

Owen Barfield Rocks: Part Two – Idols and Idolatry



Theodore Strataletes
smashing idols

This is the second post in a series of three on Owen Barfield's book, *Saving Appearances: A Study in Idolatry*. There are two forms of idolatry according to Barfield. One we've addressed in the first post, (the idolatry of a thing, a thought, or a process that is not imagined to be participating in any life other than its own separate life). And then there is the narrower form of idolatry, which the Jewish religion attempted to eradicate as a foundational strategy of its own faith system. Effectively, and ironically, they anticipated the modernist agenda of the new atheists, in attempting eliminate all vestiges of original participation—and with no less vigilance. But unlike the atheists, this strategy was to direct the people away from the creation and toward the Creator.

“Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above or that is in

earth below or that is in the water under the earth”.

When this was written the Jewish nation was literally surrounded by cultures for whom these graven images formed the heart of their religion. More than this, who can say that they were not actually participating in them? Barfield claims that an “idol is an image on its way to becoming an object”. And idol worship is the “effective tendency to abstract the sense-content from the whole representation and seek that for its own sake”. For this writer, it is hard to justify the kind of terror that was enacted in the name of smashing the “idols” that constitute other people’s devotional forms, a terror that has been re-enacted throughout history, including in the Protestant revolution. One thinks of the Taliban destroying



the Buddhas of Bamiyam in 2001.

Yet Barfield believes that this zealous disdain for and smashing of idols was a service on behalf of the evolution of human consciousness. But to get to this understanding we need to appreciate the surprising connection with human memory.

Memory is the way that humans take the images or phenomena, and make them an inward experience. Memory, because it is enacted by self-conscious creatures, wrests things from an original participation. I am no longer one with the thing I see before me. I am differentiated sufficiently that I can now name these phenomena and internalize them. They no longer

have me. I have them. When I experience phenomena in memory, I make them "mine", not now by virtue of original participation, but by my own inner activity. It is from this activity in memory, that the human word, according to Aquinas, 'proceeds'". For once the phenomena are mine, I can reproduce them in the form of words.

As we were once created by the Word of G_d ("let there be"), so now the future is created by our words by using sacred imagination (imagination that is in coherence with the Divine Word). This is very close to what is involved for Barfield in the shift from original participation(to which there is no going back) to final participation. This brings us to the role of the Jewish nation in the evolution of consciousness, according to Barfield. I'll quote at some length. We will see that their zeal to rid the world of idols was grounded in their desire to refer all created things back to the Originating Source out of which the phenomenal world emerges. In doing so, they functioned on a collective level, much like the memory functions on an individual level.

"The place of the Jews in this history of Earth, that is of man as a whole, when we see the Children of Israel occupying in that history, which memory occupies in the composition of an individual man. The Jews, with their language trailing vestiges of the world's Creator and their special awareness of history, were the dawning memory of the human race. They too tore the phenomena from their setting of original participation, and made them inward, with intent to re-utter them from within as word. They cultivated the inwardness of the represented (G_d). They pinpointed participation to the Divine Name, the I Am spoken only from within, and it was the logic of their whole development that the cosmos of wisdom should henceforth have its perennial source, not without, behind the appearances, but within the consciousness of man; not in front of his senses and his figurations, but behind them."

Prior to the modern period everything was a manifestation or a “word” of G_d. Everything participated in or was participated by G_d. Theologically framed, just as the Word proceeded from the Father/Mother, yet remains one with it, so the human word proceeds from the memory, and is one with it. What was in the memory was a name, and the name was not arbitrary for the medieval mind. The name was the thing itself. “Thinking in act is the thing thought, in act”. Through that expression of nature that is the human being, nature uttered its own name—tree, sky, rock, badger, snow. And critically, in a theologian like Aquinas, these were also names of G_d. Matter emerged from the invisible, subtle realm of “form”, species from genera, body from soul, and all from the Great Mystery. On the other hand, the modern mind starts and ends with physicality, believing that because this is the way it appears to the senses and our instruments, that life emerged from matter, consciousness from life, and the whole shebang emerged from nada.

If idols are images on the way to becoming objects, we can see how the world before us in the 21st century is filled with them. Every doctrine that has lost its original aliveness and context becomes an idol. Every form of liturgy which is not infused with the living presence of Jesus (that is participating in Christ consciousness) is an idol. Every piece of music which is merely trendy and imitative is idolatrous. Our very thinking process is an idol when it simply defaults to dead and lifeless stories, but doesn't participate in the vibrancy and spontaneity of this moment. Scripture becomes an idol and the study of it idolatrous when it is taken either literally by fundamentalists, or is deconstructed and disconnected from its numinous source by biblical scholars. The self is in constant danger of become an idol, when it has



crystallized into predictable patterns, and lost the wildness of a participating consciousness. The self is also in constant danger of being exploited as an idol by a world that is increasingly reducing the human to a consumer. The sin of our age is literalism, the growing incapacity to see, and more importantly, feel, our connection to the Whole. When the self is abstracted from the milieu of life, it becomes little more than an observer of discrete objects and experiences, we become literalists—there is nothing behind or within the appearances. When we can no longer feel that we are being lived by the Whole, by the Originating Mystery, and that every experience is an invitation to respond spontaneously to this presence that is living us, we are in danger of becoming idols and idolaters.