

**PEW RESEARCH GRANT PROPOSAL
2003-2004**

**GENE C. FANT, JR.
Reading Christianly or Christians Reading?
In Search of a Unified Theory of
Christian Literary Criticism**

1. Description of Project and Goals

In the Winter 2003 issue of Christian Scholar's Review, John E. Hull ponders the current approaches to Christian education and arrives at a central question: are we aiming for Christian education, but settling for Christians educating? That question can be taken systemically throughout the Christian educational community, and it raises a difficult question in each academic discipline: is there such a thing as a Christian theory in the discipline or are there simply Christians who are generating the scholarship? In my field of literature, do we read Christianly or are we simply Christians reading?

A broad stream of contemporary literary criticism has been labeled as "Christian." Critics like Roger Lundin, Leland Ryken, David Lyle Jeffrey, Susan Gallagher, and numerous others have generated quality works of interpretation on a wide expanse of genres. Even here at Union, Barbara McMillin has written on how the Christian worldview influences the activities of the English classroom in *Shaping a Christian Worldview*.

In most, if not all, of these works, the critics perform the criticism without fully articulating the philosophical or theological reasons for why they are reading interpreting the works in a certain way. Even in the most recent work on this topic, Luke Ferretter's Toward a Christian Literature Theory (2003), Christian literary theory is not defined in terms of what it is so much as it is defined by what opposes it, namely Derrida and Deconstructionism.

An unsettling fact in current literary theory training is that almost all current training texts in literary theory pay virtually no attention to the kinds of criticism that would be labeled as "Christian." Allegory is relegated to a historical study, Northrup Frye to a minor bit part, and in the indices of the texts of contemporary theory there is no entry citing "Christian" or even "religious" criticism. This omission of relevance is made in spite of the fact that there are several journals that specialize in "Christian" literary criticism (notably Christianity and Literature) and there are heaps of this sort of criticism published each year. I have begun to believe that this dismissal of Christian literary theory is not simply an ideological purging as much as it is a recognition that there is no comprehensive articulation of what Christian literary criticism actually is.

As I have taught courses on literary criticism, including seminars at the graduate level, I have been frustrated to find that while there is ample *application* of "Christian" literary

criticism, there is no cogent *articulation* of exactly what defines Christian literary criticism and what makes it distinct from other literary critical approaches. Economics and oppressive structures define Marxist criticism. Characterizations of women and their roles in society define Feminist criticism. Narrow focus on the text itself defines New Criticism. What, however, defines Christian criticism? Is it simply a branch of ethical criticism? Is it simply an umbrella term for a variety of hermeneutical approaches?

Goals:

1. My research proposes to survey “Christian” literary approaches to locate the threads of hermeneutic “rules” that dominate the works.
2. Additionally, I will survey contemporary literary theory works to identify the method used by other literary schools to define their approaches.
3. I then will begin to synthesize these strands in an attempt to articulate the critical foundation that undergirds Christian literary theory.
4. Finally, I will attempt to write a treatise that will clarify and expound upon this foundation in such a way that it will be useful for advanced students of literature and practicing literary professionals.

Potential dissemination of research:

I believe that this sort of endeavor will bear good fruit, either in terms of scholarly publication or in conference presentation. As I attend conferences and other professional meetings, I have found that many colleagues at other institutions also are frustrated with a lack of a clear document to which they may point students, especially those who are planning on attending graduate school at secular institutions. I could even see this project spawning a special issue of a specialized journal like Christianity and Literature.

2. Brief Survey of Literature:

Standard Texts and Readers in Literary Theory and Criticism: There are hundreds of entries on literary theory. These are commonly used ones in professional training courses. I have not included works on individual theoretical approaches, though my research will include such works in my effort to identify and define Christian literary theory in the same way as other schools of theory define themselves. Apart from older theories on allegory, few of these texts mention concepts traditionally linked to the themes or approaches that Christian critics tend to tackle.

- Barry, Peter. Beginning Theory: An Introduction to Literary and Cultural Theory. (Manchester UP, 1995).
- Booker, M. Keith. A Practical Introduction to Literary Theory and Criticism. (Longman, 1996).
- Cuddon, J. A. A Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary Theory. (Penguin, 2000).

- Culler, Jonathan D. Literary Theory: A Very Short Introduction. (Oxford, 2000).
- Dobie, Ann B. Theory into Practice: An Introduction to Literary Criticism. (Heinle & Heinle, 2002)
- Eagleton, Terry. Literary Theory: An Introduction. (U. Minnesota P, 1985).
- Leitch, Vincent B. The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism. (Norton, 2001).
- Stevens, Bonnie Klomp and Larry L. Stewart. A Guide to Literary Criticism and Research. Harcourt Brace, 1996).
- Tyson, Lois. Critical Theory Today. (Garland, 1998).

Standard Works on the Application of Christian Literary Theory:

These are general works, not specific works on specific texts.

- Cary, Norman Reed. Christian Criticism in the Twentieth Century. (AFP, 1976).
- Ferretter, Luke. Towards a Christian Literary Theory. (Palmgrave Macmillan, 2003). In part, I hope to clarify and refine Ferretter's work, which defines Christian literary theory by saying what stands against it more than what it represents.
- Frye, Northrup. Anatomy of Criticism. (Princeton UP, 1956).
- Gallagher, Susan V. and Roger Lundin. Literature Through the Eyes of Faith. (Harper and Row, 1989).
- Jeffrey, David L. People of the Book: Christian Identity and Literary Culture. (Eerdmans, 1996).
- Ryken, Leland. The Christian Imagination: Essays on Literature and the Arts. (Baker, 1981).
- Ryken, Leland. Triumphs of the Imagination: Literature in Christian Perspective. (InterVarsity, 1979). Contains Ryken's essay that is perhaps the closest pattern for what I am hoping to generate.
- Ryken, Leland. Windows to the World. (Zondervan, 1985).
- Sire, James W. Reading Slowly. (Shaw, 2000).
- Walhout, Clarence and Leland Ryken. Contemporary Literary Theory: A Christian Appraisal. (Eerdmans, 1992).

3. Time Frame:

- Research and Synthesis: Beginning in October 2003 and continuing through June 2004.
- Writing: from July through September 2004.
- Dissemination of Research: from September 2004 through satisfaction of the grant terms.

4. Budget:

Books: I will need to be able to expand my library of literary critical works since I will be performing in-depth research in many of these works. I believe that I will need at least \$500 to purchase these texts (that's 10 primary works @ \$50 each).

Stipend support: The primary cost will be in “buying” my time away from summer teaching, consulting and free lancing projects so that I can focus on this single project to the exclusion of several others. Cost: \$4,000

Total Grant Request: \$4,500

5. Essay on Research and Faith:

My academic training and interests have always run toward a synthesis of my research agenda and my interests as a believer. My master’s degree in biblical languages allowed me to receive training in critical approaches that are intrinsic to the academic approach to Christian studies. When I embarked on my doctorate in literature, I began to formulate my research agenda as an extension of my faith.

Early into my academic training, one of my professors encouraged us to approach our research as if it were devotional in nature. What he meant was that we should consider our research agenda as an outgrowth of our quiet time. When we read, we should consider it in light of Scripture and our meditations on it. Many of my projects are, therefore, outgrowths of my experiences in spiritual discipline. Therefore, I have published works that explore allegory, typology, and other traditional readings of literature that are rooted deeply in Christian scholarly approaches.

This proposal is an example of that approach. Lately I have been reading / pondering / teaching the first part of the Gospel of Matthew, much of which is concerned with exactly what defines being a Christian. This has coincided with a long-running discussion I have been having with a history professor at a state university in Georgia. He keeps asking me, “Is there such a thing as a specifically Christian approach to literature?” He has been struggling with this question in the discipline of history. He has been able to rebuff my first answers, driving me to refine my answers and try to formulate a clear, concise statement. Now that I have been simultaneously confronted with Christ’s own challenges for us to articulate what it means to be a Christian, I have been imbued with a desire to channel the overflow of these thoughts into this project.

Such an endeavor is a logical extension of the way that I have always conducted my research agenda. My dissertation explored the use of hagiography by English poets who were writing in the Petrarchan tradition. It analyzed the way that the biblical martyrs were modified by John Foxe in the Acts and Monuments and then further adapted by the English Petrarchanists. This line of thought has become a signature of my research: secular appropriation of biblical imagery.

My second major work along this line was my study of John Donne’s use of Hebrew in his Holy Sonnet 14. I tried to show how Donne was constructing the devotional nature of the sonnet sequence through his use of Old Testament and New Testament word usage. This project was presented at the Southeastern Conference on Christianity and

Literature, where it was awarded the Daub-Maher Prize as the outstanding paper presented at that annual conference.

I believe that my research in this area could allow me to encourage others to work in this area. This encouragement could find use among undergraduates who are considering graduate work in literature, as well as practicing professionals who also are seeking an articulation of how their faith can find application in literary criticism.

6. Current vitae is attached separately.