The postapocalyptic genre strips society of its constructions: both physically and ideologically. For this reason, apocalyptic and postapocalyptic scenarios offer an opportunity to analyze the most basic and central aspects of society considering that these aspects of humanity and culture are all that remain after all else falls. Postapocalypses help reveal possible answers about the center of society, the possibility and impossibility of ethics in a postapocalyptic world, and ideas of how people are able to live together. The problem arises when trying to analyze aspects of society in this genre when society as it once stood has lost its meaning. A framework becomes necessary—one that allows for the base elements of society to be discussed without hinging on the destroyed concepts and terms used by mass civilization. Folklore thus becomes necessary in analyses of apocalyptic and postapocalyptic texts. When applying the revelatory aspect of the postapocalypse along with the folkloric framework of analysis to Cormac McCarthy’s *The Road*, religion comes to the forefront—not religion as expressed and understood by structured and mass religion, but religious folklore and folk belief. The center of society—both the world before the nuclear winter as well as the shattered remains shown during the scope of the novel—proves to be religion, answering the questions posed by postapocalyptic texts of “What is the core of human civilization?,” “How can people unify and live together?,” and “What, if anything, will survive when all structure fails?” Ultimately, the use of folklore in *The
Toone 2

*Road* interconnects literature, postapocalyptic fiction, and folklore studies in academic conversation. *The Road* is a literary case study of folklore, a field not often associated with mass print media.

Analyzing *The Road* in terms of its religious elements and “goodness” is not new territory. Aspects of the book, such as the main characters in the book being a father and son pair along with their meeting with a “prophet” and their emphasis on light, resonate with religious ideas. Lydia R. Cooper, like many of the other critics of the novel, focuses on these religious elements. She asserts the need for heroes and religion even after social structures fail. Cooper explains that a new post-apocalyptic hero and religious leader emerges in the form of the father. Religion and religious ideas emanate from the novel (O’Connell 305-306). While valuable analyses, religious discussions of *The Road* can benefit from acknowledging the presence of folklore, because folklore studies, particularly religious folklore studies, offer “a lens through which religious experience as well as nonreligious experience can be investigated” (Danielson 53) and, as William A Wilson explains, folklore is “centrally and crucially important in our attempts to understand our own behavior and that of our fellow human beings” (415).

In order to examine religion as a societal center using folklore, the revelatory nature of postapocalypses must be established. An apocalypse is “a disaster resulting in drastic, irreversible damage to human society or the environment, esp. on a global scale; a cataclysm.” Predating this modern definition of the word, from the 1100s to the early 1800s, “Apocalypse”—with a capital initial—referred to “the ‘revelation of future granted to St. John in the isle of Patmos.” Around the 1300s, this idea evolved into an “apocalypse” being “revelation or discourse” (“Apocalypse”). Combining these two concepts of apocalypse, the idea emerges that an apocalypse, through its associated decimation of society, provides revelation. Revelation
comes from sifting through the broken pieces of a destroyed world. In her discussion of
apocalypses, Claire P. Curtis sees the questions of ethics and identity. All such fiction begs the
question “Is there an ethics of the postapocalypse?” It also examines the basic ideas of how
people can peacefully live together (Rosen). A functioning and whole society would obfuscate
such questions and any possible answer. Only in the wake of a destroyed society can such things
be seen, or as it is stated in The Road, “Perhaps in the world’s destruction it would be possible at
last to see how it was made” (274).

So in this postapocalyptic world, all concepts of formal or structured religion have
perished along with other staples of society. Of the two main characters in the novel, only the
father has any concept of organized religion and constructions of God—something he questions
and must reconstruct during his journey with his son. The boy knows no structured religion
because he knows no other world than the postapocalyptic existence he lives with his father.
Where structures, both physical and societal, are gone, hallmarks of religion like the material
culture and formal traditions cannot be leaned on as heavily. Religion as a concept has arguably
evolved past this point even before the cataclysmic events of the novel, but such things prove
useful in ascertaining ideas of god in relation to formal aspects of religion. This is already
complicated by the amorphous characteristic of religion, especially as it splits into spiritualism
and unofficial groups. Even the idea of God cannot be the only point to rally around given the
religions that do not have a god as a central figure of faith. Folklore definitions of religion apply
to The Road because the mass culture that stands in opposition to folklore—including structured
mass religion—has gone. While problematic and vague as well as heavily argued amongst
members of its field, religion in folklore studies can be seen as traditions and practices among a
group that binds the group together, permits communication, and allows the ideas and beliefs of
the group (both official and unofficial beliefs) to be perceived (Eliason, Danielson 45-70). There are countless variations of the idea of religion in folklore studies, but this seems to be the general trend. Too all encompassing, it runs the risk of making itself obsolete. However, it provides a starting point from which to narrow.

The father and the son use folkloric religion to keep them together and form a folk group allowing communication and the formation of shared values. The father-son dynamic receives strength from this religion. The father compares his son to angels and god. When literally lost in darkness, the father counts out his steps away from the boy, aiming to count his steps back. As he returns, his musings about what he is returning to—implicitly discussing the boy/god—it is noted that which he is returning to is a “lode or matrix. To which he and the stars were common satellite” (15). It is not just the father-son relationship that keeps the pair together; it is the belief of goodness and godliness existent in the boy. This unofficial and nontraditional belief extends to the father’s sense that God—a constantly shifting entity that endures in the boy, has retreated from the world, or still watches from afar—appointed him to care for the boy (77). This goes beyond parenthood. The boy “carries the fire” giving their journey and coexistence purpose and worth. These shifting roles of the boy and the father taking on the part of Savior, God, Prophet, Apostle, Survivor, Sacrifice, Goodness, Fire, and Light complicate traditional conceptions of religion as well as simple labels. They defy set categorization only using those remnants of constructed religion that pertain to their identities as a folk group. They are not simply The Father and The Son, but rather a new conceptualization of the divine that has adapted and will continue to adapt to the needs of the folk group.

The beliefs of this folk group consisting of the man and the boy define identity, providing an “us” and a “them” by which to guide their lives. This is a binary common in religion:
God/Devil, Heaven/Hell, Jews/Gentiles, Believers/Non-believers, Light/Dark, etc. Since other structures have failed such concepts of Christian religions and binaries of God/Devil come under extreme strain given the seemingly universal devilry eating away at humanity. A different but related binary becomes necessary for the sake of identity and commitment. A constant question asked by the little boy to the man involves whether or not they (the father and the son) are the “good guys.” One of the biggest identifying factors of defining the “good guys” is their lack of cannibalistic and heathenistic tendencies. As the novel progresses, the definition rounds out. The “bad guys” are the cannibals, but they are also the rapists, the murderers, and the individuals who would act only on their own survival instincts even at the expense of others. Physical indicators become associated with the bad guys including the loss of limbs as seen by the “spatula”-like hand of the ousted commune cannibal who attempts to take everything the boy and they father possess (255). The “good guys” stay human, keep relationships including families, believe and continue on with some sort of faith, don’t take the items from others—an example being the bunker where the boy wants to make sure they are not taking anything from the other people (145-146), perpetuating life (not killing others except under threat and even—a trait specific to the boy—giving food to others), and most importantly “carrying the fire.” The constant need for reassurance and definition about the fire and their status as good guys gives form to the group and later even allows for the joining and communication between similar folk groups when the little boy meets up with the other “good guys” after his father dies (281-287). This fire represents the goodness and hope at the center of their folk belief.

To reinforce the folk beliefs held by the father and the son, the two create and participate in evolving folk traditions. Many of these traditions mirror the Christian customs known previously to the father, but that have no meaning when left in their original state. They are
repurposed, altered, and rebuilt and then added to the new religious customs acted out by the pair. The ritualistic aspects of folk belief reinforce interconnectedness and provides symbol of meaning (Eliason). Identifiable Christian elements occur during the journey on the road. The father kneels in the ashes “like a penitent” as he coughs up blood and thinks of his wife (54). The boy perpetually makes the father partake of the food in a sort of pseudo-sacrament (23, 34). Similarly, the boy extends this same sacrament to others on the road: an example being the scene with Ely (163). The father washes/baptizes the boy, and sometimes himself, on multiple occasions including cleansing in a waterfall and in the ocean later on. One baptism of significance is after the shooting of the cannibal who went after the son.

When they’d eaten he took the boy out on the gravelbar below the bridge and he pushed away the thin shore ice with a stick and they knelt there while he washed the boy’s face and his hair. The water was so cold the boy was crying. They moved down the gravel to find fresh water and he washed his hair again as well as he could and finally stopped because the boy was moaning with the cold of it. He dried him with the blanket, kneeling there in the glow of the light with the shadow of the bridge’s understructure broken across the palisade of treetrunks beyond the creek. This is my child, he said. I wash a dead man’s brains out of his hair. That is my job. Then he wrapped him in the blanket and carried him to the fire. Soon after this ceremony when the two have returned to the fire, the man sees the boy “tottering” and is careful to not let the boy fall into the flames. As the two then proceed to fall asleep together, the following is written, “he sat holding him while he tousled his hair before the fire to dry it. All of this like some ancient anointing. So be it. Evoke the forms. Where you’ve nothing else construct ceremonies out of the air and breathe upon them” (74, emphasis added).
Each of these instances resonates with elements of formal, Christian tradition, but the meanings have changed and the ceremonies have been altered to fit the needs of the folk group. The act of penitence by the father does not take place as he kneels in the ashes thinking about his wife. Instead, his resolve, his feelings, and even his measured callousness are renewed as he uses the occasion to re-center on his son. The sacrament, an ordinance representing the blood and body of Christ and by extension his atonement and crucifixion, often connotes an eternal perspective when practiced outside the pages of this novel. In *The Road*, this sacrament surrounds the temporal and the immediate. These isolated instances perpetuate the immediate physical survival of the partakers. It does invite and extend this group’s folk religion to others, but it does not function in the same capacity as before the nuclear winter. Baptism similarly changes meaning. Often symbolizing becoming clean through Christ, repentance, and rebirth, within the father-son folk religion baptism takes on altered meanings. The baptism does cleanse, it is a physical cleaning away of ash and grime that will constantly plague the two even after they wash. Specifically for the boy, he is already seen as holy and good so it is not his own repentance and sanctification occurring. It is the body of others along with the remnants of destruction that must be washed away each time they enter the water. As for rebirth, there is none. There is no other world to be reborn into. Instead, the baptism functions as a separation from the “bad guys” and a renewal of being “human” as opposed to relying on the Christian divine. If one were to take these religious folk traditions and rituals and analyze them without the folklore aspect, a different view of religion would be found: one that would not entirely fit the situations and ideas of the father and the son.

Religion remains at the center of the father-son folk group, especially when considering the religious belief each ties to the other. Society is portrayed as belief and faith centered.
Complicating this is the cannibal communes roaming the landscape. On the one hand these groups can be seen as a religion all there own. Vastly different than the folk religions of the “good guys,” the “bad guys” still exhibit some of the same characteristics of folk religion applied in the analysis of the father and the son. The practice of eating, torturing, and raping human beings is their common goal. The idea of survival being paramount as their ideological view also becomes clear. In these respects, the cannibal communes could be considered to have folkloric religious aspects as part of their group. However, I would argue that these “bad guys” function in the novel more like an anti-religion or an absence of religion. This creates an even starker contrast between the good and the bad by showing the effects of the presence of religion and the absence. The cannibals are portrayed as more animal than human. Survival instincts drove them to eat their own kind. They go beyond this, however, and decide to satiate more than just survival needs by imprisoning, murdering, torturing, raping, and performing other inhumane acts. Their “traditions” as opposed to unifying them, create an alienating dynamic. Anyone can be killed or eaten at any time and it won’t necessarily be out of survival. They are organized and function together (60-62). But it is not unifying. Rather, they use and survive one another (Note the difference of surviving one another and surviving with one another. They each represent a means to an end for the individual, not the group). The group will not be able to continue together for long because any semblance of unity is based on something unsustainable—if they continue to eat and kill other humans as well as each other, their supply will run out and so will they as they pick off each other one member at a time. They are inhuman as opposed to human, faithless instead of believing, fragilely put together as opposed to unified and bound. They function as the other half of the binary necessary for religion.
There is no question that *The Road* is rife with religion. But to only see the religious tones while missing the “how” and the “why” of the religious presence is a missed opportunity. *The Road* presents an explanation of how people can live together by taking everything out but that which is necessary for the connections to remain: the central, religious idea of goodness and the importance placed on it by the pair as seen by their purpose and constructed traditions. This becomes a standard not just for the other groups in the book, but also for other societal structures outside the pages of the novel. Analyzing *The Road* in this fashion also encourages the comingling of Folklore studies and mass culture. The two resist intermixing, but genres such as the postapocalyptic narrative provide a space for the two to merge. In this union, literature becomes a folkloric case study of humanity.
Works Cited


