Pew Research Proposal Form
Union University

Cover Sheet

Name(s) of Applicant(s): Jason Crawford

Title of Proposed Project: Sacred Comedy

Primary Discipline: English Secondary Discipline(s):

Has this proposal been submitted to another agency, publication, or program (including for the Union University Research/Study Leave)? No

If so, which one(s)?

Location of proposed research: Jackson, TN; Austin, TX; Boston, MA

Desired start date: January 2021

Recommending Scholars and their disciplines:

External: James Simpson (Harvard University)

Union: Scott Huelin

In consultation together, we recommend the approval of the proposal as an acceptable project and affirm that the applicant has the professional wherewithal to accomplish the project satisfactorily.

Chair of your department _____ Date: _____

Dean of your school: _____ Date: _____

If the chair and/or dean do not recommend the proposal, the applicant should seek a conference to discuss the reasons.

Proposals should be submitted by the applicant in person to the chair of the Research Committee.

PEW GRANT PROJECT DESCRIPTION:
SACRED COMEDY

Jason Crawford

I. Comedy and Festivity: The Context of my Project

Theatrical drama, in western culture, has been born twice. The first of its births took place at the religious festivals of ancient Greece, where actors, singers, and dancers enacted the deeds of gods and heroes. And the second took place in the liturgies of the medieval Christian church, where simple enactments of biblical narrative – for instance, the angel announcing the miracle of Jesus's resurrection at Easter – developed into elaborate cycles of biblical drama through which the gathered community could experience in tangible ways the history of redemption.

In both these birth stories, drama is rooted deep in worship. Dramatic enactment functions, in both ancient Greece and Christian Europe, as a kind of liturgy, a ritual performance that brings the worshipping community into contact with divine power and vitality. In tragedy, the community confronts its own frailty, the limits of its attempts to achieve justice through law and the violence of its attempts to guarantee order through power. In comedy, the community enacts the miracle of a much-awaited consummation (in biblical terms: *shalom*, new creation, the wedding supper of the Lamb) and celebrates the giddy surprises of reconciliation and grace.

I've been thinking about the liturgical work of drama – the way it invites us into experiences of confrontation, confession, reconciliation, celebration, and adoration – for a few years now. My explorations began with a scholarly project, still underway, that investigates the liturgical dynamics of tragedy in the work of Shakespeare. In this project, I'm exploring the relationship between the tragic forms of Shakespeare's plays and the liturgical forms of Christian worship. Do tragic plays such as *King Lear* and *Hamlet* evoke (for instance) the Christian communion service, with its dramatic enactment of a body broken and its promise of a world healed? Do these plays embody Christian theologies of suffering, or Christian forms of expectation and hope? As I ask these questions, I'm paying particular attention to the profound changes that took place in Shakespeare's own Reformation-era church, and to the ways Shakespeare participates in, responds to, and registers the consequences of those changes.

This work on tragedy has come to fruition in various forms: an invited lecture at Duke University, two conference presentations, a substantial article in the *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies*, and a course here at Union on tragedy, suffering, and faith. Eventually it will appear as a book. As I've worked on this project, though, I've also found myself thinking quite a bit about the liturgical role of festive celebration, both in the Christian life and in human culture more broadly. I've come increasingly to appreciate the beauty of festivity, its power to constitute and heal communities and to bear tidings of another kingdom in the present age. And I've also been nurturing a growing interest in writing for broader readerships, finding new ways to share my own reflections and discoveries for the sake of a world much in need of good tidings. These interests have developed in large part through conversations with my students: I've taught three times here at Union a course on comic drama from antiquity to the Renaissance, and I've been struck by how the plays we read, along with the festive practices that nourished those plays, speak to deep longings in my students, longings for embodied experiences of celebration, reconciliation, and renewal. This spring I led an Honors Colloquium on Josef

Pieper's book *In Tune with the World: A Theory of Festivity*, and again I was struck by how lively my students are in their thinking about what genuinely festive celebration looks like, what conditions of belief and devotion nourish it, what cultural forms it can take.

Gradually, then, I've seen another book project take shape, a book about folly, laughter, festivity, and the sacred rhythms of comedy. This book, like my tragedy book, will have plenty of things to say about Shakespeare and the history of drama. But it will also discuss much more: laughing martyrs, holy fools, Christmas revels, carnival misrule, comic fiction from Jane Austen to Flannery O'Connor, comic performers from Shakespeare's clowns to Charlie Chaplin and contemporary stand-up comedians. These disparate figures and traditions are related in often surprising ways. In exploring their relationships, and reflecting on the deep connections between comic art and religious practice, I'll interact with a wide range of theoretical and historical work: Mikhail Bakhtin and Hans-Georg Gadamer on festivity and the arts, Simon Critchley and Steven Gimbel on the philosophical implications of laughter, M. Conrad Hyers and M. A. Screech on the comic possibilities of Christian theology. I'll also draw these scholarly threads together in new ways, giving attention to sacred practices that discussions of comedy have tended to neglect.

Though the book will cover quite a bit of cultural terrain, it will keep a persistent focus on two simple claims: that comedy is deeply connected to practices of sacred festivity and worship, and that festivity nourishes human individuals and communities in specific ways. Comedy, like festivity, brings our lives here in the present age into contact with the promise of another age, with Sabbath and *shalom*. Ever notice that comic plays and stories often end with weddings and feasts, and that Christian worship likewise invites us to anticipate the wedding supper of the Lamb? The resemblance is not merely superficial. Comic texts and performances often enact violence and atrocity, but at their best, they also confront a world full of violence with a kingdom that is not of this world, and with whispers of a longed-for consummation. In embodying and imagining this other kingdom, comedy can help us toward practices of celebration and hopeful expectation that can sustain life, even in the face of death.

I've done a lot of writing for other scholars, in recent years. But I've also felt a growing sense of calling to reach out to broader readerships, beyond my scholarly discipline and even beyond the academy. This summer I published an essay in the *Los Angeles Review of Books* that represented one step in that direction. With this book, I hope to go further. I'll say more about that just below, as I describe my specific plans for the Pew Grant.

II. My Project for the Pew Grant

For the spring of 2021, I have committed to write two essays that will become part of this book on comedy. I propose to use my Pew Grant to support my work on these two essays. **First**: I've been accepted to a workshop session at the Shakespeare Association of America (in Austin, TX, April 2021) on the topic, "Writing for Popular Media." I intend, for that session, to write an essay about Easter celebration and cultural renewal in Shakespeare's play *The Winter's Tale*. The essay will claim that this play, which begins in tragedy and grief, invites its viewers to experience restorative grace by inviting us into a kind of festive worship. Addressing this essay to a broad readership, and to questions about what Shakespeare can teach us right now, will require that I cultivate my craft as a writer in new ways. This conference session, led by a colleague who writes regularly about Shakespeare for popular media, will give me an

opportunity to do that. In the short term, I'll publish this piece as an essay in a popular journal; in the longer term, it will become a chapter of the book.

Second: I've been invited to contribute an essay to a special issue of the *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies*. The journal issue will be devoted to the cultural history of virtue, and my contribution will explore tales of hilarious retribution, stories in which judgment breaks into the present age in apocalyptic and carnivalesque forms. These tales are widespread in comedy, from medieval morality plays down to *Tales from the Crypt*, and they reveal quite a lot about how comedy deals with guilt, morality, and the possibility of redemption. They also exemplify the darker side of comic misrule, its potential to become violent and toxic. I'll give significant attention in this essay to medieval and early modern texts, but I'll also consider the longer history of tales of comic retribution, and their particular vitality in our contemporary culture. Though *JMEMS* is a well-respected journal of historical inquiry, it particularly encourages this sort of contemporary engagement. The essay will be due to the journal in the early summer of 2021; I'll adapt it thereafter as a chapter of the book.

I have four chapters of this book roughly drafted and hope to finish a complete manuscript in 2022. The support of a Pew Grant will help me to write well as I complete these two additional chapters this spring. The grant will help in three specific ways: 1) It will enable me to travel to the Shakespeare Association of America conference for the session in April (I don't have provost funds for that conference). 2) It will enable me, as I begin the second essay, to travel to Boston over spring break and spend a few days in the libraries at Harvard, gathering the materials I need. These are the libraries in which I learned to be a scholar; working there always enriches my writing and leaves me deeply nourished. 3) It will help to free me from the financial need to teach J-term or summer courses, freeing up crucial weeks for writing in January and June.

PROJECT SCHEDULE

Jan. 2021-Feb. 2021:	draft Essay #1, for the "Writing for Popular Media" session at the Shakespeare Association of America
Mar. 2021:	travel to Boston to research Essay #2, for the *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies*; begin drafting Essay #2
Apr. 2021:	travel to Austin, TX to present and discuss Essay #1 at the Shakespeare Association of America; revise and submit Essay #1 for publication
June 2021:	deliver Essay #2 to the *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies*

PROJECT BUDGET

Shakespeare Association of America, registration and travel:	$1400
Research trip to Boston, travel expenses:	$1000
January/June teaching release:	$2100

On Faith and My Scholarship

Jason Crawford

As a way of addressing the importance of faith to this project, I want here to discuss two significant trends in my scholarly discipline. I respond to these trends both as a scholar and as a Christian, and they have both done much to inform my explorations of comic drama and religious practice.

First: *a post-secular turn*. Modern westerners, regardless of our religious convictions, tend to share certain habits of mind by which we define what is religious, where religion can matter, where religion does or does not belong. We tend to work from a common set of assumptions about freedom, selfhood, knowledge, rights, time, work, and belief. And we tend to be shaped, in these assumptions, by the ideologies of a culture that conceives of itself and its public spaces as "secular." It is crucial, then, that thoughtful Christians reflect seriously on what it means to be secular. Where did modern secularity begin? What does secularity mean for the theological, devotional, and missional work of the Christian church? To what extent did our secular age in fact emerge *from* the work of the Christian church at the end of the Middle Ages?

My scholarly interest in the relationship between modern and pre-modern culture arises from my interest in these broad questions. When I began my graduate school training as a literary medievalist, I discovered quickly that I couldn't confront premodern texts without confronting, at the same time, questions about modernity. Reading C. S. Lewis, who was an important guide for me in my early years of graduate school, helped me to understand that medieval texts have something crucial to teach Christians about what we have gained and lost in becoming modern. As I began to read more widely, I learned that there is a lively conversation underway, both in the academy and in the public sphere, about the history and the meanings of the terms "modern" and "secular." This conversation arises from the growing suspicion of many commentators that modernity is more contradictory, heterogeneous, and fragile than we once thought. We are coming to understand in new ways that secular modernity was never inevitable, never a settled era or state, and never a neutral position from which to carry out the work of civic or academic life. And "religion" was never a bounded sphere of activity set apart from the rest of public life. We need, all of us, to re-think the meanings and the histories of these terms. And the church needs to help lead the way.

In light of these conversations, many scholars across the disciplines have been exploring the possibilities of a "postsecular" approach to understanding the contemporary world. "Postsecular" doesn't mean "no longer secular." The term is associated, rather, with an attempt to think critically about the very category of the "secular," about the many forms this category has taken and the many ends it has served. In my own home discipline of medieval and early modern studies, many scholars have been raising questions about how the notion of the "secular" developed in the late Middle Ages, and about how this notion depends on particular notions of the "religious." I began to explore these questions in my first book, *Allegory and Enchantment,* where I asked what the sixteenth-century emergence of modern literary fiction can teach us about the roots and limits of modern culture. My current explorations of the relationship between theatrical drama (a "secular" phenomenon) and festive worship (a "sacred" phenomenon) take these questions in new directions.

Second: *an affective turn*. In asking about the liturgical power of tragedy and comedy, I hope to follow the turn of many recent literary scholars to questions beyond the historical: questions about how literary texts invite us into particular practices, engage our loves and desires, and form our imaginations. Much recent critical work, by both Christian and secular scholars, has cultivated an appreciation of texts not just as *representing* forgotten human cultures but also as *enacting* and *ordering* living human experience. These questions matter to me as a Christian reader and literary critic. What might it mean to respond to George Herbert's poems of worship as worshippers, or to respond with vision to Dante's poetry of vision? Must such forms of reading be regarded as naïve? Must *critical* reading necessarily be detached, purely cognitive, and purely secular? I am attracted to comedy as a topic partly because comic performance has such strong ancient associations with ritual and devotional practice. I am eager to reflect on the special ways in which comic texts and performances provoke wonder and worship, justice and love.

I hope, then, in this project, to write not just a cultural history of comedy but also a living poetics of comedy, a reflection that invites my readers into comedy's dynamics of festive celebration and longing expectation. I hope to write a book that responds to comedy as comedy, with wonder, humility, and playful hilarity. And I hope, in the process of writing this book, to explore in new ways who my audience might be, and what my scholarship might have to say to a world in need of beauty, tenderness, and truth. Is it possible, in a book of literary reflection, to reach beyond the members of my scholarly sub-discipline and beyond the walls of the academy? I still don't know where these questions will lead me, but I am eager to explore them, and I am eager for the help of my colleagues and students as I learn to write with all my heart, in the Spirit of Christ, and in the hope of His kingdom.