

Mark Vernon, *A Secret History of Christianity: Jesus, the Last Inking, and the Evolution of Consciousness*. Alresford, Hampshire: Christian Alternative Books, 2019. xii + 211 pp. ISBN: 978-1-78904-194-1.

In 'Philology and the Incarnation', one his most provocative and theological essays, Owen Barfield describes the shock that a philologist might feel when investigating the mutations of meaning that occur in the history of our languages. Barfield's own etymological investigations led him to believe that the honest researcher would conclude that somewhere between Alexander the Great and Augustine of Hippo a powerful shift in the human comportment to language and meaning-making must have taken place. Barfield goes on to describe the surprise and delight that such an investigator would feel upon discovering that

at about the middle of the period which his investigation had marked off, a man was born who claimed to be the son of God, and to have come down from Heaven, that he spoke to his followers of 'the Father in me and I in you', that he told all those who stood around him that 'the kingdom of God is within you', and startled them, and strove to reverse the direction of their thought—for the word 'metanoia', which is translated 'repentance', also means a reversal of the direction of the mind—he startled them and strove to reverse the direction of their thought by assuring them that 'it is not that which cometh into a man which defileth him, but that which goeth out of him'.¹

Like Lewis and Tolkien, both of whom he deeply influenced, Barfield's Christianity was at the centre of his literary and scholarly work, but his faith has received far less attention than that of any of the other primary Inklings. For those interested in Barfield, then, the appearance of Mark Vernon's new eloquent, accessible, and richly stimulating work is cause to celebrate.

What kind of book is this? It is notable that Vernon's *A Secret History of Christianity* does not mention Barfield by name in its title or subtitle. This is fitting, for Vernon's volume is not a study of Barfield so much as it is an attempt to think with Barfield about the changing nature of faith in the light of what both Barfield and Vernon refer to as the 'evolution of consciousness'. It is also a surprisingly personal and even urgent book. Vernon states at the outset that this book is occasioned by a kind of crisis both within Christianity and within the West more generally. Where others might look to sociological, political, economic, or even philosophical reasons for the collapse of Christianity in precisely those cultures over which it once held such powerful sway, Vernon argues that we need attend equally to the interior, even mystical dimensions of this event. This is why Barfield and his vision of Christianity are so important

for Vernon's project: Barfield provides Vernon a way to think a living Christianity without collapsing it into either a dogmatic confessionalism and an extrinsic guarantee of salvation, on the one hand, or a liberal project for the amelioration of morals and the achievement of justice, on the other. This mystical, interior element is the secret aspect of the history that, with Barfield's help, Vernon recounts: a history of the transforming consciousness of human beings in their relationships to the world, one another, and God, a history whose centre point is found in the life of the one who was known as Son of Man and Son of God.

Readers of Barfield's *Saving the Appearances: A Study in Idolatry* will recognise much of that seminal work in Vernon's own book and in the above description. Indeed, one might be tempted to think of Vernon's *Secret History* as a commentary or even a continuation of *Saving the Appearances*. Vernon himself describes the project this way:

The aim of my secret history is to show how, through imaginatively engaging with him, as well as testing his ideas against the findings of recent scholarship, [Barfield] offers an invaluable diagnosis of the malaise of our times... . I believe his insights can help make sense of Christianity not only to those who faithfully, if somewhat uncertainly, still go to church, but also potentially to the many who increasingly recoil from it. (5–6)

This dual aim of imaginative engagement and rigorous testing in the face of contemporary scholarship characterises every chapter of Vernon's work, and, for those interested in Barfield, it is deeply rewarding. Throughout his varied corpus, Barfield had sketched an account of the Western evolution of consciousness that moved from original participation—an experience of being in which one is immersed and porous to a kind of sea of meaning proceeding from the world itself, a world that bestows enchantment but for that very reason also to some extent bondage—through a developing sense of personal interiority that eventually leads to a more pronounced conception of the self, including the dignity and freedom of human selfhood. The paradox of all of this is that the emancipatory achievement of a sense of human individuality and worth coincides with a scouring of the world of its own interiority and importance. The historical achievement of human dignity involves a kind of robbery in which the meaning of the world is exclusively concentrated in the privileged interiority of human selves. So we proceed from original participation through a middle period that Vernon calls 'reciprocal participation' to the alienation and putative, if not actual, disenchantments of modernity and our own epoch. But for both Barfield and Vernon, this is not a declension narrative, for the disenchantment we supposedly experience at present is only an epochal phenomenon, an episode along the way towards a renewal of participation that will reconcile our newfound sense of humane selfhood with the interiorities of

the world itself: this is what Barfield calls final participation, but Christians might speak of more traditionally as new creation or the redemption of all things (cf. Romans 8).

Following Barfield, Vernon recounts this same general story but does so with some markedly different emphases while also bringing Barfield's mid-twentieth-century scholarship into twenty-first-century conversations. The most notable difference lies in Vernon's treatment of the Greco-Roman lineage. Trained in ancient philosophy (as well as theology and physics), Vernon's easy familiarity with the primary sources here is evident and provides a far richer treatment of this period than Barfield ever did. Vernon's readings of Socrates and Plato through to antique Stoicism are deeply rewarding and worth the price of the book alone. Not only of interest to Barfieldians, Vernon provides a richly participatory account of these originary philosophical traditions as spiritual paths in their own right. However, where much of the contemporary retrieval of philosophy as a spiritual practice takes a muscular Stoic shape, Vernon's Barfieldian reading moves in a more Christian and grace-infused direction, thus providing a crucial corrective to one of the central ongoing debates in the history of philosophy today.

Vernon also updates Barfield's scriptural scholarship and convincingly shows how Barfield's theses have not only survived but have grown more salient and convincing throughout the decades. To my eyes, this is one area where Vernon could have, in fact, gone further, for he tends to draw largely upon authors associated with the so-called third quest for the historical Jesus, the heyday of which was in the 1990s. Vernon calls, for instance, upon John Meier, John Dominic Crossan, and others who flourished in the previous century, but his Barfieldian Christology might have been even more profoundly supported by what Crispin Fletcher-Louis has called the 'emerging consensus' of recent scholarship around the defence of an early high Christology à la Richard Bauckham, Larry Hurtado, and others. That said, Vernon's treatment of prehistory, early Hebrew and Greek sources, and the medieval period are profound and add depth to Barfield's own exploration of these periods. Vernon's account and naming of 'reciprocal participation' throughout the Middle Ages, for example, is richly illuminating and builds upon what Barfield only suggested.

The final chapters of Vernon's book deal with the elision of participation during the Reformation, the scientific revolution, and the reaction to these historical events. In comparison with the chapters on pre-modernity, these chapters feel rather rushed, as does Vernon's Romantic defence of a kind of mystical, imaginative renewal in the final chapter. Following Barfield, Vernon looks forward to a form of participation that would not abolish the individuality so delicately forged through the crucible of alienation. Vernon looks not for a return to a mystical past but for a properly mystical modernity or

postmodernity. However, one might wonder, what parts of modernity remain essential as contrasted with those that are merely epochal? It has something to do with selfhood, human dignity, and perhaps a measure of autonomy, but these are rather abstract guidelines. In a similar vein, we might wonder, what is the nature of the mysticism to which Barfield's vision and scholarship calls us? For that matter, what concrete practices and social transformations might lead us towards the renewed imaginative, participatory engagement with God and the world to which Vernon and Barfield are clearly inviting us? These are profound questions raised by Vernon's compelling book, and the fact that they remain unanswered is no criticism. Vernon and Barfield, I suspect, equally aim to lure their readers into an existential, spiritual, and intellectual engagement with the world that presents itself more as a mystery to be encountered than a solution to be codified. For his part, Barfield himself, in an interview given late in his life to Shirley Sugerman, speculated that it would likely take another fifty years before his work would bear the fruit he wished for it. This was in the early 1970s. The appearance of Vernon's rich volume half a century later suggests that on this point, as on so many others, Barfield was conspicuously prescient. If so, Vernon's works marks the beginning—but by no means the end—of the assimilation of the radical Christian vision of history that Owen Barfield bequeathed to us more than half a century ago.

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Note

1. Owen Barfield, *The Rediscovery of Meaning and Other Essays* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1977), 235.