under **Issues**; this discussion can be shared with the students.

#### b) Dust

The newly discovered elementary particles are fictionally explained as the seed-corn of human consciousness and is described as a deliberate strategy (by whom is a mystery) against the Authority, starting 33,000 years ago –when the human race emerged. The church viewed this challenge to authority as **sin**; the other side saw it as the growth in **consciousness, wisdom and imagination**. The particles called Dust eventually triumph over authority – but this is seen as free will and not disobedience. The message of this is that humanity should be informed by informed and rational responsibility, and not by unthinking obedience.

#### c) Parallel worlds

Setting a story in a parallel world is not new. Alice sees new worlds down a rabbit hole and through a looking glass; CS Lewis places his world behind a wardrobe. The various parallel worlds in *His Dark Materials* are:

- o Lyra's world, especially Oxford and the arctic (in *Northern Lights*)
- o Will's world (i.e. our world), especially Oxford although the action starts in Winchester (in *The Subtle Knife*).
- o Cittagazze, "the city of magpies" [or thieves], from which people use the subtle knife to raid other worlds.
- o The mulefa world [not represented in the play], where evolution has depended on a close relation with the tree of knowledge which produces oil and wheels (in *The Amber Spyglass*).
- o Hades, the underworld, the ancient Greek world of ghosts.

#### d) **Daemons**

In Lyra's world, what we might call inner spiritual essence is visible. Our personalities or souls are seen as daemons. Characters from our world learn to 'see' their daemons imaginatively – Will's is a cat (a fighter only when necessary); and that of Mary [a character who is not in the play] is a bird, an alpine chough (free, strong but on the margins). The end result of Lyra and Will's actions is to cut off our world from magic and the supernatural – so we have to make our own choices using our own resources – especially reason and our imagination (that is our ability to 'see' things which are true but hidden).

## **ACTIVITY 2: Sin, Obedience and Thinking for Ourselves.**

*By the end of these lessons students should have a knowledge and understanding of:*

- o Myths of creation and afterlife
- o The concepts of goodness, evil, sin
- o Doctrines of the consequences of behaviour (reward, punishment).

*By the end of these lessons students should be able to reflect upon and evaluate:*

- o Ethical values and actions
- o Making responsible individual choices

### **The Bible: original sin**

Further levels of meaning come from the stories of creation, sin, good and evil from the Christian and Jewish Bible (the book of Genesis) and retold in John Milton's famous poetic work *Paradise Lost*. Eve disobeys God by eating forbidden fruit from the tree of knowledge of good and evil. This is called "The Fall" (that is Adam and Eve have fallen into sin). 'Original sin' means that people are programmed to be disobedient and selfish, 'evil' by nature. Pullman asks the daring question – what happens if John Milton, and the Bible, got the story the wrong way round and this is really the origin of knowledge and imagination? The Christian Bishop, Hugh Montefiore, born a Jew, called this "the Fall upwards" – that is, humans became intelligent seekers for knowledge which gave them difficult choices.

### **Stories make you think.**

Pullman's story is designed to make us think about our own lives, experiences, relationships and beliefs and is not to be taken literally. Stories in the Bible were also written and told to make us think, and they too should not be taken literally. It doesn't really matter whether or not you can cut through the skin of our world into the next with a subtle knife – we assume really that you cannot; equally, it does not matter whether God created the world in six days, or whether snakes really were cleverer than humans and could talk. What myths and stories say about human experience, strengths and weaknesses is important for us to think about. You should reach your own opinions on the matters discussed – but do not be in a hurry. You need a lot of information first and need to know how to test whether information is true or false. You may agree or disagree with particular ideas. The important thing is to think about these things, to try to find your own answers, and to discuss issues with others. There are no easy answers. Life would be very boring if there were.

### **Task 2.1**

- a) Consider the question, What kind of world do you want to live in? What needs to be done to make our world closer to this ideal world? What bits of that can you achieve in your lifetime? (AT2)
- b) On *Stagework*, go to **Issues - Sources and Influences**. What does John Milton say about Satan? And what does William Blake say about the imagination?

## **Paradise in the Bible**

In the story who is on which side? Who is evil? And who decides? What is the origin and cause of evil and sin? *Genesis* in the Bible described the coming of sin when Eve, the first woman was tempted by the serpent. We are going to explore the story of Eve in paradise (called the garden of Eden) in the Bible (*Genesis*). This is a Jewish story or myth which Christians have adopted.

### **Task 2.2**

- a) Read *Genesis* chapters 1 to 3 in a modern version of the Bible. How does the writer explain human life?
- b) Class project

Group A: Research "the big bang hypothesis" about the origin of the universe. Why have scientists today suggested this?

Group B: Research: evolution by natural selection. How is it thought that living things change (evolve) gradually over time?

Together: How might we know whether the universe was created deliberately or happened by accident? (AT1)

### **God, Satan and the 'sons of God' (*bene elim*)**

Satan was not at first considered evil. In the book of *Job*, he is a member of the heavenly court ("the sons of God", *bene elim* appear in HDM) who accused the God-fearing *Job* of being pious only for reward. *Job's* prosperity was then stripped away. God is described as a monarch in a palace surrounded by courtiers. He expects loyalty from subjects like *Job*, but regards *Job* as one of the best. It was this boast that caused one courtier, Satan, to challenge God to this test of faithfulness. The God of these stories walks around, disputes and is in every way human. He made humans 'in his own image' whilst keeping them at a lower status. He was concerned that the first couple could have become his equal by having knowledge and eternal life. He was concerned when they built a tower into heaven (the tower of Babel [Babylon]) which might challenge him. The courtiers (*bene elim*) decided to marry human women and have superhuman children, called the Nephilim (*Genesis* 6:1-4).

### **Zoroastrian influence.**

The great battle between God and Satan appears later and owes a great deal to Persian religion, Zoroastrianism, which still exists today. The three Magi or "wise men from the east" were Zoroastrians in the story of *Jesus' birth*. They worshipped one God, Ahura-Mazda and believed that the universe is one gigantic battle between the forces of good and evil. They influenced Jews and Christians. The New Testament book *Revelation* has an example of this great battle. Christians identified Satan with the Devil, the Evil One, the Prince of Darkness – and with the serpent in the Garden of Eden. Zoroastrians are mentioned in *Northern Lights*, p.97.

### **Task 2.3**

Search in the library, encyclopedias or the internet to find out more about Zoroastrians. Put information together as a class project. (AT1).

What do you think is meant by an evil person? Why did Zoroastrians think there was a King of Evil?

### **Sin as failure to achieve one's ideals**

There is another view of sin, based on the Greek word for sin, *hamartano*, 'failure to hit the mark'. This means the sort of behaviour that we know lets ourselves and our friends down. The first part of this process is to develop our ideals or promises; the second to stick by them whatever the consequences.

### **Task 2.4**

- a) How must the witch Seraphina Pekkala have felt when she failed to save the life of Lee Scoresby as she had promised? Contrast this with how Ruta Skadi behaves after she has killed Jopari. Discuss these feelings of guilt and revenge. (AT2)
- b) The past century has included great violence and acts of genocide. What would you do if you were ordered to kill, and if you refused you would be killed yourself? Would you live up to your non-violent ideals, or try to save your own life?
- c) Write a story, or prepare a role play, of a person who sees bullying happening. One character intervenes and stops the bullying; another does not but turns away. Make your characters as realistic as possible. (AT2)

### **Background Notes For Teachers**

#### *The Genesis story of Paradise*

A 'paradise' was originally the walled garden of a king in the ancient world. The Genesis story describes this paradise as a "garden", in the east, in Eden (the Middle East). The human (in Hebrew the word for both human and male is *adam*) was created first, "from the dust of the ground" and life breathed in. To provide a partner, the first human was put to sleep and divided into male and female. The man (now referring to the male human, is generally now called "the man" (*ha'adam*) and not Adam<sup>1</sup>) could say that she is "bone of my bone and flesh of my flesh" as she had been taken from his side<sup>2</sup>; the object of life is to bring these two halves together again through marriage. In this paradise there was no shame, or guilt, or anger – or even hard work.

#### *The tree of the knowledge of good and evil*

One tree, in the middle, was declared out of bounds and would cause death. This was "the tree of the knowledge of good and evil". The serpent, or snake was "more shrewd [clever] than any of the wild animals the Lord God had made". This snake questioned, doubted, investigated and did not accept the authority of the Lord God. For those who did accept God's authority, the serpent was the tempter and God's

---

<sup>1</sup> Gradually Adam becomes the man's proper name after he has named his wife Eve, which means "life", defined as "mother of all the living". Eve is later revealed as Lyra's secret name as she will re-enact and reverse the events of "the fall" in paradise.

<sup>2</sup> Adam's 'rib' was an early mistranslation.

adversary. In our story, the serpent was simply a snake who began a conversation with one of these not too bright humans who simply accepted God's authority. "You will not die" [if you eat the forbidden fruit] the serpent said, "Your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil". The fruit looked good, so she ate, and gave to the man who also ate. Their eyes were opened but the first thing they felt was shame, and made clothes for themselves by sewing fig leaves. They hid from the Lord God when they heard him on his evening walk, but the truth was soon out and the man confessed, blaming the woman, who in turn blamed the snake. This is called "the Fall", the point when 'sin' entered the world. The man and woman had discovered the Lord God's knowledge, and so had to be excluded from the garden in case they also ate the fruit of the tree of life and became immortal, and God's rival. So the first man and woman were banished out of the garden and an armed guard, called a cherubim, a kind of dragon, placed to bar access to the tree of life. Thereafter, life outside the paradise was hard, its people having to grow food, kill animals, make enemies and kill, produce babies through painful childbirth and so on. The world and human life as we know it had begun. Paradise was lost and humans ever after dream of finding it again. The 'sin' therefore was to challenge God.

### **ACTIVITY 3: Good and Bad Character and Behaviour - Ethics and Morals**

*By the end of these lessons students should have a knowledge and understanding of:*

- o Religious teaching about ethical behaviour
- o Religious teachings about human status and value
- o Religious teachings about relationships

*By the end of these lesson students should be able to reflect upon and evaluate:*

- o Personal qualities
- o Relationships

#### **Our Personalities**

In Lyra's world, the personality has an external form – the daemon. Children's personality-daemons change showing how they are experimenting, and they settle at puberty into a mature unchanging form. In Will's (our) world daemons are invisible except to the imagination. Daemons answer the question, 'What kind of person am I?'.

Fader Coram of the Gyptians hobbles on two sticks but his cat daemon is strong, healthy and sleek. His body might be damaged but inside he is still strong, determined and a powerful intellect. The servants' daemons are generally dogs – faithful, obedient. Powerful Lord Asriel has a snow leopard, evil Mrs Coulter a manipulative yellow monkey. Lyra's daemon is Pantalaimon: he can be inconspicuous, as a moth, or be a bird or many other things. By the end he settles to be a pine marten.

The choice of daemon symbolises a person's general personality or 'soul'. Pullman suggests that children explore and are adaptable until they 'settle': whether they end up cruel or kind depends on what they do with childhood experiences. In our world, you have to look carefully to discover someone's true personality; if they are good people, or bad people, you can usually sense it, although it might take time.

#### **Task 3.1**

On *Stagework*, go to **Productions – His Dark Materials - Daemons**. Notice how it was decided to represent daemons on stage. In Lyra's world, inner spiritual realities are described as visible entities (good as well as bad).

#### **Task 3.2**

Think about what would be appropriate daemons for the following characteristics:

- o Proud
- o Arrogant
- o Cruel
- o Lazy
- o Independent
- o Kind
- o Cautious
- o Ambitious

- o Opinionated
- o Fearful
- o Leader
- o Follower

What animal daemons can you suggest for some of these? Why?  
What animal best suits your personality?

### **Body, Soul and Spirit**

Sometimes, people are described as “body, soul and spirit”.

- o The **body** is our physical self. Most people are not very happy with it: they want to be taller, or thinner, or more beautiful, or have a better nose.
- o The **soul** is our personality, emotions, creativity – our inner world which is sometimes called ‘spiritual’. This is what the daemon represents in Lyra’s world.
- o The **spirit** is that bit of us some people believe lives on. Some believe that it is reincarnated into a new body, some that it goes to paradise, or heaven or into some heavenly state. Some believe that it simply dies with our physical body.

The Bible (St Paul) talks of the spirit being the eternal part of us that lives on after death. Life after death is a mystery. In HDM, the discovery that the spirits of people live on in the underworld leads to the task of setting these spirits free so they can merge into everything. The good need not fear death. According to the Bible (New Testament), the physical body will be resurrected in the last days. HDM explains the underworld as just a stage through which the dead go: their absorption into all matter is the teaching of Hinduism and Buddhism.

### **Task 3.3**

According to Christianity, only humans have souls and spirits, not animals; and in HDM, animals do not have daemons. Do you think humans are special or are just intelligent animals?

We sometimes say that someone’s will or spirit is broken. This can be done by violence – beatings, or abuse; or psychologically through sarcasm. If you tell someone they are an idiot for long enough, they may begin to believe it. This is what happens in HDM when the daemon is cut away from the child – the child becomes a zombie, not a real person, not fully alive – and may even die of despair. We see all this in the children whose daemons have been cut away.

Think of ways that people in our world can have their spirits broken – by dictators who terrorise their people, or criminals who rule by fear, or parents who terrorise their children, or children who bully and terrorise others. Write about some examples from your imagination; and when doing this, think about how people can fight against it (non-violently, of course).

*Mrs Coulter abusing Lyra*

There is a good example in HDM when Lyra is staying with Mrs Coulter, who has turned out to be her mother. She seems to Lyra to be kind and good, as well as rich and beautiful: but –

Lyra mentioned Dust to Mrs Coulter, and her daemon “snapped his head up to look at her, bristling, as if it were charged itself. Mrs Coulter laid a hand on his back” (NL, p.83). It was just like seeing shock in someone’s eyes and expression before they quickly cover it up. A little later, in a petty row, the golden monkey leaps at Pantalaimon (as a polecat), pinning him to the carpet, with a paw around his throat and pulling his ears.

“Not angrily, either, but with a cold curious force that was horrifying to see and even worse to feel.

Lyra sobbed in terror.

“Don’t! Please! Stop hurting us!”

Mrs Coulter looked up from her flowers.

“Do as I tell you, then” she said.

“I promise”. (NL,p.87)

### Task 3.4

On *Stagework* go to **Productions – His Dark Materials - Lyra meets Mrs Coulter**, look at the video clips and read the script. What kind of person would you describe Mrs Coulter as?

*Who is good, who is evil?*

It is hard to know who is good and who is evil. HDM opens with the Master trying to poison Lord Asriel in order, it is said, to avert greater danger. However the Master turns out to be a friend and protector of Lyra, keeps her as safe as possible, and gives her the alethiometer to guide and protect her. Fader Coram, whose down-to-earthness we trust, says of him:

“I see the Master having terrible choices to make; whatever he chooses will do harm; but maybe if he does the right thing, a little less harm will come about than if he chooses wrong. God preserve me from having to make that kind of choice.” (NL p.129).

Mrs Coulter in the story is generally bad, and is ambitious and feared – her actions include murder and the kidnapping and torturing of children. Yet in the end she protects her daughter and sacrifices her own life.

### Task 3.5

On *Stagework* go to **Productions – His Dark Materials - Alethiometer**, where Lyra is given the alethiometer. Discuss the purpose of the alethiometer.

### Task 3.6

*Heaven, hell or what?*

As a class use *Stagework* and go to **Productions – His Dark Materials - The Boatman on Stage**. Look at the clips and read the script.

The boatman comes from the ancient Greek story of the spirits of the dead having to cross the river Styx to get into Hades, the underworld. This is the parallel world that Lyra and Will enter. Lyra's daemon and Will's soul cannot enter but are separated from them. It is a real psychological hell, organised by the harpy 'No Name'. The land of the dead is revealed as a prison created by religious fear – people need to be freed from this fear and a route out into paradise is organised for the spirits, guided by the newly directed Harpies.

### **Task 3.7**

For most people, life after death is a mystery that we will never understand. Pullman's story suggests that the atoms of the spirits merge into total being (a bit like a drip of water becoming part of an ocean).

Research: find out what Buddhism teaches about *nirvana*.

### **Background Notes for Teachers**

#### *Daemons*

Milton wrote of a council of spirits called Pandaemonium: this gives us the word daemon, and maybe also the name of Pan (Pantalaimon) Lyra's daemon. In Greek, panta means everything, and *laimon* the throat, Pan's normal resting location. The body + daemon is the **whole** person; the throat is the **source of life** (eating and drinking) and of **communication**.

#### *Buddhism*

Teachers do not need to have an in-depth knowledge of Buddhism for this unit because the discussion is at a general level. Those who wish to find out more will find the following short and inexpensive guide from Oxford University Press useful: Damien Keown, *Buddhism, A Very Short Introduction*, (ISBN 0-19-285386 4).

#### **ACTIVITY 4: By Whose Authority?**

*By the end of these lessons students should have a knowledge and understanding of:*

- o Religious claims for authority
- o Power and authoritarian theocracy

*By the end of these lessons students should be able to reflect upon and evaluate:*

- o The concept of personal authority
- o Decision-making skills

#### **The Magisterium**

Lyra's Oxford, where HDM opens, is in the hands of a powerful and authoritarian church (the Magisterium). In Lyra's world, the church are involved in assassination, have armed zeppelins, spies and secret police. They believe that they are right, and that dangerous heresies have to be prevented. Above all, they want to protect their position. There is a Ministry of Theology, and experimental theology is researched in Jordan College. We would call it physics. The story tells of how dangerous it is when power gets into the wrong hands, particularly when freedom of belief, thought and speech are threatened. It shows how dogma threatens both understanding and learning. Threats to the church are also threats to its status and wealth. This is an alternative world, not our world, where the Christian church has lost this kind of power. In our world there are examples of dominating power – we call it 'totalitarian' – when a dictator is in total control. Some have been responsible for the deaths of many millions of people (Hitler, Stalin and Mao). Such leaders only exist if others support them and keep them in power – the army, the police, the politicians, the people – even if only through fear.

#### **Freedom of Thought and Belief**

HDM then is about the importance of our freedom to work out our own beliefs. The object of belief in Lyra's Oxford is The Authority. The 'right' beliefs, are compulsory. Where does this Authority come from? Questions about the existence of God have been discussed for many centuries. In HDM, the Authority is a being from another world who has been used by the church – in other words, his authority is a fiction. One of the plots of HDM is to kill the Authority with the *subtle knife*, so ending the church's power. In fact, The Authority fades away willingly, leaving people to make their own choices. This marks the end of superstition and the beginning of reason. In HDM, there is another authority, the Alethiometer or 'truth measurer' which passes on both information and instructions. The alethiometer represents inner spiritual truth, based on knowledge and imagination: in the story this truth comes from Dust, the elementary particles of consciousness. Lyra knows how to work the device instinctively, but loses the skill when entering adulthood. After this time, the alethiometer requires a lifetime of study to combine imagination with reason..

#### **Task 4.1**

Use *Stagework Productions – His Dark Materials - Alethiometer*. Discuss what in real life might be meant by "spiritual truth".

## Religious Authority

Religions today have different ideas of the authority on which we should base our decisions. For some there is an authoritative book, described as being 'inspired' or even dictated by God. For some Christians, decisions must be based on the Bible, and for Muslims on the Qur'an. For others, authority comes from experiences, from a personal relationship and specific communications from God. For others, people should learn, think, discuss and make up their own minds about issues that are important to human relationships and society based on values and informed reason. Religious belief should not mean the end of thinking. Disagreements should be viewed positively as contributions to understanding. There are no doctrines which are beyond investigation and inquiry. The object is for people to understand themselves, their community and their world more deeply.

### Task 4.2

Find out about the Qur'an and the account in Islam about how these verses were 'revealed' to Muhammad, from God through the angel Gabriel. (AT1)

Write a list of five things about human life that you hold to be important. Discuss these lists in groups to produce a group list set out in order of importance. If you cannot get full agreement, take a vote. In the class afterwards, discuss the points on which you had most disagreement. (AT2)

Siddhartha Gautama, known as "the Buddha", the founder of Buddhism, taught that people should think, contemplate and meditate on the truth at all times, especially during work and normal activities. He taught his followers to work things out for themselves, and only gave them as a starting point "the four noble truths" – which basically state that *we are unsatisfied with life because we have inappropriate desires based on what we think we want*. If we come to terms with and control these desires, we can achieve peace.

### Task 4.3

Buddha taught that people should not be held back by complaints (he used a word meaning 'unsatisfactoriness'). What would your list of unsatisfactory experiences be? What might you do to stop them bothering you? (AT2)

Find out about the Noble Eightfold Path of Buddhism. What might you mean by the phrases 'right understanding', 'right resolve', 'right speech', 'right action' and 'right livelihood'. (AT1)

*Who is right?*

The question of authority concerns all religions. Whose way is the right one? Can they all be right in some way? Or are they all wrong? Because people differ in their views on this, many feel that it is important for people with different beliefs to learn from each other, to find out where they agree and disagree. Sikhs have a teaching important to them: *there are many paths to God*.

### Task 4.4

Research: find out about the teaching of Guru Nanak the first Sikh Guru. Write a short life story and a summary of what he taught.

### **The final sacrifice**

Just as in Christianity death and evil were defeated by Jesus sacrificing his life, in HDM, the same is achieved through Will and Lyra sacrificing their future life together. In the final scene, the window between their worlds is closed: they will never meet again. They each have useful lives to lead in their own worlds. They must in future meet only in their imagination, especially at midnight on midsummer's eve when they would both sit on the same bench in their own world in Oxford Botanic Garden.

### **Task 4.5**

On *Stagework* go to **Productions – His Dark Materials - The Botanic Gardens** to see two scenes, that of their parting, and another when, aged about 20, they sit together but in different worlds.

Discuss why they chose to part like that when in love. What other choices could they have made, and why did they reject them? Do you consider this to have been a responsible choice? Was it the right choice?

### **Plenary**

Draw out from the class final points on good, evil and human responsibility and human rights. List points on the whiteboard.

To finish the unit, **Review** what has been learned about thinking for ourselves.

### **Background Notes for Teachers**

#### *Buddhism and Islam*

For the Buddhism task, teachers can consult the short guide. This contains an explanation of the four noble truths (summarised above) and the Noble Eightfold Path. The students' task is to discuss what might be meant (in their own terms) by "right" understanding, resolve, speech, action and livelihood. There are no right answers!

Teachers do not need to have an in-depth knowledge of Islam for this unit because the discussion is at a general level. For those who wish to, Malise Ruthven, *Islam, A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford University Press, ISBN 0-19-285389-9) provides a good introduction. For Sikhism, see E. Nesbitt, *Sikhism: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford University Press, ISBN 0-19-280601-7).

### **Extension Activities**

Look up, write and explain the Greek myth about Pandora's box, about the coming of evils into the world. (AT1). What do you think this says about human experience? (AT2)

Invite in a Christian, Buddhist and/or a Muslim as a visiting speaker to talk about their beliefs about good, evil and the afterlife. (AT1)

Discussions could include drama/role play: if so a flexible classroom will be needed. (AT2)

Discuss examples of good and bad behaviour from TV programmes, cartoons and current affairs. (AT2)

### **Useful websites**

[www.multifaithnet.org/religions](http://www.multifaithnet.org/religions)  
[www.religioustolerance.org](http://www.religioustolerance.org)  
[www.bbc.co.uk/religion/religions](http://www.bbc.co.uk/religion/religions)