The kid spat dryly and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. A lizard came out from under a rock and crouched on its small cocked elbows over that piece of froth and drank it dry and returned to the rock again leaving only a faint spot in the sand which vanished almost instantly.1

The opening pages of Cormac McCarthy’s Blood Meridian introduce the character of Judge Holden at an evangelical tent revival meeting held in Nacogdoches in 1849. The anonymous protagonist of the novel, called only “the kid,” has slipped into Reverend Green’s “nomadic house of God” (6) to get out of the rain. He hears the preacher describe the constancy of God’s love—“Don’t you know that he said I will folle ye always even unto the end of the road?” including “these here hell, hell, hellholes right here in Nacogdoches” where the temptations of alcohol and prostitution await (6). This conviction of human sin coupled with God’s promise of constancy set the stage for a presumable altar call: Reverend Green will invite his tent revival audience to recognize their own sinfulness and need for redemption and that only faith in Jesus Christ, who died for our sins, offers the salvation they need.

This evangelical invitation to be born again is interrupted by the judge—perhaps the most enigmatic and terrifying character in all American lit-
I feel it my duty to inform you that the man holding this revival is an imposter. He holds no papers of divinity from any institution recognized or improvised. He is altogether devoid of the least qualification to the office he has usurped and has only committed to memory a few passages from the good book for the purpose of lending to his fraudulent sermons some faint flavor of the piety he despises. In truth, the gentleman standing here before you posing as a minister of the Lord is not only totally illiterate but is also wanted by the law in the states of Tennessee, Kentucky, Mississippi, and Arkansas. (7)

The Reverend begins reading from his Bible in defense, but the judge continues to detail the charges, “the most recent of which involved a girl of eleven years—I said eleven—who had come to him in trust and whom he was surprised in the act of violating while actually clothed in the livery of his God” (7). Reverend Green protests with the novel’s first hypothesis as to the judge’s true identity: “This is him, cried the reverend, sobbing. This is him. The devil. Here he stands” (7). No matter: the judge turns the screw, adding that “Not three weeks before this he was run out of Fort Smith Arkansas for having congress with a goat. Yes lady, that is what I said. Goat” (7). The revival meeting dissolves at this point into a mob as members of the audience begin shooting at Reverend Green. The postscript to the episode is the judge’s nonchalant admission, as he afterwards buys the kid and others drinks at a tavern, that “I never laid eyes on the man before today. Never even heard of him” (9).

The readers of McCarthy’s 1985 novel had likewise never heard of this fictionalized evangelical preacher, but the outrageous sexual charges the judge brings against him might have sounded familiar. Although pedophilia and bestiality were not among the usual catalogue of sexual sins, the 1980s were known for regular scandals featuring fundamentalist and evangelical preachers, often situated in the South in what had been known as the Bible belt. This was in particular the era of the televangelist scandals: of Jimmy Swaggart, Jim and Tammy Faye Bakker, Oral Roberts, and others. It is not possible that McCarthy had his eye on these scandals as he was composing *Blood Meridian* in the early 1980s, however, simply because the scandals with Swaggart and the Bakkers occurred in the late 1980s, making them the context for early readers of the novel but not the context for its composition. There had been other, less-known scandals in southern congregations, but perhaps it is best to say that, if such scandals were not quite what McCarthy had in mind, then certainly the evangelical revivalist culture of the scene would have been readily recognizable to McCarthy’s
McCarthy emerged from an intensely religious culture, and his novels, critics agree, are among the most religiously resonant of the serious literature being produced today. But what would it mean not only to pay attention to the religious imagery and references in this novel largely set in 1849–1850 but to listen to it carefully against its compositional background of the conservative evangelical and fundamentalist Christian resurgence since the 1970s?

That resurgence, after all, was perhaps the most important religious development in the United States during McCarthy’s lifetime. Beside the proliferation of religious identities and numbers encouraged by the post-assimilationist growth of non-European immigration since the 1960s, the most astounding and unexpected religious development in the contemporary period has been the de-secularization of public life and re-enchantment of the world that has attended this Christian resurgence. Galvanized by opposition to Roe v. Wade and the Equal Rights Amendment, post-separatist fundamentalism established an alliance with conservative evangelicals and sometimes Catholics in a broad realignment of the cultural politics of the period. Perhaps first represented by the Southern Baptist Jimmy Carter, the resurgence over time bent clearly toward conservative social norms and expectations, as the arc from Ronald Reagan to George W. Bush suggests.

From gender roles, abortion, and homosexuality, through the meaning of American history, foreign policy (especially in the Cold War or the Middle East), economic and welfare policies, and public education, to the science of evolution and even climate change, many of the most contentious issues in American public life in the last half century have been deeply affected by the politics of the resurgence.

The contemporary period has long been characterized as dominated by the two paradigms of multiculturalism and postmodernism. But I would like to suggest in this article that the conservative Christian resurgence has been as important a social and political force as these other two better-recognized paradigms of social and literary change and that we need to learn to listen to the literature of the period against this backdrop of renewed Christian vitality and influence. My argument will not be that McCarthy is encoding messages about this Christian revivalism in his work but that this revival is the specific cultural formation for the religious resonances of his work and that the religious meaning of his novels must be understood in its context. Sometimes this way of listening for the revival is simple—as it is with the instance of the tent revival that begins Blood Meridian, or the scenes of evangelical baptisms in this (268–69) and other McCarthy novels—and is merely evidence of the continuing religious energy of American culture, as the several “Great Awakenings” in American history attest. Indeed, the
tent revival the kid attends in Nacogdoches, Texas in 1849 is at the tail end of the Second Great Awakening, which often featured itinerant preachers holding camp meetings over several days, including notably in frontier societies. The kid would not have been the first impoverished social outcast to escape boredom or the weather by listening to a revivalist preacher on the frontier. Including a reference to the Second Great Awakening during what some have seen as the Fourth Great Awakening is a way of calling our attention to this continuing religious energy in America.6

While this cultural presence of evangelical Christianity clearly connects the time of Blood Meridian’s composition to its historical setting, I want to read the novel against a less-obvious theological issue that connects the 1980s to the mid-nineteenth century: that of evolution. As we shall see, Blood Meridian is replete with images, scenes, and language that evoke the nineteenth-century sciences of geology and biology. Behind this presence are the deep theological problems that evolution presented Bible-believing Christians—as then, so now. Evolution is a problem not just for literalists who are committed to a young earth and to the direct divine creation of human origins—the group that represents only one part, although at times the most vocal and powerful part, of the contemporary Christian resurgence. Evolution, I will argue, has also been deeply problematic for non-literalist Christian theology. The desire to read design in our world runs up against crucial problems of theodicy to which evolution seems to point, and against this backdrop it is especially rewarding to read McCarthy’s most famous novel.7

Critics have long been attentive to the religious language and meanings in McCarthy’s work, especially Blood Meridian. Amy Hungerford has recently suggested that the style of the novel reminds us of the “sacred aura” of the Bible, and that the judge in particular “sounds both like Christ telling parables and like Milton’s Satan addressing his fiends.” Insofar as the judge and the narrator sound alike, religious authority trumps the religious content of the novel, ultimately conferring “a godlike status on the author.” Whereas Hungerford sees the kid carrying around a Bible he cannot read in these terms of authoritative style displacing religious content, Douglas Canfield suggests that it might be evidence “for a Christian existentialist reading of the end of the novel.” But “The question,” Canfield asks, “if this novel is a theodicy, is whether there is any other agency that counts, that does not serve the warrior ethic and a brutal imperialist Manifest Destiny?” Canfield finds
the answer in the figure of the kid who seems at least at times to “witness” against himself, in the novel’s language, even as he partakes in its violence, and in the epilogue that in Canfield’s estimation represents the coming of civilization to the frontier. Interestingly, even a self-avowed atheist like Canfield trying to find some shreds of “Christian existentialism” is moved to rescue a benevolent God from the evidence of the novel and indeed, as we shall see, from the evidence of history and natural history.

A similar problem exists for another approach to the religious dimension of Blood Meridian: that of reading the novel for its Gnostic suggestions, championed by Leo Daugherty in 1992 and Petra Mundik in 2009. The substantial virtue of this approach is that it makes sense of a number of strange images, allusions, and episodes in the novel and is an especially strong account of the figure of the judge who is, one of the characters recognizes, a “mystery himself, the bloody old hoodwinker” (263). As Daugherty and Mundik summarize the scheme, in Gnostic cosmologies there was originally a good, divine realm of the spirit, created by a good supreme being and in communion with it. This original unity and goodness was broken, perhaps by an outside force or by one of the lesser created deities, either of whom took upon itself the creation of the material universe, including humankind. In Gnostic theologies, it is Yahweh, the traditional Jewish and Christian God, who creates this lesser material realm, trapping a divine spirit or spark from the original good spiritual realm in human beings. This spirit or “pneuma is actually a fragmented spark of the divine which has fallen into, or in some cases, been maliciously trapped in the evil manifest cosmos.” In this cosmology, our divine spirit must find knowledge—gnosis—of its true antecedence and through this knowledge eventually escape the evil materiality of world and body, reuniting with the divine sphere. Often a messenger is sent—Gnostic Christians understood this to be Jesus—to convey in secret sayings this true understanding of the alien spirit that longs to escape the material body, a message which is not understood by all. The archons, or lords of the material realm, work to keep the divine sparks trapped in material bodies, and the spirits housed in human shells ignorant of their real nature: to this end, Yahweh introduces Mosaic laws and rules of conduct. As can be seen in this nutshell description, Gnosticism upends traditional orthodox Christian theology by redescribing Yahweh as the evil god of the material realm intent on keeping his human creatures ignorant of the divine nature of their spirits, and it is for this reason that the community Bart Ehrman refers to as the “proto-orthodox” followers of Jesus contested Gnostic accounts, along with other belief systems they termed “heresies,” in the first few centuries of the Common Era.

Although obscure and—let’s face it—more than a little bit goofy, this
system of religious belief seems to offer a fairly robust account of some of the confusing allusions, episodes, and imagery in *Blood Meridian*. Particularly strong is its account of the judge who, it is several times suggested in the novel, seems to have supernatural capabilities. In Daugherty’s and Mundik’s complementary schemes, the judge is an archon whose command of the material world and its modes of life is consistent with the fact that, as one of the novel’s many “as if”s would have it, “he seemed much satisfied with the world, as if his counsel had been sought at its creation” (146). The Gnostic reading of *Blood Meridian* is compelling but not perfect, and carries with it the additional commendation that Elaine Pagels’s *The Gnostic Gospels*, which provides an accessible scholarly account of the Gnostic texts found at Nag Hammadi in 1945, was published in 1979, just before McCarthy began to write *Blood Meridian* intensively.13 But the overarching problem with this account is that it requires us to conclude that McCarthy believes in its bizarre cosmology. In the Gnostic reading, the ethics of the novel rest on the notion that the kid carries a spark, as indicated by his supposed misgivings about his violent acts—something Mundik connects to *The Road*, where the “father reminds the son throughout the journey through the apocalyptic wasteland that they are ‘the good guys’ because they are ‘carrying the fire.’”14 The only thing that makes the novel not nihilistic, that is, is the kid’s spark and the final presence in the epilogue of a Gnostic savior who proceeds across the plain trying to strike the spark out of human materiality. Because the final ethical vision of *Blood Meridian* would depend on these two readings, I submit that the Gnostic interpretation of the novel requires us to take seriously the idea that McCarthy takes Gnostic cosmology seriously.

But why would he? One of the biggest problems with Gnostic cosmology is the obviousness of its attempt to salvage a good God out of a world of evil and suffering. Gnosticism does this by distancing the original good deity from the facts of human and animal suffering for which he is not responsible. Thus, in Mundik’s Gnostic interpretation of *Blood Meridian*, the excellent question that the judge rhetorically poses to the Glanton gang—“If God meant to interfere in the degeneracy of mankind would he not have done so by now?” (153)—is answered by the idea that the evil or uncaring creator has no desire to alleviate the suffering. But this Gnostic reading defers rather than answers the novel’s central question of theodicy, here expressed by the judge’s question: that is, why doesn’t the real God, the true good spirit, intervene in the degeneracy, evil and suffering? To send a few messengers at distinct historical moments who speak in riddles that only a select few can understand is clearly not a satisfying answer for theodicy, thus calling into question (again) this God’s goodness, power, or knowledge. This theology also belittles pain and suffering by treating them as not real, as merely
illusions one must see through. Tracing Gnosticism’s possible intellectual antecedence through Jewish apocalypticism to the prophetic tradition of the Hebrew Bible, as Ehrman does, makes painfully obvious how it was another attempt to provide an alibi for God—to explain why he is not here now to stop suffering and why he is not responsible for it in the first place. To read *Blood Meridian* as a Gnostic text is ultimately to make McCarthy into a kind of apologist for God, justifying God’s ways to men in the tradition of Milton and C. S. Lewis.

I contend that a better way to understand the religious meaning of *Blood Meridian* is not to make McCarthy into a Gnostic apologist for God but to see the novel as an indictment of God’s responsibility for suffering in his material world. Like the creationists of his time, McCarthy discerns in the natural world the character of the creator; but in contrast to their accounts and signaled by the myriad references to evolution in his book, the suffering entailed in evolution implies an anti-theodicy in which human and animal suffering makes impossible the classical notion of God as all-powerful, all-good, and all-knowing.

Fittingly, it is the judge who ties together many of the strands of evolution in the novel. The judge is a practitioner of the nineteenth-century scientific disciplines involved in evolution: the geologist who affirms an ancient earth against those who quote scripture (122); the botanist pressing leaves (133); and the ornithologist preserving birds (206), a probable allusion to Darwin’s important 1835 research on the adaptation of finches on the Galapagos Islands; and the paleontologist studying fossils. In one scene, the narrator describes,

At all desert watering places there are bones but the judge that evening carried to the fire one such as none there had ever seen before, a great femur from some beast long extinct that he’d found weathered out of a bluff and that he now sat measuring with the tailor’s tape he carried and sketching into his log. All in that company had heard the judge on paleontology save for the new recruits and they sat watching and putting to him such queries as they could conceive of. He answered them with care, amplifying their own questions for them, as if they might be apprentice scholars. They nodded dully and reached to touch that pillar of stained and petrified bone, perhaps to sense with their fingers the temporal immensities of which the judge spoke. (262–63)

The judge’s discovery of the dinosaur fossil from a bluff recapitulates the fact that many early fossils in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries were first discovered emerging from cliff faces undergoing natural erosion. His
concluding words to his students—"Your heart's desire is to be told some mystery. The mystery is that there is no mystery" (263)—is likewise an allusion to evolution's demystification of the origin of species, now found not in supernatural creation but in the simple natural processes of natural selection working on random mutation. This "singing out the thread of order from the tapestry," as the judge puts it, is the kind of disenchanting scientific mastery that separates the judge from the "man who believes that the secrets of the world are forever hidden" and thus who "lives in mystery and fear" (207–8).

The narrator likewise alludes to the developing picture of evolution in the mid-nineteenth century when he describes in one chapter heading "The judge collects specimens—The point of view for his work as a scientist" (194). This narrator compares the Glanton gang to "gorgons shambling the brutal wastes of Gondwanaland" (180)—that is, to dinosaurs wandering Gondwana, one of the two supercontinents making up Pangaea that existed between 510 and 180 million years ago. The novel constantly calls humans "apes" (4, 68, 78, 95, 154, 159, 208, 248, 296), a figure of speech that recalls one of the most contentious popular understandings of Darwin's theory: that we are descended from apes. Likewise, the epigraph about scalping found among fossils three hundred thousand years ago draws the reader's attention to violent practices of Homo sapiens, the evolutionary ancestor of today's anatomically modern humans. The epigraph cites Tim White who, not incidentally, studies human evolution at Berkeley; his research focus for the last decade or so has been cannibalism (xi). The timeframe of the novel, 1849–1850, is roughly 10 years before Darwin's famous synthesis of evolutionary ideas through his introduction of the mechanism of natural selection. These ideas were circulating during this period, and Darwin would shortly provide "the thread of order" by locating natural selection as the design mechanism in *The Origin of Species*.

My location of the controversies surrounding the sciences associated with evolution during both the setting of *Blood Meridian* and the time of its composition does not mean that all the "scientific" discourses present in the novel are taken seriously by McCarthy. On the contrary, my reading has the advantage of interpreting the judge not as an archon with godlike knowledge but as a sleuth on the cutting edge of scientific mastery circa 1850, whether those ideas ultimately turned out to be right or wrong. Thus the judge's forays into phrenology (249) and racial anthropology (88–89) suggest that for all his supernatural powers, he is actively trying to figure things out during his time period. He is a scientist of his time, which includes getting some things wrong. Likewise, the social Darwinism avant-le-mot that animates Captain White's white supremacist ideology (35–36) is amusingly
if horrifically disproved when his group of filibusters is utterly destroyed by
the Comanche, who have comfortably culturally adapted the horse-based
warfare introduced by Europeans onto the continent. He imagines that the
question of who will govern the Southwest will be answered in terms that
anticipate Herbert Spencer’s slogan “survival of the fittest” as applied to
races and nations. The mistake of Captain White and Captain Glanton is to
believe that military supremacy is the sign of a group’s biological superior-
ity—the same mistake social Darwinism would later make (but that Darwin
himself did not make)—rather than a cultural or environmental advantage
that was historical and transitory.

Perhaps the most important way Blood Meridian invites readers to think
about the religious context and religious meaning of evolution is its interest
in seeing the system as a product of design. Like other nineteenth-century
natural historians, the judge understands that the world might hold signs
of the mind of God. Thus, in another scene of scientific instruction in the
novel, the geologist judge one evening breaks open rocks,

in whose organic lobations he purported to read news of the earth’s origins, hold-
ing an extemporary lecture in geology to a small gathering who nodded and spat.
A few would quote him scripture to confound his ordering up of cons out of the
ancient chaos and other apostate supposing. The judge smiled.
Books lie, he said.
God don’t lie.
No, said the judge. He does not. And these are his words.
He held up a chunk of rock.
He speaks in stones and trees, the bones of things. (122)

Besides recapitulating the mid-nineteenth century’s debate between the
Bible’s attestation of a young earth and the developing geological evidence
advanced by Charles Lyell—whose discovery of vast “eons” was the pre-
condition for Darwin to hypothesize that a natural selection might function
analogously to artificial selection (i.e., breeding)—the judge’s extemporane-
ous lecture suggests that the natural world provides a kind of writing (“these
are his words”) wherein the intention of God might be discerned.

The judge’s “lecture in geology” was inspired by a similar scene in Samuel
Chamberlain’s My Confession: Recollections of a Rogue, which was the histori-
cal source of many of the Glanton gang’s characters and episodes in Blood
he was, no one knew, but a more cool blooded villain never went unhung.
He stood six foot six in his moccasins, had a large fleshy frame, a dull-tallow
colored face destitute of hair and all expression.” That McCarthy had evolu-
tion on his mind when composing Blood Meridian is suggested by the fictional
This is a preview of Christopher Douglas,

“If God Meant To Interfere’: Evolution And Theodicy In Blood Meridian,”


For the full version please contact

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