

**Trends in American Culture in the  
Post-1960s Period:  
Proceedings of the 9th Biennial Conference  
of the Hungarian Association of  
American Studies**



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## Foreword

The present volume contains the proceedings of the 9th biennial conference of the Hungarian Association of American Studies held in Eger in May 2012. It was a special pleasure for us to welcome researchers dedicated to the exploration of this exciting and continually expanding discipline. We were especially pleased that along with the leading scholars of American Studies in Hungary we could welcome presenters from Germany, Romania, Russia, Spain, Iran, and the United States. We were also glad to provide a forum for the young researcher generation as well.

Reflecting the dynamically broadening scope of the discipline, in addition to essays on history, literature, civilization and linguistics the volume contains articles on media studies, medical issues, and body studies. The editors of this volume aim to share the latest research results both with the scholarly community and with everyone who is interested in various aspects of culture in North America.

**Zsuzsanna Tóth**

**Who are God's Enemies?  
Religious Debates on Philip Pullman's Trilogy, *His  
Dark Materials***

When J. K. Rowling's Harry Potter series (1997–2007) reached the United States, part of the American public contended that the novels contain occult or satanic subtexts, which led to calls for the books to be banned from schools. Soon after, Philip Pullman's (1946–) fantasy trilogy, *His Dark Materials* (1995–2000), written for young adults was also accused of promoting atheism, occultism and even Satanism. In order to further an understanding of North American readers' reception of Pullman's denial and post-modern recreation of the myths of Christianity, I aim to prove that these debates on religion are the result of a coincidence of special circumstances involving the ambivalent reputation of the author, the theological complexity of the trilogy, the socio-political positions of Christianity and the politicised nature of children's literature in the United States.

After the death of his father, Philip Pullman was given a Christian education by his beloved grandfather, who was an Anglican clergyman; however, by now the 66-year-old British author, a supporter of the British Humanist Association and the National Secular Society, is far from being a devout believer or a regular church-goer. He is first and foremost disreputable for propagating his so-called atheism, as if he took pleasure in insulting fundamentalist Christian communities. For instance he has made the assertion that "[m]y books are about killing God" (Meacham n.pag.), "Blake said Milton was a true poet and of the Devil's party without knowing it. I am of the Devil's party and know it" (Bertodano n.pag.) or "I'm trying to undermine the basis of Christian belief" ("Profile" n.pag.). After having made such contentions, he was reported as having acknowledged that "a controversy would be likely to boost

sales" ("Profile" n.pag.). Of course, as Joscelyn Godwin remarks, "[n]othing generates more publicity than upsetting people's religious sensibilities and getting them to protest against one's work" (Godwin n.pag.). In addition, Pullman's scornful criticism of the great Christian classic, C. S. Lewis' fantasy series, *The Chronicles of Narnia* (1950–1956), also belongs to his pro-atheist propaganda. He declared that "I hate the Narnia books, and I hate them with deep and bitter passion, with their view of childhood as a golden age from which sexuality and adulthood are a falling away" (Vulliamy n.pag.). Godwin considers Pullman's reproach of the Narnia books for sexism and even racism as "something of the conventional left-wing intellectual" (Godwin n.pag.).

Great western philosophers, such as Søren A. Kierkegaard and Friedrich Nietzsche, were convinced that when Christianity became a state religion, then a world religion, it had already lost its true essence, faith. After going through Pullman's autobiography, speeches and interviews, one realizes that he essentially shares this view, a fact that somewhat undermines his self-made myth of being an uncompromising atheist. Rather showing an inclination toward agnosticism, Pullman does not wholly refuse the potential of an 'intimate' spirituality. He claims

If we're talking on the scale of human life and the things we see around us, I'm an atheist. There's no God here. [...] But if you go out into the vastness of space, well, I'm not so sure. On that level, I'm an agnostic. (Meacham n.pag.)

Doubt, for Geddes MacGregor, is "a profound expression of humility" (429), and "without a willingness to doubt, religious tolerance is impossible" (430). Along this line of thought, Pullman sharply distinguishes between the public-official and the private manifestations of religiosity. On the one hand, Pullman declares that

[T]he religious impulse—which includes the sense of awe and mystery we feel when we look at the universe, the urge to find a meaning and a purpose in our lives, our sense of moral kinship with other human beings—is part of being human and I value it. (Pullman n.pag.)

On the other hand, calling attention to the historical facts of religious fanaticism, ruthlessly enforced conversion in parallel with colonisation,

witchcraft, and abuse of women and children, he obviously expresses his disgust with religious fundamentalism and obscurantism in fiction and non-fiction. According to Pullman,

When you look at organized religion of whatever sort—whether it's Christianity in all its variants, or whether it's Islam or some forms of extreme Hinduism—wherever you see organized religion and priesthood and power, you see cruelty and tyranny and repression. It's almost a universal law. It's not just Christianity I'm getting at. The reason that the forms of religion in the books seem to be Christian is because that's the world I'm familiar with. (Roberts n.pag.)

In other words, what he attacks is not faith in general, but a particular attitude of *any* religious community and organization, including excessive patriotism, rapacity, control and subjugation, of course always in the name of some god. In light of these, Pullman accepts that in telling just a story and not making an argument, "if I'd had more time to think about it, no doubt I would have put in a good priest here or there [into the trilogy], just to show they're not all horrible" (Spanner n.pag.). Moreover, he admitted that he admired a lot of individuals who belonged to denominations like the Unitarians or the Quakers because "they maintain a respect for differences of opinion, and on the whole they think that what's important is what you do and not what you think," in which Pullman has always believed (Spanner n.pag.).

For Pullman, who studied English literature in Exeter College, Oxford, the ancient Judeo-Christian myth of the Fall of Man is about the birth of consciousness and the fight against obscurantism. He confesses that "the story of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden and the temptation of the Serpent is for me the central myth of what it means to be a human being" (Fried n.pag.). Taking into account the heretical notion that there was once a war in Heaven and the wrong side won, the fall of the first couple is no longer a disaster marking human imperfection, but a defining moment of humankind. As a *felix culpa* (fortunate fault or fall) indicating the essential goodness of human nature, the Fall is one of the most positive events in the intellectual history of the enlightened man; in other words, it is a development from childish ignorance and obedience into adults' curiosity, knowledge and independence based on responsible decisions.



Inspired by John Milton's epic poem *Paradise Lost* (1667) and William Blake's visionary prophecies, Pullman's myth-denial is a subversive criticism and dismantlement of the grand narrative of Christianity. At the same time, his post-modern myth-recreation intends to replace Christian religion with "an emancipatory and 'natural' humanism: plain human dimensions, human tasks and human stories" (Gooderham 163–4). In brief, the trilogy's two twelve-year old protagonists, Lyra Belacqua as the second Eve and William Parry as the second Adam, wander through several parallel universes in order to fulfil the second Fall (or rather Aspiration) to preserve the freedom of consciousness. The first novel, entitled *Northern Lights* in U.K. / *The Golden Compass* in North America (1995) (abbreviated as GC), depicts how Lyra saves children from the evil experiments of the Magisterium, a local church in an alternative reality, with the intention of preventing the development of pre-adolescents' sexuality. The second novel, *The Subtle Knife* (1997) (abbreviated as SK), introduces a cosmic war between the supporters and the opponents of the oppressive Church. This book also reveals Lyra's destiny as the saviour of sensual and intellectual curiosity and wisdom. The third novel, *The Amber Spyglass* (2000) (abbreviated as AS), ends with the defeat of the 'mind-colonizers' and the victory of free thinkers. The first book of Pullman's trilogy was adapted for the screen in December 2007. As a fantasy-adventure film, *The Golden Compass* was released by New Line Cinema, directed by Chris Weitz, and it stars Dakota Blue Richards, Nicole Kidman and Daniel Craig.

*His Dark Materials* is built on the author's mythopoesis (fictional mythology) into which traditional mythological themes and archetypes were integrated, primarily from the Early, the Gnostic and the Pantheistic versions of Christianity. While Pullman's complex metaphysical structure lacks a fully explicit cosmogony (creation myth)—"[t]here may have been a creator, or there may not: we don't know" (AS 188)—it is an eloquent evidence of his agnosticism that the whole story is polarized between two opposing deities, both of them are far from omnipotent, omnipresent or immortal. The author remarkably rejects one type of god, who is thus portrayed as excessively negative, and he recommends another type of god, who is represented positively, in the former one's place. This is what, according to the American Catholic theologian Donna Freitas, also an enthusiastic *His Dark Material*-fan, "protest atheists do not do" (Freitas, *Killing...*, 20).

In Pullman's story the negatively depicted god figure is called the Authority. As an inferior angel informs us,

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 [...]. The first angels condensed out of Dust [conscious matter, discussed below], 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 [Xaphania] found out the truth, so he banished her. (AS 28)

The Authority who is not a figure of love or mercy or grace, who is absent from human affairs, who opposes any freedom and individual thought because they constitute a threat to his power, who prefers that humans should be automatons, is used to express Pullman's own stated religious ideology. In the mythopoesis of the trilogy the Authority's earthly representative, a tangle of courts, colleges, and councils collectively known as the Magisterium, possesses "absolute power over every aspect of life" (GC 27), and this church, which Hugh Rayment-Pickard defines as "an amalgam of Catholic and Protestant Christianity" (49), has "tried to suppress and control every natural impulse" (SK 44). As a true god does not require any church to intercede between him/herself and his/her subjects, which is a Protestant ideology, priests are shown to be contemptible. The expelled angels led by Xaphania, a kind of goddess of wisdom figure, have been fighting to overthrow the domination of this imposter god:

All the history of human life has been a struggle between wisdom and stupidity. She [Xaphania] and the rebel angels, the followers of wisdom [also alias Xaphania], have always tried to open minds; the Authority and his churches have always tried to keep them closed. [...] Wisdom has had to work in secret, whispering her words, moving like a spy through the humble places of the world while the courts and palaces are occupied by her enemies. (AS 429)

As the God-the-tyrant represents all the cruelties and atrocities committed over the years 'in the name of God,' and as he is neither omniscient, nor omnipresent, nor immortal, this over-aged being is fated to be defeated, and ready to die under miserably marginal conditions—"he was so old, and he was terrified, crying like a baby [...]. Demented and powerless, the aged being could only weep and mumble in fear and pain and misery, [...]" (AS 366)—to give the way to another deity Pullman seems to admire. Contrary to the expectations raised by the block quotation above, it is not Xaphania.

The death of the Authority and the overthrow of his Kingdom of Heaven liberate all conscious beings and reveal the 'true' god Pullman argues for. This deity, called 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" (AS 28). As a cosmic life-force standing for love, consciousness and free will, Dust made up of invisible particles is a pantheistic vision of self-conscious matter giving birth to every living being.<sup>1</sup> Parallel with the imposter God who has spent an eternity wiping out all traces of Dust threatening his rule; the Church in Pullman's world believes Dust to be the physical manifestation and evidence of original sin which must be destroyed. However, like the Authority, Dust is neither omnipotent, nor immortal:

Dust came into being when living things became conscious of themselves; but it needed some feedback system to reinforce it and make it safe, [...]. Without something like that, it would all vanish. Thought, imagination, feeling, would all wither and blow away, leaving nothing but a brutish automatism. (AS 403)

For this reason, as the Authority's Kingdom of Heaven is over, it is not the organized church but the individual that should be the centre of religious life for establishing the Republic of Heaven where each and

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<sup>1</sup> Sincerely fascinated by Pullman's mystical-pantheistic divinity, Freitas calls attention to the fact that while most Christians are taught to imagine God through the first and second parts of the Trinity, the Father (God) and the Son (Jesus), Pullman's vision of Dust is much closer to the third part, the Holy Spirit (Freitas, *The accidental...* n.pag.). Furthermore, this divinity, as she claims, fits into our age because it is compatible with science, popular spirituality and contemporary theology so much that it is Pullman's Dust that the Death-of-God theologians of the 1960s were seeking and the feminist and liberation theologians of the 1970s found (Freitas, *Killing...*, xxi).

every person has ultimate responsibility for humankind (a basically Protestant belief) to live full and worthy lives, to take this physical world, the here and now as their true home. The formerly disjoined world could only be restored by creating new values with the true divinity.

Due to its subject, *His Dark Materials* trilogy and *The Golden Compass* film were met with extreme emotional responses from some parents, teachers, and even a few scholars; most of them were members of particular religious groups. Freitas thinks that Pullman is so forthright about his atheism that "he has made it virtually impossible for readers to engage this trilogy without his personal views about God perched somewhere in their minds" (Freitas, *Killing...*, xviii). Although it sounds as if she neglects the Pullman-reader's intellectual ability to interpret a work independently of the author's opinion, her remark turns out to be true for some overzealous Christian readers. Unfortunately, without paying any attention to *Dust*, most Christian readers or viewers could comprehend on both page and screen only the negative portrayal of the Authority, mistakenly identified with the Biblical God, and that of the Church. The way Pullman depicts the structure of religious organisations in the alternative reality of his story suggests which religious groupings found his novels insulting. As Protestants have traditionally criticised (along with Pullman) the institutions of the Catholic Church, basically this grouping was not involved in the attacks against the author and his trilogy. The only exception, however, was the evangelicals with a so-called 'Puritanism-based hypersensitivity' and a high regard for Biblical authority. Therefore, it was primarily the members of the Roman Catholic Church who had the most problem with Pullman's literary works. Underneath an "emotionally manipulative rhetoric" of contemporary American politics (Abate 171), all objections to the author, the novels and the film appealed to beliefs about the necessity of protecting childhood innocence.

The most striking negative reactions against Philip Pullman and his trilogy came after the news of releasing the film adaptation, maybe because Americans allegedly spend more time on watching films than reading books. Although the anti-religious meaning of the first book was finally obscured in the movie to avoid controversy, *The Golden Compass* was met with hostility among certain Christian communities because, as Steven Otfinoski reports, "a number of religious groups felt that by watering down the author's message it would encourage young people to read 'atheistic' literature" (102). Among others, the Catholic League, an

American anti-defamation and civil rights organization, printed thousands of copies of a booklet called "Golden Compass: Agenda Unmasked" to distribute it to reviewers and religious groups in order to call for a boycott of the film and the novels ("Golden Compass..."). In the eyes of this conservative religious organization Pullman is "nothing less than the Antichrist, a militant atheist, and a heretic in the mould of the poets John Milton and William Blake" ("Profile" n.pag.). Furthermore, the magazine of the evangelical non-profit Focus on the Family, entitled *Plugged In*, urged parents to keep their children out of movies because of the film's "twisted worldview and dark spirituality" ("The Golden Compass" n.pag.).<sup>2</sup> In the end, Freitas observed that what started as a few angry press releases turned into a frightening reality in which "Catholic principals, librarians and teachers all across the United States and Canada are being told by their diocese to remove *His Dark Materials* from their shelves and classroom curricula" (Freitas, *The accidental...* n.pag.).

Even scholars could not resist voicing their view regarding Pullman's distinctive representations of religious myths, characters and organizations. On the one hand, the American Millicent Lenz argues that concerning the literary form of satire, Pullman's depiction of the 'Church' in Lyra's world is a gross caricature of institutionalized religion, "totally at odds with any values the historical Jesus would recognize" (158). Since the Magisterium is a dead institution in an alternative world, "exaggeration is an effective narrative strategy, in the tradition of Jonathan Swift" (Lenz, 158). However, on the other hand, David Gooderham is convinced that

Explicit metaphysical, religious or ideological language characteristically does not appear in high fantasy texts—until, by sharp contrasts, in Pullman's narrative Christian terminology and particularly the important institutions and theological concepts of church, God, and fall receive explicit and frequent reference. (156)

The reason why he finds it problematic is that

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<sup>2</sup> Initially, Pullman's witty reply to letters accusing him of promoting witchcraft or Satanism was that after having read all three books, "if you find that you've inadvertently become a Satanist, you can write to the publisher and get your money back" (Bertodano n.pag.). A few years later he came to the conclusion that there is no point in trying to communicate with fundamentalist believers "who know they've got all the answers" (Butler n.pag.).

A metaphorical representation suggestively opens up a whole range of possible readings, and thus frees readers [...] for a more flexible and uninhibitedly critical response. By contrast, the use of an ecclesiastical discourse which ties the reader too closely to the conventions of realism both raises ideological hackles [...] and inhibits a free range of imaginative response. (160)

As a result, without considering believers' inclination to monopolize religious terms and concepts in works of fiction, Gooderham concludes that Pullman's trilogy undermines one of the most important and intellectual values of the genre of fantasy.<sup>3</sup>

There is a recognizable connection between the strong national traditions of Christianity, the alarming position of contemporary religious institutions in the United States, and the outstanding hostility of a particular part of the American public towards the British author and his trilogy. According to Patrick Allitt, "America's idea of their nation as one deserving of, and blessed by, God's special favour had persisted throughout American history" (259); therefore, the American nation "remained far more involved in religious activities and groups than their counterpart in the rest of the industrialized world" (259). In addition, Christian religion and conservative politics have always been "deeply imbricated" in the United States (Abate 98). Religiosity became a more sensitive issue when in the second half of the twentieth century evangelical churches gained notable cultural influence in spite of the fact that as cultural authorities mainstream Protestant churches became weaker (Allitt 259). The Catholic Church, which was marginal in American national life, was in a worse situation because of a series of unsettling changes including a steady decline in the overall number of priests and nuns, new recruits and a gradual ageing of the entire population in holy orders between World War II and the new century (Allitt 260). In the light of this, it is no wonder that American Christians feared that even a work of fiction for children could threaten their more precarious position.

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<sup>3</sup> In an interview Pullman was confronted with an accusation according to which having been alarmed at his careless use of words like 'Magisterium' and 'Oblation,' some theologians said these words went to the heart of their beliefs. Pullman questioned it: "'Magisterium' and 'oblation' are [...] terms of church organization. These are administrative things. These are bureaucratic things. How can an attack on those be constructed as an attack on God?" (Roberts n.pag.).

Unfortunately, while religion as an intellectual preoccupation was the priority of a tiny minority (Allitt 263); it would be crucial to fathom the inability of Pullman's fundamentalist attackers.

Pullman's strongly liberal trilogy seems to be incompatible with American children's literature that is under the primary influence of the anti-modernist tendency of conservative politics. While many lessons of the idolised literature for the youth are basically conservative (urging children to obey their parents and follow rules), Pullman, following perhaps in part the heretic and anti-orthodox path of William Blake, redefines the binarity of good and evil to such an extent that "freedom, wisdom and strength are humankind's goal, replacing the obedience, humility, and submission that should be abhorred" (Scott 103). Furthermore, in the first decade of the twenty-first century traditionalism reinforced struggles to preserve "long-standing and often religious-based notions of morality, and existing hierarchies of race, ethnicity, and class," even gender (Abate 12). In light of this, evangelical Christians, Pullman's active opponents, desperately fought to "restore America to its proper status as a Christian nation built on 'family values' and to defend the idealized Christian family" (Abate 14-15), by ignoring the growing global needs for cultural and social equality in the country of the 'melting pot.' In contrast, in Pullman's iconoclastic story, as Bernard Schweizer asserts, there are important values that define modern liberal societies, such as gender equality, tolerance of sexual orientation, affirmation of sexuality, celebration of the life-force, tolerance toward other races, ethnicities and belief-systems, as well as anti-imperialism (171).

Fortunately some members of Christian organizations have succeeded in looking behind the anti-religious surface of Pullman's novels to discover his celebration of love, open-mindedness, tolerance, curiosity and human intelligence. Brian Detweiler, co-director of Reel Spirituality, a think tank at the Fuller Theological Seminary in Pasadena, California, claimed that *His Dark Materials* trilogy inspires people to "look harder for more authentic religion. Pullman takes license in pointing out the scary, false gods and destructive idols we've created. In that sense, I think he's doing a great service" (qtd. in Otfinoski 103). Also, the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops stated in their review of the movie *The Golden Compass* that

To the extent [...] that Lyra and her allies are taking a stand on behalf of free will in opposition to the coercive force of the

Magisterium, they are of course acting entirely in harmony with Catholic teaching. The heroism and self-sacrifice that they demonstrate provide appropriate moral lessons for viewers. (Qtd. in Otfinoski 103)

Freitas finds *His Dark Materials* filled not only with attacks on authorities who claim access to one true interpretation of a religion, but also with feminist and liberation strands of Catholic theology that threaten the power structure of the Church (Freitas, *The accidental...* n.pag.). Thus, she concludes that the trilogy is not anti-Christian, but anti-orthodox, and "God is big enough [...] to coexist with Will and Lyra. It is the critics of Pullman's novels who are trying to make her [him] small" (Freitas, *The accidental...* n.pag.).

All in all, the hostile reception of the novels and the film in North America was preconditioned by Pullman's firm views on religion manifested in *His Dark Materials* trilogy which actualizes a great ancient myth, by the role Christianity has played in the national, political and social life of the U.S.A., and by the strong conservative tendency in American children's literature. Myths, as sacred narratives usually explaining our cosmology (how the world or humankind came to be in its present form), still have deep emotional impact not only on devout Christian believers, but possibly also on anyone brought up in Western Christian civilization. As Pullman's post-modern trilogy is about the reckless questioning and retelling of the canonized version of the myths of the Fall without involving the necessity of Redemption, *His Dark Materials* provides a good example to highlight how fossilized the old, often obsolete canonized myths of the contemporary Western Christian world might be. In addition, wide-spread unwillingness to expand intellectual horizons can be blamed for the refusal to struggle to comprehend the highly educated Pullman's fantasy world, which is constructed from elements of Greco-Roman and Judeo-Christian mythology, philosophy, theology and literature, both canonised and apocryphal.

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