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## ***Pursuing an Earthly Spirituality: C.S. Lewis and Incarnational Faith*** **by Gary S. Selby**

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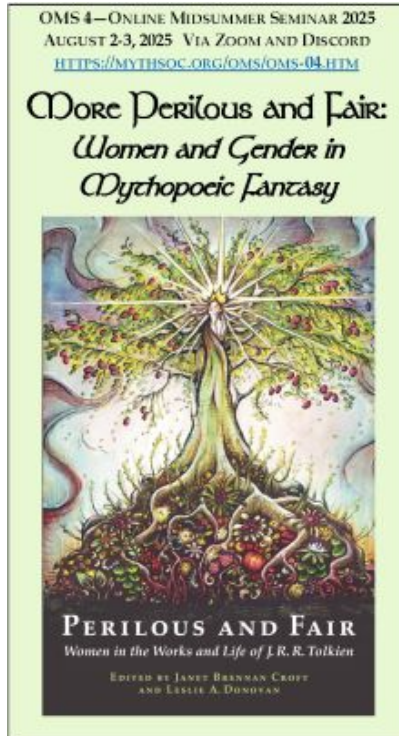
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### *Pursuing an Earthly Spirituality: C.S. Lewis and Incarnational Faith* by Gary S. Selby

#### Abstract

*Review of Pursuing an Earthly Spirituality: C.S. Lewis and Incarnational Faith, by Gary S. Selby.*

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was itself the *raison d'être* for the thesis paper." As a collection of essays, the meandering path towards this goal is littered with personal anecdotes. Here, finally at the last essay, the ingredients are brought together to make sense of the soup. And yet. We are as travelers at the train station, prepared for a voyage into the creative realms, only to be denied boarding in spite of having tickets in hand. For, in order to actually read the *Fantastic Travelogue*, we are instructed to click a link and be taken to another book that must be consumed as a separate experience. Rather like Baedeker's, the reader is left wanting the real thing.

—Sharon L. Bolding

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**PURSUING AN EARTHY SPIRITUALITY: C.S. LEWIS AND INCARNATIONAL FAITH.** Gary S. Selby. IVP Academic, 2019. 212 p. ISBN 9780830852369. \$24.00.

**I**N *LETTERS TO MALCOLM* (1964), C.S. LEWIS WRITES that in prayer, the “attempt is not to escape from space and time and from my creaturely situation as a subject facing objects. It is more modest: to re-awake the awareness of that situation. [...] This situation itself is, at every moment, a possible theophany” (111). In *Pursuing an Earthy Spirituality*, Gary S. Selby provides the first book-length treatment of Lewis’s embodied spirituality, seeking to revitalize contemporary faith through a renewed appreciation for that same “creaturely situation.”

*Earthy Spirituality*’s introduction juxtaposes the quality of Lewis’s educational experience with William T. Kirkpatrick—“red beef and strong beer”—and Selby’s own experiences of Christian spirituality, in which “the life of faith and earthly joy were locked in separate rooms” (2-3). *Pursuing an Earthy Spirituality* intends to both diagnose this tendency toward modern gnosticism (i.e., a harsh body/soul dualism coupled with an overwhelming emphasis on a disembodied spirituality) and, through Lewis, propose an antidote. Borrowing Lewis’s wording from the final chapter of *Miracles* (1947/1960), Selby defines this impoverished religiosity as “negative spirituality.” Accordingly, *Pursuing an Earthy Spirituality* “traces the theme of earthly spirituality” through Lewis’s

writings, exploring his embodied faith through an emphasis on consciousness and choice (9-10).

Selby begins not with the central importance of the Incarnation, but with joy; “An Inconsolable Secret: Our Longing for Joy” identifies Lewis’s moments of longing (*sehnsucht*) as God-given signs of grace. The second chapter, “Not Safe—But Good: God as the Glad Creator” continues Shelby’s effort to resolve the tension between joy and religion, drawing heavily on Lewis’s autobiographical *Surprised by Joy* (1955). Selby’s core argument comes fully to light in “This Bleak Fantasy: Negative Spirituality” — coincidentally, one of the book’s strongest chapters—in which he argues negative spirituality consists in three elements: 1) the elevation of sacrifice to an ultimate value, so that “self-deprivation for its own sake becomes a mark of Christian virtue”; 2) an intellectualization of faith which locates spirituality exclusively in the mind; and 3) a rejection of bodily, sensory pleasure (54-55). Drawing on Lewis’s introduction to *English Literature in the Sixteenth Century* (1954), Selby traces the roots of negative spirituality to the ascendancy of early modern science and begins to describe Lewis’s alternative to such disenchantment, drawing on works such as *Till We Have Faces* (1956) and *The Screwtape Letters* (1942).

Having established the importance of bodily experience, “A New Kind of Consciousness: The Alternative to Negative Spirituality” explores Lewis’s vision of spiritual formation as “centered in an expanding self-awareness and a consciousness of others, of the world, and of God” joined to an increasing sense of agency, “in which we choose the will of God in a way that is truly free” (95). Selby’s illustrations, drawn from *Perelandra* (1943), *The Horse and His Boy* (1954), and *The Magician’s Nephew* (1955) are especially poignant in this regard. Chapter five, “Very Far Inside: Spirituality and the Life of Virtue” embraces the latent pastoral quality of Selby’s prose, providing four practical applications drawn from *The Screwtape Letters*: “confronting debilitating emotions,” “nurturing appropriate ‘self-forgetfulness,’” “overcoming negative attitudes,” and “embracing compassion” (105-114). In providing a crucial counterpoint to the third chapter, “Retinas and Palates: Spirituality and the Earthly Life” proves another high point of the work, in which Selby finally contextualizes Lewis’s “earthy” proclivities within the doctrine of the Incarnation. While *Pursuing an Earthly Spirituality* consistently shies away from a discussion of the eucharist (or even an explicitly *sacramental* imagination), Selby nonetheless devotes a portion of the chapter to a theology of eating, centered around attention, gratitude and adoration, and self-control.

Drawing on Selby’s experiences teaching in a study abroad program in East Africa, “Those We Have Hitherto Avoided: Spirituality and the Other” focuses on the importance of embodied community vis-à-vis an extended discussion of *Out of the Silent Planet* (1938), highlighting the importance of

cultural accommodation marked by curiosity, empathy, and humility. As the book draws to a close, Selby turns his attention to Heaven; “The Beginning of All Things: Spirituality and the Life of Hope” couples a thoughtful reflection on Lewis’s sermon-cum-essay “Transposition” (1944/1949) with depictions of heaven in *The Great Divorce* (1945), *The Voyage of the “Dawn Treader”* (1952) and *The Last Battle* (1956). As with other chapters, Lewis’s non-fiction animates Shelby’s rich analysis, including passages from “The Weight of Glory” (1941), *Letters to Malcom*, and *Miracles*. *Pursuing an Earthy Spirituality* ends where it began: joy. In tracing joy “like a golden thread through all of Scripture” (11), Selby recounts biblical instances of joy, largely drawn from the books of the Jewish Old Testament.

Throughout *Pursuing an Earthy Spirituality*, Selby draws on a robust selection of Lewis’s published fiction and non-fiction, focusing largely on The Chronicles of Narnia, the Ransom Trilogy, and *The Screwtape Letters*, in addition to Lewis’s apologetic works (including the very welcome addition of traditionally less popular titles such as *Letters to Malcolm*). However, he is largely silent on Lewis’s letters or essays, with “The Weight of Glory” and “Transposition” offering two significant exceptions. Selby’s book will be transformational for highly conservative evangelicals who, like Bob Jones, may be scandalized that Lewis drank liquor and smoked a tobacco pipe. Yet *Pursuing an Earthy Spirituality* will also prove immensely valuable to Protestants who, like the young Lewis, struggle with the error of “measuring the success of our worship by the psychological state that it produces within us” (67). As poet Malcom Guite notes in his front-matter endorsement of the book, “[t]his is a much-needed book that will send people back to Lewis with new appreciation [and] encourage them to take a long hard look at some of our contemporary spirituality.” Yet Selby seems to have forgotten that *he himself* is “transposing” the works of a 20<sup>th</sup> century Anglican writer—and scholar of medieval and early modern literature, no less—for an American (and presumably evangelical) audience. While possibly attempting to avoid denominational difference in favor of a “mere Christianity,” Selby repeatedly misses opportunities to fully discuss the sacramental view of reality that hides between the lines of *Pursuing an Earthy Spirituality*, and likely should have provided additional structure to the book as a whole (scattered mentions of sacrament can be found on pages 7, 74, 144-145, and 158). Similarly, despite the book’s subtitle, the enduring significance of Christ’s Incarnation is not discussed at length until the sixth chapter. Selby also misses a parallel opportunity to acknowledge the significance of Lewis’s *medieval* imagination. For instance, Selby describes Ransom’s voyage through the cosmos in *Out of the Silent Planet* as Lewis’s effort to “re-enchant the universe [...] to recapture that sense [...] which had been lost in the modern view” (54) but fails to explain the revitalization of the premodern

view which Lewis himself describes in *The Discarded Image* (1964). Such an example also illustrates Selby's comparative neglect of other Lewis scholars—including, but not limited to, Robert Boenig's 2012 *C.S. Lewis & The Middle Ages* (Kent State UP).<sup>1</sup> Of course, one book can only do so much, and Selby well-accomplishes his goal to "trace the theme of earthy spirituality" in Lewis's body of writings. In drawing extensively from a rich well of personal experience and decades of teaching, Selby not only convincingly argues for the importance of our "creaturely situation," but also provides practical instruction on how to joyfully *live* an incarnational faith.

—Sarah O'Dell

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**THE LITERARY TAROT, THE LITERARY TAROT CLASSICS EDITION GUIDEBOOK, AND ORACLE'S ATLAS: A COMPANION TO THE LITERARY TAROT CLASSICS EDITION.** Brink Literacy Project, 2022. UPC 195893099603.

**B**RINK LITERACY PROJECT (<https://www.brinklit.org>) is a non-profit founded by Dani Hedlund to foster world literacy through education and community outreach, including the Frames Prison Program intended to help counter the low literacy rates of women in U.S. and U.K. prisons. It also offers mentorship and publishing opportunities for writers, such as a fifteen-week internship providing an introduction to many aspects of the industry. Much of the funding for the Project comes from an annual gala, a gala that was cancelled in 2020 because of the COVID-19 pandemic. Faced with the near immediate shut-down of their programs, Hedlund's decision to develop a Tarot deck funded on Kickstarter (<https://www.kickstarter.com/projects/brinklit/the-literary-tarot>)

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<sup>1</sup> See also Jason M. Baxter's *The Medieval Mind of C.S. Lewis*, published by IVP in 2022, several years after *Pursuing an Earthy Spirituality*.