

**H**is reputation was mixed, for some he was thought to be outdated, populist, and theologically naïve, while others saw him as articulate, imaginative and both philosophically and theologically astute. November of 2013 will mark fifty years since the death of the famed and influential writer C.S. Lewis. Westminster Abbey in London will mark this anniversary with a memorial to be placed in “Poets Corner”. This is not to suggest that Lewis was a great poet but rather that his literary achievements are exceptional. With this anniversary on the horizon I have taken some time to dip again into the writings of this engaging and gifted author and to read a little about what others have said. What I find particularly interesting are his accounts concerning how we get at the truth about things.

From the early years of World War II through the 1950s Lewis was viewed as the foremost Christian apologist. Fundamental to his apologetic was a strong sense of the human condition. His considerable exposure to literature since early childhood provided sharpened intuition and exceptional wisdom about people. It was clear to Lewis that we are not the heroic self-sufficient individuals many would like to believe – but rather are

all bumbling mortals entangled by desire, uncertain how best to order our lives. For Lewis this kind of self-understanding was an important component in the process of discovering what is true.



When Lewis engaged in apologetics it was not an effort to demonstrate some set of creedal beliefs, these are secondary. He was less interested in the details than in the

*continued on page 4*



## Phil Irish's *Narnia Triptych*

A few years ago, I was welcomed into a creative project fueled by the imagination of C.S. Lewis. I was to paint a backdrop to augment the work of a symphony orchestra and a theatre company – all working together to stage *The Lion, The Witch and the Wardrobe*. In the collaborative process of creation, we discovered new riches in the classic tale. The painting was made in sections, in my studio, so that I could only see one sixth of the 15' x 30' work at a time. In a sense, I was immersed in the particularity of each part of the painting and unable to see the entire tale. Lewis sweeps us into a compelling mix of particularity and unknowing.

Lewis' tale is in no way a tract. How can one tell a Jesus story without being burdened by closed readings and pat answers? In Narnia, we find an imaginatively open terrain to encounter God afresh. The characters endear themselves to us, even as mythic images elicit metaphorical thinking. The plots, of course, command our investment in the tale. We are not fundamentally creatures of intellectual resolve. Rather, beneath our

clever ideas and ideals, we are creatures of desire. And our desires are formed by the stories in which we embed ourselves.

The Narnia Chronicles are tales of spiritual formation. Far from axiomatic coldness, the tales owe their warmth to Lewis' close observation of life's conflicted and contradictory experiences. Lewis pays attention to the nuanced world of experience, even as he plays with allegorical motifs and talking beavers. In this way, each of the children across the series is drawn into different aspects of the adventure of faith. In *The Horse and His Boy*, Aslan redirects excessive interest in other people's lives. "That is part of her story and I tell no one any story but his own." Perhaps, while delving into these books we begin to hear our own story whispered in a new and living way.

Part of the power of Lewis' imagination is that it welcomes, indeed generates, further imagination. This artist, the Kitchener Waterloo Symphony, and Lost and Found Theatre (launched under Imago) were honoured to be nourished by the generosity of his story.

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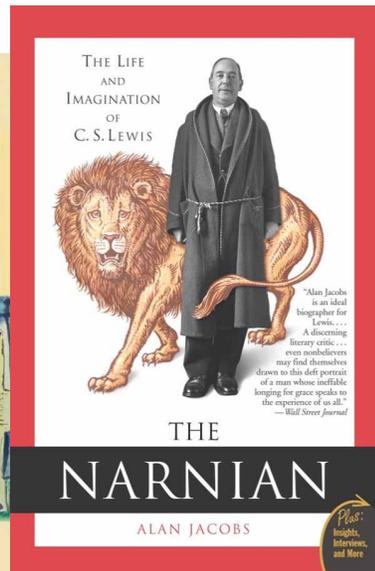
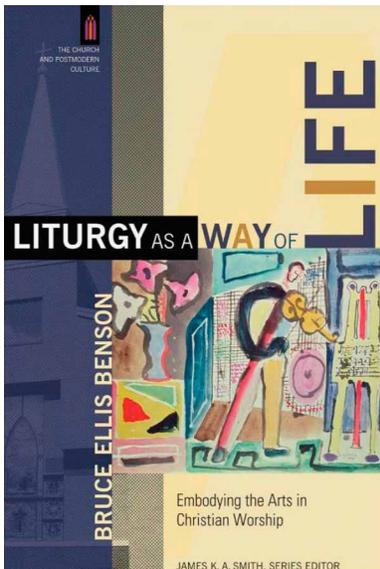
Bruce Ellis Benson, *Liturgy as a Way of Life: Embodying the Arts in Christian Worship*, Baker Academic, 2013. The Church and Postmodern Culture, Series editor James K. A. Smith

The subject of liturgy has been finding its way into current discussions on contemporary culture. This marks a shift from a focus on theory/idea/worldview to the more postmodern emphasis on practice/action/desire. Benson is a professor of philosophy at Wheaton College whose thinking is greatly indebted to Continental philosophy. Among the themes woven throughout this book are, seeing ourselves as a work of art, call and response and improvisation.

The author contends that “call and response” is fundamental to human existence and is intimately connected to goodness and beauty. Here he follows French philosopher Jean-Louis Chretien who reminds us that it is never “beauty for beauty’s sake” but always beauty that constitutes a call to something beyond itself. Benson is keen to move away from two popular notions, both

legacies of romanticism, the artist as genius and art as self-expression. For him art is a location for truth and conveys much more than the inner life of the artist. He takes up the ‘modern’ understanding of art and deconstructs it unmasking its weaknesses in order to prepare the ground for an alternative paradigm.

This work employs a broad brush with the intent to affirm the value of the arts and the invitation to a liturgical style that will touch all of life. It is a liturgy that is communal and hence the author’s attention to the improvising community of jazz musicians as an alternative to the romantic idea of the artistic genius. This is a book with plenty of insights about art and about the liturgical nature of life. He stretches our understanding of worship well beyond the narrow confines of Sunday morning and invites us to let that spirit permeate all of life. This is done with a clear conviction that art has a key role for both shaping and expressing the liturgy of life.



Alan Jacobs, *The Narnian: The Life and Imagination of C.S. Lewis*, HarperSanFrancisco, 2005

Though widely known for his writings on apologetics, less known for his academic work on medieval literature and his philosophical debates, Lewis is probably best known for his Chronicles of Narnia. Written between 1949 and 1955 these remarkable tales have captured the imaginations of young and old. When you think of it Lewis appears as an unlikely candidate to write a series such as the Narnia tales.

Jacobs, in this well researched work delves into the life of Lewis and tells a very personal story of the man and the shaping influences on his life. In reading this rich and perceptive biography you will learn a lot about Lewis. We catch a glimpse of his childhood and early schooling that provides a good sense of what it was that fed this fertile imagination while growing up. We also get glimpses of his spiritual journey from early acceptance of faith to outright rejection of Christianity and the strong and measured return to faith as an adult. You will get to meet his friends, (the Inklings and others) feel something of the struggles he faced and overcame and discover afresh the wisdom he offered in his writings.

Not surprisingly Jacobs gives considerable attention to what Lewis read and what he wrote. Reading and writing were a big part of his life and it is through this body of literature that one is better able to understand the man we have come to appreciate. Jacobs writes in an entertaining and very personal way never oversimplifying this complex figure while discerning the heart of the man who has given us so much to think about and to enjoy. The Narnian was a remarkable figure and if you are interested to get to know him it will be hard to do better than reading Jacobs book.

“...in regard to literature Harold Bloom has spoken of ‘the anxiety of influence’ – which is the desire to be new, fresh and original – jazz musicians would rather speak of ‘the joy of influence’. Bloom’s talk of ‘anxiety’ stems from the romantic paradigm of art... with its drive to be ‘original’. ...to carve out a place for oneself by overcoming the influence of previous artists, ...and thus distance oneself from the tradition. But jazz provides an entirely different model. As a jazz improviser, one becomes part of a community of improvisers. As an improviser one works with material that already exists rather than creating *ex nihilo*. As an improviser, one is aware of being wholly indebted to the past. As an improviser, one speaks in the name of others. As an improviser, one joins a conversation.”

(*Liturgy as a Way of Life*, p.93)





## James Elkins event

On May 23rd Imago hosted a lecture and conversation with renowned Art Historian James Elkins from The School of the Art Institute of Chicago. Elkins lecture held at the Jackman Hall in the Art Gallery of Ontario provided a glimpse of the landscape in relation to religion and art. He made it clear that there is an entrenched resistance to art that is religious to be found in the art-world. You would be hard pressed to find work that might be considered religious in magazines like ARTFORUM, museums and galleries of contemporary art or as a subject

taken up by art critics. Spirituality is acceptable, religion is not. One way to describe the tension is to note art in general is for aesthetic purposes while art that is religious is for religious or devotional purposes. So the latter is a different genre and should not have a place in the “art-world”.

The lines drawn are more fuzzy than clear and the conversation on this subject needs to continue. There are signs that the great gap between the art world and those who do their art against a backdrop of religious faith is being bridged. It fell to Imago’s Executive Director to offer a response. Here are a couple of observations made in that response.

Secularization theory became popular in the 1950’s – the claim runs something like this – “Historical development in the past two or three centuries has brought about a decline of religion and an increase of secularity – and there is good reason to believe that the secularization of society will continue and eventually religion will be a thing of the past.” I agree with Elkins that there are signs that secularization theory may be losing its grip. My hunch is that the “art world” is holding fast to the hope embedded in the

secularization theory – and is doing what it can to keep religion at bay.

Here is another way to express this reality – The discourse of art history and art criticism is shaped by thinking that excludes religious sensibility or theological interpretation. What the discourse allows is speaking about art in religious settings – or the artistic dimensions of religion. There is plenty of interest in the role of art in religious contexts. What the discourse is not able to do is to speak to the religious dimensions of art. There is no vocabulary, no interest, no inclination and indeed no mandate for the art historian or art critic – to probe, inquire about or articulate anything about religious sensibilities or theological interpretations of art.

Though what transpired that evening was not recorded an interview with Elkins took place in the same venue the afternoon before the lecture. Both the lecture and the interview were generously supported by Caritate Foundation. You may find that interview on YouTube – *An Imago Conversation – Religion and Contemporary Art* it is also on the Imago website <http://www.imago-arts.org>

## Flagship Gallery

The Semaphore Fellowship’s *Flagship Gallery*, which opened its doors this past June, on Hamilton’s James St. North has now reached its 4th exhibition, a children’s juried show *FACEMAKERS*, featuring amazing work in, wait for it...plasticine! Our gallery has received rave reviews for both its interior design and the quality of our members’ work. We

have been blessed with a very talented and diverse group of established artists, as well as some gifted art students and recent graduates. Thus far there has been a gallery launch group-show and two wonderful solo shows profiling the work of Jeanette Obbink (Paris, ON) and George Langbroek (St. Catherines).

For those of you who are not familiar with the James North art community, there is an Art Crawl the second Friday of every month. September 13, 14 is the date for SUPERCRAWL when 100,000 people are expected to descend on this 6 block stretch of art galleries, cafes, and studios over two days. Flagship Gallery will be mounting a group show of our members work, entitled *Let’s Pretend; Art Matters*.

The space we have is not just for displaying visual art. On September 12th, *Flagship* will host a panel discussion on the question: “Why Is Art Fundamental To Living?”, moderated by Chris Cuthill, that will include Calvin Seerveld and the arts faculty chairs of Redeemer University.

We hope many of you will come and enjoy our arts space, support our artists of faith, and help us celebrate the beauty of excellence in imagery. For more info call *Flagship Gallery* 905-577-8585 Wednesday to Friday, 12 to 5pm, later on Art Crawl evenings – 237 James St. North, L8R 2L2, [www.semaphore.ca](http://www.semaphore.ca)

James Tughan



## Upcoming Imago Evening

Thursday October 10, 2013 at Enoch Turner Schoolhouse

Joyce Gladwell, Author, *Brown Face Big Master*

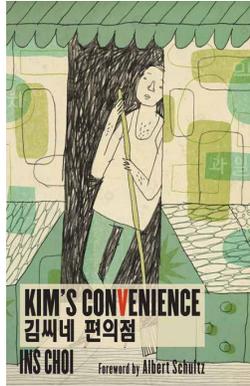
Joel Gordon and Ben Porter, *The Love Movement* goes to TV

Paul Neufeld – jazz piano

Rob Hengeveld – visual artist

Jeremy Zeyl – singer/songwriter

Admission Free – Reception to Follow



## Kim's Convenience by Ins Choi

After sell out runs at Soulpepper Theatre in Toronto, this engaging story of a Korean family whose life revolves around a convenience store, is now on the road.

Theatre Calgary, September 3 to 29, 2013

Ottawa's National Arts Centre English Theatre, January 22 to February 8, 2014

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## The famed C.S. Lewis

*continued from page 1*

overall vision. The analytic capacity of reason was only one tool in the box. In addition to reason Lewis attended to the reality of human longing and the gift of imagination. His efforts to argue in favour of Christian faith were not bound to rational argument. Lewis had far too fertile an imagination to feel fully at home in the flatland of rationality. He was intent on extending the borders of reason to include human desire and imagination.

In his autobiography *Surprised by Joy* Lewis succinctly articulates the dilemma he experienced in his own effort to understand the world. "The two hemispheres of my mind were in sharpest contrast: on the one side a many-islanded sea of poetry and myth; on the other a glib and shallow 'rationalism'." Reason as he speaks of it here, has the characteristic of insistence – allowing one only to accept what passes in reason's court while the poetic invites you into a less rigid more expansive world.

The subject of human longing (*Sehnsucht*) or desire played a key role for Lewis. He famously wrote: "If I find in myself a desire which no experience in this world can satisfy, the most probable explanation is that I was made for another world." There is a considerable literature on the subject of human longing much of it unrelated to religious sensibilities. But there is also Augustine's observation about the restless heart – unsettled until it finds its rest in God. One significant expression of longing is what Lewis calls Joy. There is no easy

definition of Joy but the experience serves as a pointer to the possibility that there is something more. Not so much a person as a place. Joy is to be distinguished from happiness or pleasure as these are within our power while Joy is not. Lest we think that Joy is a superficial matter we are told that it might almost equally be called a kind of unhappiness or grief. Further, Lewis writes: "Joy is distinct not only from pleasure in general but from even aesthetic pleasure. It must have the stab, the pang, the inconsolable longing."

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C.S. Lewis

Lewis did not feel fully at home in the house of reason as he could not ignore the draw of human longings and what they signaled about the limits of the natural world nor could he neglect the powerful presence and work of imagination. Apologetics is all too often about propositions and not often enough about meaning, value and identity. These more existential elements are better addressed through imagination. Only a small portion of the rich tapestry of human experience can be discerned through the

employment of reason. There is so much more to be discovered. Lewis was captivated by the compelling narrative of Christianity and its capacity to make the diversity of human experience meaningful. The Christian narrative is best grasped through the imagination which discerns the coherence and depth of the story. As Lewis notes "I believe the sun has risen not only because I see it but because by it I see everything else." In a similar way Christian faith is the light by which we shape our experience of the world into meaningful perspective.

Dipping again into the work of C S. Lewis has brought fresh understanding of his holistic approach to knowledge and faith. But I have also discovered that the land he occupies is a land familiar to Imago. Imago's founder Wilber Sutherland served on the Board of the C. S. Lewis Foundation and was well conversant with the thought of Lewis. My hunch is that the initiative that is called Imago has some debt to C. S. Lewis. Art is one important location to influence our desires and engage our imaginations – Christian faith is another. The coming together of these two is at the heart of the vision of Imago.

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