

# THE 2024 ACNA ANNUAL THEOLOGICAL ESSAY CONTEST

Third Place Winner

Priest/Deacon

Baptizing the Imagination:  
The iMind and Christian Apologetics Today

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Wherever we go, if we're not looking at our smartphones, we see other people looking at their smartphones. We roll out of bed in the morning, and the first thing we do is pick up our phones. Although we know we shouldn't, we look at our phones while we drive to work. While we're at work, we look at our phones in our offices, at lunch, in the hall between meetings, and even during meetings. When we take our children for a walk in the park, all of us, parents and kids, are on our phones. We sit down to dinner at a nice restaurant with someone we love, and we take out our phones. We climb into bed at night after a long day, and we look at our phones one more time—just one more time. There are currently 4.88 billion smartphone users in the world, which is over 60 percent of the world's population.<sup>1</sup> That percentage is higher in North America and will only go up in the future. Smartphones are everywhere all the time, and we use them to do almost everything.<sup>2</sup>

If Christian apologetics is the effort to explain and defend the Christian faith to contemporary people, the pervasiveness of the smartphone today means that apologetics must address its effects on our thinking and culture. Any approach to apologetics that doesn't do so will be insufficient. In particular, Christian

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.bankmycell.com/blog/how-many-phones-are-in-the-world>

<sup>2</sup> The Apple App Store currently offers 1.8 million apps. See <https://www.apple.com/app-store>

apologetics must speak to the iMind, that is, the human mind that is now integrated with the internet through smartphone technology. In the following essay, I describe what I call the iMind and argue that imaginative apologetics is the approach that is best suited for the task of addressing it. Then I offer an example of imaginative apologetics from C. S. Lewis and conclude by reflecting on our calling as Christian apologists in the twenty-first century to baptize the imagination.

## 1. The iMind Today

Our pervasive dependence on smartphones has produced what Mary Swingle calls the iMind.<sup>3</sup> Like the iMac and the iPhone, the iMind is constantly connected to the *internet*, which has rewired how we think and live.<sup>4</sup> Of course, our technology has led to numerous advances in communication, information availability, and commerce, but it has also had many negative effects on our children and us, such as social deprivation, sleep deficits, attention fragmentation, and addiction, as well as unprecedented levels of depression and anxiety.<sup>5</sup> We need to do a better job of unplugging and recovering life-giving spiritual practices.<sup>6</sup> But Christian apologetics must address the minds people actually have and not the ones we wish they had.

The iMind is characterized by *immanence*, *insignificance*, and *isolation*.

First, people are connected in a human-to-human network and cut off from the

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<sup>3</sup> Although I develop it differently, I take this term from Mari K. Swingle, *i-Minds: How and Why Constant Connectivity is Rewiring Our Brains and What to Do About It*, 2nd ed. (Gabriola Island: New Society Publishers, 2019).

<sup>4</sup> When he introduced the iMac in 1998, Steve Jobs said the *i* stood for the following five words: internet, individual, instruct, inform, and inspire. Presumably, the iPhone, introduced in 2007, stands for the things today.

<sup>5</sup> For harms to Gen Z, see Jonathan Haidt, *The Anxious Generation: How the Great Rewiring of Childhood is Causing an Epidemic of Mental Illness* (New York: Penguin Press, 2024), 113–141.

<sup>6</sup> On the importance of spiritual practices, see Haidt, *Anxious Generation*, 199–218.

created world around them. This makes it seem like God isn't present or active. Second, people are reduced to the role of online consumers, whose highest goal is to indulge their desires, but that isn't the purpose of created and redeemed humanity. Third, a virtual network is a far cry from the true human community of family, friends, and the Church. It doesn't matter how many online followers one has: in the absence of embodied relationships, one is left feeling alone.

Perhaps the biggest obstacle to apologetics today is *indifference*. People are simply too distracted and busy looking at their phones to care much about ultimate questions like: Does God exist? Does my life have meaning? Is real community possible? However, the iMind is also *image-based*. This means that Christian apologetics can appeal to the imagination to break through indifference and to address the iMind's immanence, insignificance, and isolation.

## **2. Imaginative Apologetics: Preparing the Way**

In her book *Apologetics and the Christian Imagination*, Holly Ordway makes a strong case for the essential role of the imagination in the work of apologetics.<sup>7</sup> According to her, evangelism is the *invitation* to believe the good news of salvation through Jesus Christ (Matt 28:18–20), and apologetics is the *explanation* of the Christian faith so that people can understand it and appropriate it for themselves (1 Pet 3:15). Apologetics has both positive and negative functions. On the one hand, apologetics seeks to demonstrate the meaningfulness, beauty, and goodness of the Christian faith. On the other hand, it argues against doubts, objections, and

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<sup>7</sup> Holly Ordway, *Apologetics and the Christian Imagination: An Integrated Approach to Defending the Faith* (Steubenville: Emmaus Road Publishing, 2017). For other approaches to imaginative apologetics, see Andrew Davison, ed., *Imaginative Apologetics: Theology, Philosophy, and the Catholic Tradition* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2012); Justin Ariel Bailey, *Reimagining Apologetics: The Beauty of Faith in a Secular Age* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2020).

falsehoods that call the faith into question. We have two God-given mental faculties that make this possible. First, we use our imagination to form mental images that give meaning and coherence to our experiences. Second, we use our reason to think logically and to make judgments about what is true and false. Imagination and reason work together in human cognition, but imagination is dominant in the positive function of apologetics, and reason is dominant in the negative function. Therefore, Christian apologetics must seek to integrate imagination and reason.

To clarify further, Ordway offers the metaphor of a way or path.<sup>8</sup> Christian conversion is a journey of faith rather than a single event or decision. The evangelist invites people to begin their journey on this path, but the path may be overgrown with brush and blocked by rocks. The apologist prepares the way for people to walk in faith: imaginative apologetics is a tool for beautifying the path so that people can see it and desire to take it, and rational apologetics is a tool for removing obstacles so that people can continue their journey. All Christians are called to be apologists, and apologetics assists people both outside and inside the Church.

Past approaches to Christian apologetics have tended to focus on the use of reason to argue against objections to the faith. But that understanding of apologetics neglects the essential role of the imagination. God has given us both faculties, and both are necessary for apologetics. In past generations, apologists could assume that concepts like God, salvation, and the Church were meaningful to people. But in our post-Christian culture, we can no longer assume that. Instead, we need imaginative apologetics to make these concepts meaningful again before we can argue for them logically. As a result, imaginative apologetics should take a

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<sup>8</sup> Ordway, *Apologetics*, 12–15.

leading role today, breaking through apathy with vivid images of transcendence, significance, and community.<sup>9</sup>

### 3. C. S. Lewis's Baptized Imagination

When he was a young atheist, C. S. Lewis picked up a copy of George MacDonald's *Phantastes* in a train station.<sup>10</sup> The book is a fairy tale without any explicit Christian references, but it's saturated with God's implicit presence. In *Surprised by Joy*, Lewis describes reading that story as a major turning point in his life.<sup>11</sup> He writes, "That night my imagination was, in a certain sense, baptized; the rest of me, not unnaturally, took longer."<sup>12</sup> Although he was not yet a Christian, Lewis had embarked on a journey of conversion. He would go on to become the most influential Anglican apologist of the twentieth century. He wrote works of rational apologetics such as *Mere Christianity*,<sup>13</sup> but, like MacDonald, he also wrote fictional works of imaginative apologetics such as *The Chronicles of Narnia*. His stories have now baptized the imaginations of countless Christian converts (including my own).

I want to show how Lewis's book, *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, can function as an imaginative apologetic, developing the themes of divine

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<sup>9</sup> I take these three concepts from Kerry L. Dearborn, "The Baptized Imagination," *Inklings of Glory in Christian Reflection: A Series in Faith and Ethics* (2004): 11–20.

<sup>10</sup> George MacDonald, *Phantastes: A Faerie Romance* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 2000 [1858]).

<sup>11</sup> C. S. Lewis, *Surprised by Joy: The Shape of My Early Life* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1955), 178–181. Lewis first mentions this experience in his introduction to an anthology of MacDonald's writings: C. S. Lewis, ed., *George MacDonald: An Anthology* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1947), 20–22.

<sup>12</sup> Lewis, *Surprised by Joy*, 181.

<sup>13</sup> C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2001 [1952]).

transcendence, human significance, and true community.<sup>14</sup> The story may be familiar, but allow me a brief summary to set the stage. Four siblings—Peter, Susan, Edmund, and Lucy—are sent to live temporarily in an old house in the country. While there, they find their way into the magical land of Narnia through the wardrobe in a spare room. Narnia is a land of talking animals and fantastic creatures where it’s always winter because the White Witch has cast an evil spell over it. But the inhabitants await a time when the great lion Aslan will return from beyond the sea to break the Witch’s spell, bringing with him the spring thaw and installing four humans as virtuous rulers over Narnia.

First, Lewis explores the theme of transcendence with the character of Aslan. The first time the children hear his name, it has a strange effect on them.<sup>15</sup> Lewis describes the name like something in a dream that is both incomprehensible and profoundly meaningful, either terrifying or lovely beyond words, either making the entire dream a nightmare or an exceedingly beautiful experience. Each of the children has a different response to hearing the name: Edmund feels mysterious horror; Peter feels brave; Susan smells delicious aromas and hears delightful music; and Lucy feels like she is waking up at the beginning of summer vacation.

Second, Lewis affirms the significance of human life using the character of Edmund. When Edmund betrays his siblings to the White Witch, she has the right to execute him, but Aslan offers his life in Edmund’s place.<sup>16</sup> The monstrous servants of the Witch bind the lion with ropes, shave his mane, muzzle him, beat him, mock him, and spit on him. Then she kills him with a knife on the Stone Table. However, there’s a “deeper magic from before the dawn of time”: the

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<sup>14</sup> C. S. Lewis, *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2007 [1950]).

<sup>15</sup> Lewis, *The Lion*, 67–68.

<sup>16</sup> Lewis, *The Lion*, 145–163.

sacrifice of an innocent life causes death to work backwards. The Stone Table cracks, and Aslan returns from the dead. He is willing to suffer all of this because of his love for Edmund and so that all four children can rule as kings and queens in the palace of Cair Paravel.

Third, Lewis shows Aslan creating community around himself. Unlike the Witch, who treats everyone as a slave, Aslan, the true king, treats everyone as family and friends. The first time the children meet him, he is surrounded by a diverse crowd of creatures:<sup>17</sup> tree and water spirits playing stringed instruments, four great centaurs, a unicorn, a bull with the head of a man, a pelican, an eagle, and a large dog. Two leopards attend him, one carrying his crown and one bearing his standard. He immediately invites the children to feast with him in a wonderful pavilion of yellow silk under the banner of a red rampant lion.

In addition to being a wonderful story, *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* is also an effective work of imaginative apologetics. Without mentioning God or the cross of Jesus Christ or the Church, Lewis baptizes our imaginations. He breaks through our indifference and opens us up to the realities of divine transcendence, human significance, and true community. We begin to ask: Does a being like Aslan actually exist? Does my life have meaning like the children in the story? Is there a kingdom like Narnia in which great diversity finds true unity? In so doing, Lewis prepares the way for rational apologetics to provide evidence, arguments, and answers for the Christian faith. As twenty-first century apologists, we need to follow the example of Lewis by submitting our iMinds to baptism and by baptizing the imaginations of others with visual art of all kinds and image-rich poetry and stories.

#### **4. Conclusion: Baptizing the Imagination**

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<sup>17</sup> Lewis, *The Lion*, 125–126.

I've shown how pervasive smartphone use profoundly shapes human experience and culture today. This is true for non-Christians and Christians alike. Therefore, to explain and defend the Christian faith, we must address the internet-integrated iMind. Contemporary people suffer from a loss of divine transcendence, human significance, and true community. Without denying the importance of rational argument, I suggested that imaginative apologetics is the approach that best speaks to our rewired and image-based thinking. Then I offered an example of imaginative apologetics from C. S. Lewis's baptized imagination. Using the narrative images of the lion Aslan, the boy Edmund, and the diverse kingdom of Narnia, he explored the themes of transcendence, significance, and community.

In conclusion, I want to offer one more image to help us reflect on the vocation of the Christian apologist today—the biblical image of St. John the Baptist (Matt 3:1–12; Mark 1:2–8; Luke 3:1–20; John 1:19–34). Let me be clear that I'm not proposing that we follow John's example literally; rather, I'm suggesting that we take his ministry as a metaphor for our task of apologetics today. We baptize the imagination to “prepare the way” for the journey of conversion.<sup>18</sup> As apologists, we prepare a way for people to come to the Lord in faith, but we also prepare a way for the Lord to come to them in grace. Without the powerful descent of his Holy Spirit, our work will be in vain. Like John, we ultimately bear witness: “Behold, the Lamb of God” (John 1:29, 36).

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<sup>18</sup> The baptism of the imagination can take place before or after the Sacrament of Holy Baptism. Lewis had been baptized as an infant, but he considered himself an atheist at the time *Phantastes* baptized his imagination. For many adults today, baptism of the imagination will be necessary before they're willing to receive the Sacrament.