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Philip Harrold

Ten years ago, at a gathering at Lambeth Palace, an “alternative worship” service was vividly described as follows:

“On the first visit to a service, the main impression is visual. Screens and hanging fabrics, containing a multiplicity of colours, moving and static images continuously dominate the perceptions. There are other things: the type of music, often electronic, whose textures and range seem curiously attuned to the context of worship, smells, the postures adopted by the other worshippers, As the mental picture begins to fill up with details, there is a growing appreciation that considerable technological complexity is sitting alongside simplicity and directness. The rituals—perhaps walking through patterns, tying [*sic*] a knot, or having one’s hands or feet anointed—are introduced with simple, non-fussy directions. The emphasis is on allowing people to do what will help, liberate, and encourage their worship rather than on the orchestration of a great event Where something is rather obscure, its purpose is to invite further reflection, perhaps teasing the worshippers to look deeper beyond the surface meaning For many of those who stay, they have never before had an experience of Christian worship like it. It is as though they have come to a new place which they instantly recognize as home.”

Then, as now, the Rev. Dr. Paul Roberts pleaded for a renewed appreciation of the artistic sensibility in worship, not for art’s sake alone, but as part of a “vibrant missionary engagement” with postmodern aesthetics—embracing its “richer, multi-layered, and

more fluid textuality—envisioning meanings and appreciating multivalence through a variety of media.”¹

Roberts presently serves Anglican parishes in Bristol, England while co-hosting “alternative worship.org,” a self-described “gateway for anyone researching Alternative Worship and new forms of church.” A similar web-based service is provided at Vintagechurch.org by a counterpart to Roberts on my side of the pond, Dan Kimball, pastor at Santa Cruz Bible Church in California. Accordingly, Kimball wants the aesthetics at his church “to scream out who we are and what we are about the moment people walk in the doors.”² Neither enterprise sees itself as trendy, seeker-sensitive, or mere window-dressing. Rather, the basic conviction is that arts speak to more fundamental concerns regarding the transcendent realities of truth, goodness, and beauty. Assuming that “people who value beauty might eventually look for truth,” the arts become a tool of evangelism, a pathway to God.³ Indeed, Brian McLaren, a leading spokesperson for the Emergent Church/Conversation [EC] in the U.S., believes that “image (the language of imagination) and emotion (including the emotion of wonder) are essential elements of fully human knowing, and thus we seek to integrate them in our search for this precious, wonderful, sacred gift called truth”⁴ Otherwise, the gospel remains “flattened, trivialized, and rendered inane,” observes McLaren—with a message stuck in the small world of “Sunday School Christianity,” unable to connect with a postmodern culture that is visually inclined, aesthetically charged, and open to—if not in outright pursuit of—mystery.⁵

Seasoned insiders to the EC like Alan Roxburgh, a writer and theological educator in Vancouver, B.C., admire such “wonderfully creative movements of bright young leaders,” while, at the same time worrying that they might cater to self-actualization, becoming “purveyors of more experiential, artsy, aesthetic forms

of religious goods and services.”⁶ The aesthetic media may very well morph into the message, confusing style and substance—“undeniably cool,” yes, but never actually answering the question, “What is the Gospel?” Scott Bader-Sayre and Andy Crouch, authors of two important cover-page articles on the EC in *The Christian Century* and *Christianity Today* (respectively), heartily endorse the recovery of a sense of mystery and transcendence through the arts—especially for those who have given up on the “small life” and superficiality of contemporary evangelicalism. Perhaps the emerging experience—in worship gatherings as well as any artistic engagement with the wider world—will also nudge today’s alienated youth to see beyond their angst, into the numinous, finding a spiritual place they can call home. But all this relevance, according to Bader-Sayer, will have to be “modulated” by resistance—by the counter-cultural move to “[interpret] the culture to itself” in light of the hope conveyed in the story of Jesus Christ.⁷ Lauren Winner expresses the tension well when she asks, “How do you simultaneously attend to the culture *and* be a pocket of resistance?”⁸

If any of this sounds familiar, it is likely because the contemporary EC interest in artistic expression is reminiscent of the challenges and opportunities C.S. Lewis encountered as he *smuggled* theology into his own post-Christian world through the literary media of fantasy and myth. I see two significant areas of correspondence here. First, regarding context, Lewis was just as persuaded then as the EC is now that the church was in a “missionary situation.” Writing in 1945, he observed: “A century ago our task was to edify those who had been brought up in the Faith: our present task is chiefly to convert and instruct infidels.”⁹ Given the pervasive spiritual alienation of his day and, indeed, of his own early life, Lewis advised an indirect or “latent” approach to evangelism that nurtured, through the poetic and mythic imaginations, a disposition to *hear* (pre-evangelism) then *believe* (pre-apologetics) the Gospel.¹⁰ Just as Paul Roberts hopes that today’s “alternative” worship services will “tease” their participants to “look deeper” at life and its ultimate destination, Lewis hoped his fantasy writing would, at the least, awaken deep longings for transcendence. Both see re-enchantment and its attendant aesthetic practices as evangelistic endeavors in a world filled with competing ideologies and narratives, or perhaps a world that has no story to tell at all.¹¹

There is a second important area of correspondence between the missional aesthetics of Lewis and the EC, and that has to do with the way both understand the stealthy relationship between artistic or literary expression and apologetics. Lewis actually used the term *smuggle* in reference to his fictional works much the same way that EC proponents speak today of the subversive ways they are communicating the Gospel in the eclectic vernacular of postmodern culture. In a letter

to Anglican nun Sister Penelope (CSMV), written in the summer of 1939, Lewis observed how “any amount of theology can now be smuggled into people’s minds under cover of romance without their knowing it.” He recalled his early experience of “*almost* believing in the gods”—indeed, feeling something akin to “holiness”—through George MacDonald’s “fantasies for grown-ups.”¹² Later in life, in a more familiar passage from his essay, “Sometimes Fairy Stories May Say Best What’s to Be Said,” Lewis observed:

I thought I saw how stories of this kind could steal past a certain inhibition which had paralysed much of my own religion in childhood . . . But supposing that by casting all these things [Christian teachings] into an imaginary world, stripping them of their stained-glass and Sunday school associations, one could make them for the first time appear in their real potency? Could one not thus steal past those watchful dragons? I thought one could.¹³

Indeed, Lewis knew those “watchful dragons” quite well because he had moved in fits and starts beyond the smallness of his Sunday School Christianity into a “region of awe”—a spiritual journey of deconversion and reconversion that anticipated much of the religious autobiography we see among today’s self-described postmoderns.¹⁴ Smuggling was, in effect, an act of “redemptive deconstruction,” according to Louis Markos: “Lewis dissociated the signifieds of Christian theology from their typical, uninspiring signifiers (their Sunday school associations) and attached them instead to a new set of signifiers with the power to reinvigorate and inspire young and old alike.”¹⁵ He accomplished this through bold use of allegory, myth, and symbol—genres and literary devices that are most amenable to an incarnational aesthetic, the “transposing” of divine presence or, at least, transcendent meaning into a “lower” medium of communication.¹⁶ Little wonder that emergent writers like Charlie Peacock and Brian McLaren admire Lewis for his “imaginative and mystical sensitivities,” especially his literary “portals” which lead the reader beyond the confines of the self into the heavenlies.¹⁷

There remains, however, a crucial, yet often overlooked, *social* dimension in Lewis’s incarnational aesthetic—a dimension I refer to as the sympathetic imagination. Because this more earthly aspect directly challenges the persistent individualism of late-, as well as post-modernity, I would like to suggest its particular relevance to the EC’s embrace of the arts today. Let’s begin with Lewis’s most explicit statement concerning the role of sympathy in the exercise of the imagination, as found in *Miracles* (1947). In his chapter on the Incarnation—“the Grand Miracle”—he explains how God becoming man is replicated “in a very minor key”

throughout all of nature by the sympathetic relations humans enjoy with each other and even with animals. An awareness of these lower transpositions—especially through an exercise of the poetic imagination—reveals a world in which “everything hangs together and the total reality, both Natural and Supernatural, . . . is more multifariously and subtly harmonious than we had suspected.” At this point, Lewis is most interested in developing the incarnational principles of recapitulation and vicariousness as they intimate the Grand Miracle, but he also acknowledges their profound social implications. In marked contrast with the natural human tendency of self-sufficiency, he emphasizes how identification with and sacrificing for others, and receiving their selfless offerings in return, is a way of disclosing, albeit imperfectly (or “faintly”), a fundamental attribute and activity of the Divine Life.¹⁸

Later, in a more thorough discussion in the Epilogue to *An Experiment in Criticism* (1961), Lewis correlates this sympathetic disposition with the benefits of literary practice and experience. Chiefly among them is the capacity of the imagination to enter into the perspectives and experiences of others:

Good reading, therefore, though it is not essentially an affectional or moral or intellectual activity, has something in common with all three. In love we escape from our self into one other. In the moral sphere, every act of justice or charity involves putting ourselves in the other person's place and thus transcending our own competitive particularity. In coming to understand anything we are rejecting the facts as they are for us in favor of the facts as they are. The primary impulse of each is to maintain and aggrandize himself. The secondary impulse is to go out of the self, to correct its provincialism and heal its loneliness. In love, in virtue, in the pursuit of knowledge, and in the reception of the arts, we are doing this.

For Lewis, the immediate “good of literature” is that it “admits us to experiences other than our own,” and, in so doing, “heals the wound, without undermining the privilege, of individuality.”¹⁹ Of course, this requires a “baptized imagination”—one that permits any artistic or literary endeavor, even the “sub-Christian” variety, to point upwards to God.²⁰ But, again, note that for Lewis, this imagination has a profound horizontal dimension as well—one that begins and ends in a phenomenology of sympathetic relations with others.²¹ Here, we find the sort of concreteness that Lewis appreciates in the “spontaneous tendency of religion” to resort to poetic expression. After all, for Lewis, it is poetic, not “ordinary” language that conveys the *presence* of the object as much as its meaning. This is what I think Lewis has in mind when he extols the remarkable

powers of poetic language—the way it uses “factors within our experience so that they become pointers to something outside our experience.” What can he be referring to here except the arena of our interpersonal relationships, where love, transgression, alienation, and forgiveness all provide opportunities to “verify” fundamental Christian ideas? Forgiveness, for one, resists precise definition, but it can be communicated with uncanny specificity and emotional impact in poetic language and a wide array of other artistic forms. Ultimately, Lewis despaired that while this storehouse of “hints, similes, [and] metaphors” was crucial to late-modern apologetics, it was under-appreciated, and, consequently, under-utilized.²²

This may not be the case today, especially considering the EC's enthusiastic and, at times, exotic attempts at new forms of Christian community and “corollary apologetics.” The EC, in fact, describes itself as intensely relational.²³ But, as Paul Roberts and others inside the movement observe, EC ecclesiology is “still unformed and provisional”—in large part, I think, because it lacks a central organizing principle.²⁴ It would be much too modern, of course, to build anything on a blueprint, let alone *one* blueprint(!), but the incarnational aesthetic offered by Lewis is remarkably fluid, adaptive, and missional. More importantly, it modulates the EC's passion for relevance with a relational phenomenology of sympathetic imagination that strongly resists, as St. Anne's did in *That Hideous Strength*, potent cultural pressures of competitive individuality, on the one hand, and reductive homogenization (the proverbial “lowest common denominator”), on the other. However Lewis's aesthetic is applied—in the creation of new forms of worship, new channels of literary endeavor (especially on the Internet), or sponsorship of the arts—it must be informed by the “The Grand Miracle.” The Incarnation was, after all, Lewis's chief source of inspiration, and he devoted most of his life to letting it work its peculiar magic in his mind and craft. “It digs beneath the surface, works through the rest of our knowledge by unexpected channels, harmonises best with our deepest apprehensions and our ‘second thoughts,’” he observed, “and in union with these undermines our superficial opinions.”²⁵ Ultimately, for Lewis, that's what the sympathetic imagination is all about.

Notes

¹ Paul Roberts, “Liturgy and Mission in Postmodern Culture: Some Reflections Arising from ‘Alternative’ Services and Communities,” <http://seaspray.trinity-bris.ac.uk> (accessed September 5, 2003): The author is an ordained priest in the Church of England, serving parishes in

- Bristol. This online paper was presented at the “Alternative Worship Day” gathering at Lambeth Palace in 1995.
- ² Dan Kimball, *The Emerging Church: Vintage Christianity for New Generations* (Zondervan-Emergent-ys, 2003), p. 135. Kimball’s church can be visited online at <http://vintagechurch.org>.
- ³ Andy Crouch, “Visualcy: Literacy Is Not the Only Necessity in a Visual Culture,” *Christianity Today* (June 2005): 62.
- ⁴ Brian McLaren, “An Open Letter to Chuck Colson,” *A New Kind of Christian* (December 2003). See <http://www.anewkindofchristian.com/archives/000018.html> (accessed December 16, 2003).
- ⁵ McLaren, *A Generous Orthodoxy* (Zondervan, 2004), p. 145; also quoted in an interview with Jason Byassee, “New Kind of Christian: An Emergent Voice,” *Christian Century* (November 30, 2004): 29.
- ⁶ These concerns are raised by Alan Roxburgh, “Emergent Church: Filled with Creativer, Energetic Potential,” *Allelon Ministries* (June 15, 2005). See www.allelon.org/articles (accessed June 23, 2005).
- ⁷ Scott Bader-Sayre, “The Emergent Matrix: A New Kind of Church?” *The Christian Century* (November 30, 2004): 20-27; and Andy Crouch, “The Emergent Mystique,” *Christianity Today* (November 2004): 36-41.
- ⁸ Winner, quoted in Bader-Sayre, p. 26. Winner is author of the popular spiritual autobiography *Girl Meets God: A Memoir* (New York: Random House, 2002).
- ⁹ Lewis, “Christian Apologetics,” in *God in the Dock: Essays on Theology and Ethics*, ed. Walter Hooper (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1970), pp. 93-94.
- ¹⁰ Stephen M. Smith, “Awakening from the Enchantment of Worldliness: The Chronicles of Narnia as Pre-Apologetics,” in *The Pilgrim’s Guide: C.S. Lewis and the Art of Witness*, ed. David Mills (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), pp. 168-181.
- ¹¹ Regarding Lewis’s explicit evangelistic agenda, see especially his essay “Christianity and Culture,” in *Christain Reflections*, ed. Walter Hooper (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1967), pp. 12-36.
- ¹² Lewis, Magdalen College-Oxford, to Sister Penelope CSMV, 9 July (August) 1939, in *The Collected Letters of C.S. Lewis*, ed. Walter Hooper, vol. 2, *Books, Broadcasts, and the War, 1931-1949* (HarperSanFrancisco, 2004), pp. 262-3.
- ¹³ Lewis, “Sometimes Fairy Stories May Say Best What’s To Be Said,” in *Of Other Worlds: Essays and Stories*, comp. and with Preface by Walter Hooper (New York: Harvest Book-Harcourt, 1996/1994), p. 37.
- ¹⁴ Lewis, *Surprised by Joy: The Shape of My Early Life* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Co., 1955), 221. Some prominent examples from EC circles include: Gordon Lynch’s *Losing My Religion? Moving on From Evangelical Faith* (London: DLT, 2003); Dave Tomlinson’s *The Post-Evangelical* (El Cajon, CA: Emergent ys-Zondervan, 2003); Donald Miller, *Blue Like Jazz* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2003); and Brian McLaren, *Generous Orthodoxy* (Zondervan, 2004), esp. Chapter 9. For a helpful critical assessment of the deconversion phenomenon in contemporary evangelicalism, see Kurt A. Richardson, “Disorientations in Christian Belief: The Problem of De-traditionalization in the Postmodern Context,” in *The Challenge of Postmodernism: An Evangelical Engagement*, ed. David S. Dockery (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1995), pp. 53-56.
- ¹⁵ Louis Markos, *Lewis Agonistes: How C.S. Lewis Can Train Us to Wrestle with the Modern and Postmodern World* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2003), p. 139.
- ¹⁶ Lewis, “Transposition,” in *The Weight of Glory* (HarperSanFrancisco, 1949/1976, rev. 1980), pp. 98-99. Transposition, for Lewis, is not strictly a literary strategy, but rather a broad statement of principle regarding the analogous relations between the spiritual and natural or the higher and the lower realms. In Christian theology, Lewis referred to the sacramental as a more advanced instance of transposition (p. 102).
- ¹⁷ Charlie Peacock, *New Way to Be Human* (Colorado Springs: Shaw Books, 2004), p. 176; and McLaren, *Generous Orthodoxy*, pp. 150-151.
- ¹⁸ Lewis, *Miracles: A Preliminary Study* (New York: MacMillan, 1947/1960), pp. 111, 118-120.
- ¹⁹ Lewis, “Epilogue,” in *An Experiment in Criticism* (Cambridge UP, 1961), pp. 130, 139, 140.
- ²⁰ Lewis spoke of his own baptized imagination in his preface to *George MacDonald: An Anthology* (HarperSanFrancisco, 1946), p. xxxviii; see also *Surprised by Joy*, pp. 179-180.
- ²¹ The term ‘phenomenology’ is often used in the sense of Rudolf Otto’s notion of the *numinous*—the experience of ‘the holy’ aside from its moral or rational aspects. Lewis appreciated Otto’s phenomenological description of the universal or essential aspects of religious experience, but he also acquired a taste for philosophical phenomenology from the lingering neo-Hegelianism at Oxford University—especially that of T. H. Green (d. 1882), F. H. Bradley (d. 1924), and Bernard Bosanquet (d. 1923), all of whom were “mighty names” in Lewis’s intellectual formation. Their cumulative effect on Lewis was to

provide a door *into* Christianity; this according a letter he wrote to Paul Elmer More, 25 October 1934, in *The Collected Letters of C.S. Lewis*, p. 145. Green and Bradley, in particular, appropriated the venerable notion of sympathy into their modified Hegelianism as a mode of moral reasoning. It was also a more popular expression of ethical sentimentalism that influenced evangelical piety throughout the late 18th and nineteenth centuries. John MacCunn provides an introduction to Green's version of sympathy in a standard work that was contemporary with Lewis's philosophical studies; see *Six Radical Thinkers* (New York: Russell & Russell, 1910/1964), pp. 215-266. For a recent overview of Lewis's idealist phase, see David C. Downing, *The Most Reluctant Convert: C.S. Lewis's Journey to Faith* (InterVarsity Press, 2002), pp. 123-137.

²² Lewis, "The Language of Religion," in *Christian Reflections*, pp. 137-138. For a helpful survey of how Lewis accomplished this in his fictional works, see Kath Filmer-Davies, "Fantasy," in *Reading the Classics with C.S. Lewis*, ed. Thomas L. Martin (Baker Academic, 2000), pp. 285-296. Thus, in *The Narnia Chronicles*, we see how community forms through the mutuality and cooperation of siblings, each with their own distinctive roles and individualities, but also varying capacities of affection and friendship. We also see how the wicked witch Jadis seeks to destroy these sympathetic relations and, in the telling of the story, we find ourselves identifying with the struggle to resist and, sometimes, redeem the resulting brokenness. The Space Trilogy takes us further into the realm of human and social psychology, but, as Kath Filmer-Davies has observed, as much through an exploration of *inner* space, as *outer*. In *The Great Divorce*, we plunge into the dark world of human selfishness while, in Lewis's last novel, *Till We Have Faces*, we encounter the fundamental human tension between submission and control. In all of these works of fantasy, the immediate concern with interpersonal dynamics remains accessible to our (the reader's) sympathetic imagination. Accordingly, by the very act of "good reading" we are moving about in a world that is creatively designed to nudge us beyond the tiny sphere, if not prison, of our own self-interest.

²³ See, for example, Dan Devadatta, "Strangers but Not Strange: A New Mission Situation for the Church (I Peter 1:1-2 and 17-25)," in Craig Van Gelder, ed., *Confident Witness—Changing World: Rediscovering the Gospel in North America* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 110-124; James

Wm. McClendon, Jr., "The Practice of Community Formation," in Nancey Murphy, et al., *Virtues & Practices in the Christian tradition: Christian Ethics after MacIntyre* (Trinity Press, 1997), 85-110; and The Rutba House, ed., *School(s) for Conversion: 12 Marks of a New Monasticism* (Eugene, Oregon: CascadeBooks, 2005).

²⁴ Paul Roberts, "Considering Emerging Church," *Thinking Anglicans* (August 28, 2003). See www.thinkinganglicans.org.uk/archives/000129.html (accessed March 20, 2005).

²⁵ Lewis, *Miracles*, p. 131.