

## **“Bless those who curse you”: Dealing with Modernity in Popular Culture**

By Jason King, Ph.D.

Assistant Professor of Religious Studies

Saint Vincent College

300 Fraser Purchase Road

Latrobe, PA 15650

[jason.king@email.stvincent.edu](mailto:jason.king@email.stvincent.edu)

What would one do if an author set out explicitly to leave the Church, followed his own principles to their logical conclusion, and arrived at a place he thought was new but was really still part of Catholicism? This is the situation of the author of the *His Dark Materials* trilogy (*The Golden Compass*, *The Subtle Knife*, and *The Amber Spyglass*), by Philip Pullman. Having received such honors as Publishers Weekly Best Book of the Year, ALA Best Book for Young Adults, and the Carnegie Medal and soon to be made into a trilogy of motion pictures produced by New Line Cinema, these books are destined to become a force in popular culture. The story is a subversive reading of John Milton's *Paradise Lost*. Instead of God being good and Satan evil, in Pullman's rewriting, God is the evil Authority who restricts people's freedom, while Satan, sadly misunderstood by the Authority's centuries of spin, was condemned for championing freedom.

On the surface, Pullman's story seems a classic example of the modernist supreme value: freedom "dependent of nothing and nobody." God is evil for restricting this freedom, and Satan is good because he rebels against this tyranny, against any command to serve. Yet, through Pullman's story, freedom, while crucial, is always at the service of something greater. Will and Lyra, the christs of the story, continually use their freedom to show compassion for others. They liberate spirits from the Land of Dead, show mercy on their enemies, and, in the end, sacrifice their own love to save the universe. Despite this almost explicitly Christian story line, Pullman insists not only is he not Christian but that "[e]very church is the same: control, destroy, obliterate every good feeling." What does one do with a modernist that in theory still champions uninhibited freedom and yet undercuts this value in a very Catholic way – having freedom be subservient to the good? In other words what does one do with virulently anti-Catholic crypto-Catholic?

Pullman's *His Dark Materials* actually provides an opportunity to think about how Catholicism should address modernity as it is manifested in popular culture, an often underrated sphere of influential. In this paper, I will assess potential responses to Philip Pullman's trilogy as examples of how Catholicism might engage other modernist phenomenon in popular culture. First, protesting the anti-Catholicism in Pullman will just draw attention to the anti-Catholicism and rebound to make the anti-Catholicism seem justified. Second, attacking the ideas in *His Dark Materials* in an academic manner fails because 1) the anti-Catholicism is a bias and not a rationally held belief, and 2) the pop-culture medium is not conducive to, interested in, or swayed by sustained, philosophical argument. Third, acceptance of the Pullman's story is problematic because it seems to legitimize the anti-Catholicism and thereby cut off the Church as a source of knowledge about freedom, humanity, the world, and goodness. Finally, the last option is witness. Catholics should head Jesus saying to "Do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you." (Luke 6:27-28). Instead of drawing attention to the work in any of the ways stated above, Catholics should not only extol the self-sacrificing love depicted in Pullman's story but should labor to live it out as it is an expression of genuine Christian love. This way what is true in Catholicism and where this truth overlaps with Pullman's work will rise to the surface, and the biases will be undone on an appropriate level, the level of experience. Those reading the anti-Catholic rants will reflect on their experiences and say, "not true."