

Pew Research Proposal Form
Union University
Fall 2017

Cover Sheet

Name(s) of Applicant(s): *Jay Beavers*

Title of Proposed Project: *Outlaw Religion: The Prophetic Imagination in the Novels of Cormac McCarthy*

Primary Discipline: *English*

Secondary Discipline(s): *Education*

Has this proposal been submitted to another agency, publication, or program? *No*

If so, which one(s)?

Location of proposed research: *Jackson, TN*

Desired start date: *Immediately*

Recommending Scholars and their disciplines:

External: *Luke Ferretter, Associate Professor of English, Baylor University*

Union: *Jason Crawford, Associate Professor of English*

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 *David Anderson* Date: *10/17/18*

Dean of your school: *H. B.* Date: *10-17-18*

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 Research Grant Proposal
2018-2019

Outlaw Religion:
The Prophetic Imagination in the Novels of Cormac McCarthy

Jay Beavers, Department of English

I. Brief Project Description and Major Goals

I propose to write a book based on my dissertation exploring the prophetic themes and characters in the novels of Cormac McCarthy. This book will not only develop the scholarship on religious themes in McCarthy, but also explore new ways of thinking about the place of religion in literature in the postmodern and postsecular era. Intermediate goals include presenting a paper on this topic at a conference in the spring and sending out book proposals to various publishers interested in religion in McCarthy or contemporary American literature.

II. Expanded Description of Project

Recent criticism has observed a return to questions of religion and spirituality in the contemporary novel. After a period in which spiritual questions were ignored in favor of the immediate and material concerns of humanity, the religious impulse seems to have returned, often in a hybridized or attenuated way. Whereas the secular worldview is marked by an attempt at certainty, totalizing narratives, and a focus on the here and now, the postsecular impulse has been to return to a more tentative exploration of spiritual themes, even if only through nostalgia or a cynical imitation of religious forms.

Studies of Cormac McCarthy's novels have tended to follow a similar trajectory to contemporary literary criticism. While the earliest critics suggested that McCarthy's work was nihilistic, later scholars have begun to chart the ways in which the novels seem to take religious views seriously, be they gnostic, agnostic, or even Roman Catholic. My book is an attempt to mark out some new territory and provide a new way of thinking about the religious turn in relation to McCarthy's novels.

The key to this new approach is the ancient tradition of biblical prophets. In my book, I argue that McCarthy's novels draw heavily on the traditions and idioms established by the ancient Hebrew prophets, as outlined by theologians like Walter Brueggemann and Abraham Heschel, and that many of his characters behave as reluctant prophets who bear witness to revelation in spite of themselves. The revelation these characters receive is mysterious, and their oracles are paradoxically silent, often being enacted rather than spoken, but this is consistent with the behavior of the ancient Hebrew prophets. As I argue, the ancient prophets were not primarily concerned with foretelling the future, but with speaking to specific cultures in a way that would effectively translate God's revelation to a particular people. Like the prophets they resemble, many of McCarthy's characters criticize the prevailing culture that perpetuates the *status quo* of unjust governments, oppressive economics, and tamed religion. At the same time, these characters gesture towards an alternative vision of reality rooted in charity towards others and the radical freedom of God. Thus, these prophetic characters, often in ignorance, bear messages of the mystery of God by dramatic actions and indirect symbols. They are not so much speaking prophets as acting ones, and their lives and bodies bear God's revelation.

My project proceeds by a series of character studies and close readings of key passages in all of McCarthy's published novels to date. I show that McCarthy makes use of what we might call postsecular prophets who suggest ways of being and knowing that challenge the certainty and logic of the secular world and maintain an impossible hope in alternative realities while criticizing the horrors of history. These postsecular prophets usually speak from a position of vulnerability and weakness by comparison with the prophets of the status quo who speak for the secular authorities. The secular prophets are certain. They run the numbers. With enough knowledge and intelligence, they can predict the future. They assert control. They claim authority through violence and rhetoric. The secular prophets obsess over why and how, and this gives them power in the world that can seem supernatural. By contrast, the postsecular prophets do not know. They doubt. They lack any authority and cannot predict the future. In so doing they assert the freedom of God to do as he will and the freedom of humanity to believe or not. The postsecular prophets do not care about why and how, only who, and they have no power to effect change; however, their lives are marked by miracle and revelation that defies prediction or manipulation by secular or religious authorities.

In terms of postsecular criticism more generally, I believe a better understanding of the prophetic tradition will enable us to step away from the secular-postsecular dialectic and find fruitful alternatives. In the ancient world, the prophets emerged as a viable third source of authority that alternatively challenged and affirmed the authority of kings and priests. Some combination of kingship and priesthood had ruled ancient civilizations for millennia before the prophets appeared as a counterbalance. In the same way, the prophetic imagination may now offer a counterweight to the pressure of secularism on one side and religion on the other. The prophetic tradition both challenges and affirms secular and religious authority while suggesting that other forms of authority exist beyond rational argumentation, political power, and cultic rites.

III. Surrounding Scholarly Literature and My Contribution

In short, this project has the potential to extend the current scholarship around McCarthy and religion in the postmodern novel in several ways. First, many critics remain convinced that McCarthy's writing is nihilist or gnostic; I intend to show that much of what has been mistaken for nihilism can be read as a prophetic criticism of the status quo that makes room for revelation. Furthermore, while gnostic religion regards the material world as useless at best and harmful at worst, the prophetic perspective in McCarthy sees God working in and through the material world, restoring His good creation even as He allows evil to burn itself out. Among those who acknowledge serious religious concerns in McCarthy, many argue that this is an innovation of his later fiction, beginning with *Blood Meridian* and continuing through *The Road*. On the contrary, I can show the influence of the prophetic imagination beginning with McCarthy's earliest published novel. Finally, the prophetic imagination has much to offer contemporary scholarship on postsecularism or the return to religion in the American novel in various ways. While much has been said about the possibility of faith as expressed through a sacramental imagination, the prophetic imagination has been mostly overlooked as a way of thinking about literary attitudes toward earthly authorities, the role of the author, and the nature of knowledge.

Vereen Bell's *The Achievement of Cormac McCarthy* (Louisiana State UP, 1988) was the first book length discussion of McCarthy's novels. Bell is a remarkably sensitive reader, but his overall take on religion in McCarthy is that there isn't any. Bell set the conversation in his day, but later authors have begun to challenge his basic assumption about religion.

My study of prophetic religion in McCarthy cuts against the grain of postsecular readings such as Amy Hungerford's, who in her *Postmodern Belief: American Literature and Religion since 1960* (Princeton

UP, 2010) suggests that religion in *Blood Meridian* operates as a hollowed out shell, aping the form of religious language and imagery while denying any essential meaning. By contrast, I suggest that prophetic characters in McCarthy's novels do gesture towards transcendent meaning, while criticizing the horrors of history.

A few books deal with religion in McCarthy's novels at length. The first I would mention is Matthew Potts's book *Cormac McCarthy and the Signs of Sacrament: Literature, Theology, and the Moral of Stories* (Bloomsbury Academic, 2015) on McCarthy's use of sacramental imagery. I see my book as something of a companion to Potts's work in that the sacramental imagination and the prophetic impulse may overlap at certain points. Potts's work as well as my own serve to undermine the often supported notion that religion in McCarthy is primarily gnostic in nature. I believe I can also extend Potts's work by demonstrating the presence of prophetic themes and characters even in McCarthy's earlier work. Potts's argument tends to focus on McCarthy's later novels where sacramental imagery becomes more prominent.

Another recent book length entry in the discussion of religion in McCarthy is Petra Mundik's *A Bloody and Barbarous God: The Metaphysics of Cormac McCarthy* (U of New Mexico P, 2016). Mundik draws not only from Christian mysticism, but also Buddhism, Gnosticism to explore the religious underpinnings of McCarthy's later novels. She also focuses solely on McCarthy's later novels, beginning with *Blood Meridian*.

Todd Edmondson's *Priest, Prophet, Pilgrim: Types and Distortions of Spiritual Vocation in the Fiction of Wendell Berry and Cormac McCarthy* (Pickwick Publications, 2014) is notable for coming at some points closest to my central observation of the prophetic characters in McCarthy's novels. His focus is broader, however, and fails to demonstrate the pervasiveness of this trope or expand upon its significance for understanding McCarthy's work more generally.

Bryan Giemza has written of McCarthy's Irish Catholic roots *Irish Catholic Writers and the Invention of the American South* (Louisiana State UP, 2013). Giemza's work focuses more narrowly on Irish Catholicism and the regional influences on McCarthy.

Manuel Broncano has written *Religion in Cormac McCarthy's Fiction: Apocryphal Borderlands* (Routledge, 2014) which focuses on McCarthy's western fiction. The title aside, Broncano does not offer much in the way of a theological reading of the novels. Instead, he draws on the general biblical background of the later novels to argue, somewhat paradoxically, that McCarthy is an agnostic.

Probably the most recent book to touch on McCarthy's religious concerns is Russell M. Hillier's *Morality in Cormac McCarthy's Fiction* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2017). Hillier focuses on the struggle of many of McCarthy's characters to maintain some sense of goodness and morality amidst the dark landscapes of his novels.

Diane Luce's *Reading the World: Cormac McCarthy's Tennessee Period* (U of South Carolina P, 2009) has some extensive discussion of religion in McCarthy's Appalachian fiction. Her conclusion is that McCarthy displays a gnostic approach to religion.

IV. Statement of Faith Integration

I have always experienced the study of literature as a theological and religious enterprise. The more I have learned about the techniques and theories underpinning the study of literature, the more I have become convinced that the real value of literature is the way it enables us think about and experience humanity's struggle with itself, with God, and God's creation. In short, I study literature because it enables me to experience God's truth.

My decision to pursue my doctoral degree at Baylor in its Religion and Literature program was motivated by my conviction that religion and literature are inextricably linked and that neither can be fully understood apart from the other. The best literature frequently draws on themes, images, symbols, and allusions to the biblical texts and it grapples with the questions raised by the biblical authors. Even avowed atheist authors, at their most honest, struggle with the questions raised by Job and Quoholeth and with as little success. Blake said that Milton was of the Devil's party and didn't know it, but it is equally true that even an atheist or agnostic can express God's truth unawares. Reading great literature, therefore, can and should be informed by an awareness of the religious and theological thought that precedes and influences it.

But great literature is not simply a retreading of old Bible stories. At its best, literature allows us not merely to know but to experience the truth of God and the world He made. Our knowledge is expanded not only by the different perspectives literature offers but by the ways in which literature can inhabit our minds and bodies and allow us to experience reality along with its characters. By reading literature "religiously" we can know the truth on an imaginative and experiential level that surpasses mere cognition.

The study of literature can also improve our reading of religious texts. It is a commonplace that the Bible, the Book of Books, is a collection of writings that span millennia and represent the work of dozens of different authors working in a wide array of genres. It contains poetry, myth, wisdom literature, drama, history, and non-fiction. The truth of the Bible is not represented from one perspective only but by a multitude of voices. None of this detracts from my conviction that the Bible is the inspired word of God. On the contrary, an appreciation of the variety of literary forms in the Bible only demonstrates to me that the truth it contains is so powerful and profound that it can only be represented by a multiplicity of human voices, languages, styles, and registers. God's truth is infinite, and our attempts to understand and express God with human language are graciously sufficient, but never comprehensive. It seems fitting to me, then, that the Christian Bible is a collection of perspectives that reflect on the person of the triune God like spotlights surrounding a diamond. So, I believe the study of literature – of genre, voice, image, and metaphor – is an essential element of Christian education.

I also believe that practitioners of religion and literature have much to teach each other when it comes to habits of reading and interpretation. A literary scholar knows well the tension between reading for information and reading for pleasure and can show students of the Bible how to see verses in their larger context and make connections both within and without the text. On the other hand, the religious reader can show the literature lover how to meditate and contemplate on language. The literary method of reading tends to impose meaning on the text, but the religious method of reading allows the text to impose meaning on the reader. The religious reader knows how to slow down, to ponder, chew, and wrestle with a single line or passage until that passage becomes a part of the reader. To coin the psalmist, this is the process of hiding the word of God in one's heart and allowing the text to change the reader.

My project on the prophetic in Cormac McCarthy's novels is informed by the convictions about my discipline that I have described above. While others have remarked that McCarthy's prose and imagery often draws on the language of the King James Version of the Bible, I go further to suggest that his tone and content are not simply hollow imitations of a grand style. Whatever McCarthy's personal beliefs, I believe the power of his language comes from a sincere attempt to express truth and to grapple with the unknowns of human existence. I believe I have found a key to understanding the tension between McCarthy's style and his often bleak and violent content in the prophetic imagination, which unblinkingly faces the degradation and suffering of the world in order to clear the way for the revelation of God and gesture toward alternative realities. It is my hope that this project will help outline some ways in which the prophetic mode can inform our reading of literature, but I also hope that it may show how literature can inform the prophetic role of the church in the world, perhaps by reminding the church that, like the prophets, it need not have all the answers. Sometimes it is enough to raise the question and retell the old stories in ways that fire imaginations and draw hearts toward the eternal truths of God.

V. Project Schedule

October 2018-December 2018: Submit book proposals to several publishers who have demonstrated an interest in publishing on religion and McCarthy (Bloomsbury, Routledge, the U. of New Mexico Press, and OSU's Postsecularism Series at least)

Dec. 1, 2018: Submit an abstract to the International Conference on Christianity and Literature to present a paper on some element of this project

January 2019: Draft paper for ICCL; research and revise manuscript

March 29-30, 2019: Present a paper at the ICCL in Cambridge, MA

May-August 2019: Complete revisions and submit final draft to publishers

VI. Project Budget

\$500 – for books and research

\$500 – to defray travel costs to Cambridge, MA

\$3500 – Replacement for J-term and/or summer teaching responsibilities so that I can devote myself entirely to this project

James Aaron Beavers
Curriculum vitae

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Jackson, Tn 3830
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EDUCATION:

- 2011-2016 **Ph.D. in English Language and Literature**
Baylor University (Waco, TX)
Dissertation: *Flawed Hearts: The Prophetic Impulse in the Novels of Cormac McCarthy*
Director: Dr. Luke Ferretter, Professor of Literature
- 2004 **M.A. in Renaissance English**
University of Richmond (Richmond, VA)
Thesis: *Beyond Gender: The Pursuit of Power in the Henriad and Coriolanus*
Director: Dr. Anthony Russell, Associate Professor of English
- 2001 **B.A. in English and History**
Grove City College (Grove City, PA)

EMPLOYMENT:

- 2016-present Union University
Assistant Professor of English

PEER-REVIEWED PUBLICATIONS:

- 2015 “‘Stairwell to nowhere’: The Darkness of God in Cormac McCarthy’s *Suttree*” *South Atlantic Review* 80.1-2.
- 2016 “Broken Prophets: The Violence of Faith in Cormac McCarthy’s Border Trilogy” *Intégrité* 15.1.
-

OTHER PUBLICATIONS:

- 2017 “Audiobooks: Ancient Orality, Modern Technology” *Journal of the Union Faculty Forum* Vol. 37.

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PRESENTATIONS:

- 2018 “Free Stones and Captive Men: The Tower of Babel and Cormac McCarthy’s *The Stonemason*” presented at the Southeast Conference on Christianity and Literature in Jackson, Tennessee, April 19-21
- 2015 “Prophetic Drama in the Border Trilogy”
presented at the South Atlantic Modern Language Association conference in Durham, North Carolina, November 12-14
- 2015 “Holy Chaos: Prophetic Voices in *Outer Dark*”
presented at the Fifty Years of Cormac McCarthy Conference in Memphis, Tennessee, October 8-10
- 2014 “The Prophetic Impulse in Cormac McCarthy’s *Child of God*”
presented at the Southwest Conference for Christianity and Literature in Siloam Springs, Arkansas, November 13-16
- 2014 “Prophets of Nature in Cormac McCarthy’s *The Orchard Keeper*”
presented at the Rocky Mountain Modern Language Association conference in Boise, Idaho, October 9-11
- 2013 “Rendered and Revealed: Facts and Meaning in *The Floatplane Notebooks* and *Blood Meridian*” presented at the Rocky Mountain Modern Language Association conference in Vancouver, Washington, October 10-12
- 2012 “Stairwell to nowhere”: Apophatic Theology in McCarthy’s *Suttree*”
presented at the Southern Writers, Southern Writing Graduate Conference at the University of Mississippi, July 12-14

EXPERIENCE:

Union University

Written Composition I (Fall 2016, 2017, and 2018)

Written Composition II (Spring 2017 and 2018)

World Literature I (Spring 2017)

World Literature II (Fall 2016, 2017, and 2018; January 2018, Summer 2018; Spring 2018)

Literature and Film (Spring 2017)

The Short Story (Spring 2018)

Drama (Fall 2018)

Teaching English in the High School Classroom (Fall 2016 and 2017)

Baylor University

American Literature II (Teacher of Record – Fall 2015, Spring 2016)

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Thinking and Writing (Teacher of Record – Fall 2012, 2013, 2014, 2015)

Thinking, Writing, and Research (Teacher of Record – Spring 2013, 2014, 2015, 2016)

Honors Colloquium (Instructor: Spring 2014, 2015; Fall 2014, 2015)

Writing Tutor, Baylor Writing Center (Fall 2011-Spring 2012)

Trinity Christian School of Fairfax

English Teacher/Department Head

AP Literature and Composition, Junior and Senior English classes; was department head for the 2010-2011 school year (2006-2011)

Oak Hill Academy

English Teacher/Department Head

Junior and Senior English, Theater, and Creative Writing (2004-2006)

Adjunct Professor, Wytheville Community College

Dual credit Senior English through Oak Hill Academy

AWARDS/SCHOLARSHIPS:

Professional Development Grant, 2018 (\$750)

English Department Travel Award, 2015 (\$300)

Graduate School Travel Award, 2015 (\$300)

Conyers Graduate Scholar, 2013-2014

Graduate School Travel Award, 2014 (\$300)

English Department Travel Award, 2014 (\$300)

Graduate School Travel Award, 2013 (\$300)

Graduate School Travel Award, 2012 (\$300)

PROFESSIONAL SERVICE

Faculty Advisor, Sigma Tau Delta International English Honors Society (Fall 2018-Present)

English Department Guest Lecturers Travel Award Committee (2014-2015)

English Graduate Student Association (EGSA), Professional Development Chair (2013-2014)

English Department New TA Training (August 2014)

Teaching Mentor (2013-2014)

MEMBERSHIPS

South Atlantic Modern Language Association (SAML A)

Rocky Mountain Modern Language Association (RMMLA)

Christianity and Literature (CCL)

LANGUAGES

French, intermediate reading proficiency

German, intermediate reading proficiency

Old English, intermediate reading proficiency

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COMMUNITY SERVICE

Pastorate Facilitator, All Saints Anglican Church, Jackson, TN (Fall 2018)
Sound Ministry, All Saints Anglican Church, Jackson, TN (Spring 2018-present)
At-Large Bishop's Committee Member, Christ Church, Waco (May 2014-May 2016)
Co-founder and advisor, Anglican Student Ministries, Baylor University (March 2014-May 2016)
Adult Sunday School Teacher, Holy Spirit Episcopal Church (Fall 2013)

REFERENCES

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