

Karl Barth's Secular Parables*

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Abstract

In his *Church Dogmatics*, Karl Barth describes what he calls “secular parables,” cultural artifacts produced by non-Christians (or by Christians who are consciously or unconsciously avoiding overt Christian expression in their work) which embody or express truth. Barth provides theological and biblical reasons why Christians ought to be ready to pay attention to truth from such sources. He also indicates the potential usefulness for Christians in the study of these materials and clarifies the relationship between the truths recognizable in them and the truth of the Bible. His account of secular parables offers a useful pattern for Christian scholars engaged in the study of secular or non-Christian cultures.

KEYWORDS: Karl Barth, secular parables, truth, Christian scholarship

Introduction

At the Christian college which is my academic home, I regularly teach freshman and sophomore students in a course called Introduction to Literary Studies. As its title implies, the course is designed to introduce students to literary study as a profession, and, because I take the profession seriously, I require that students read a generous sampling of the short stories and poems available in the class anthology. This requirement almost always raises questions concerning the appropriateness and limits of Christian study of secular texts. Should Christians always avoid short stories like Kate Chopin's “The Storm,” with its apparent endorsement of adultery? Do the sexual jokes in Shakespeare's plays make them unsuitable for Christian consumption? What about some of John Donne's poems that engage in playful blasphemy? There are no simple one-size-fits-all answers to such questions, at least as I have come to understand them. Rather, they are likely to generate ongoing reflection in any reader who is trying to take seriously both her Christianity and the study of literature.

As I try to help students face these questions, I often find myself describing for them a term I learned from Karl Barth. Late in *Church Dogmatics*, Barth explains what he calls “secular parables” (1961, § 69, sec. 2). I like the term, which simultaneously points to non-churchly and edifying aspects of whatever these things are and which seems particularly suited as a description of texts, though Barth apparently also has in mind statues and symphonies. Secular parables are “true words” — sometimes actual words, but also other kinds of cultural artifacts — spoken (whether literally or metaphorically) from “outside the walls of the Church” (Barth uses the Latin phrase *extra muros ecclesiae*) which the Church ought to be expecting and ought to hear. In what follows I want to explain a little more fully, though at the risk of some oversimplification, what

Barth means and why I think the category is useful for Christians. I think it will become clear that my account is an appropriation; I want to borrow from Barth to suit my own purposes—though I'm pretty sure I'm applying his idea fairly.

Barth expects to find secular parables because he takes seriously the claim that Jesus is "the Light of Life" (this phrase is the title of subsection 2 of § 69). He examines this claim from several angles, but here is one fairly direct statement of the key idea which appeals to Jesus as the light of life:

If with the prophets and apostles we have our starting-point at His resurrection and therefore at His revelation as the One who was and is and will be; if we recognise and confess Him as the One who was and is and will be, then we recognise and confess that not we alone, nor the community which, following the prophets and apostles, believes in Him and loves Him and hopes in Him, but *de jure* all men and all creation derive from His cross, from the reconciliation accomplished in Him, and are ordained to be the theatre of His glory and therefore the recipients and bearers of His Word. In the very light of this narrower sphere of the Bible and the Church, we cannot possibly think that He cannot speak, and His speech cannot be attested, outside this sphere. (p. 117)

By borrowing Calvin's description of creation as the theatre of God's glory,ⁱ Barth means to suggest, I think, that human creativity (as an echo or mirror of God's creation and because God continues to work) will sometimes (though not always) bring truth to expression. It is only fair to admit that Calvin might have had some reservations about Barth's use of his phrase, yet Barth is not that far, in my judgment, from Calvin's acknowledgment (1960, 2.2.15) that when we find evidence of an understanding of truth or goodness "in secular writers," we should

let that admirable light of truth shining in them teach us that the mind of man, though fallen and perverted from its wholeness, is nevertheless clothed and ornamented with God's excellent gifts. If we regard the Spirit of God as the sole fountain of truth, we shall neither reject the truth itself, nor despise it wherever it shall appear, unless we wish to dishonor the Spirit of God (Calvin, 1960, p. 273).

Barth makes the point a little more aggressively by suggesting, not only that the Spirit of God is the source of all truth, but by calling even secular occurrences of truth by the name revelation. (With my students it sometimes helps to notice that his explanation also resembles the Neo-Calvinist understanding of "general revelation," though Barth seems to consider the Neo-Calvinist doctrine of general revelation as suspiciously like the "natural theology" which he rejects.) Barth thinks Christians ought to expect to discover secular parables precisely because God is graciously self-revealing. In order to explain this point, Barth revisits the doctrine of the Word of God which is the focusing topic of the first volume of *Church Dogmatics*. There Barth develops a threefold description of revelation. Most fundamentally, God is revealed in Jesus

Christ, the Word. The writings of the Old and New Testaments, in bearing witness to the primary word, Jesus, comprise the Word of God in a secondary sense.ⁱⁱ These texts are normative and authoritative for the Church and, as Barth makes clear, the assessment of secular parables involves comparing their implications with the Bible as the Church's authoritative norm.

On a third level the Word of God comes to expression in the preaching of the Bible in the Church. On this point Barth echoes the teaching of Reformers like Heinrich Bullinger, who in the *Second Helvetic Confession* famously declared that "*The Preaching of the Word of God Is the Word of God*" (in Cochrane, 1966, p. 225).ⁱⁱⁱ The fact that this third level of revelation has been received within the Reformed tradition is particularly helpful for me in appropriating the notion of secular parables, not only because my college belongs to this tradition, but also because this understanding of preaching opens a space for the recognition of a text as both the fallible product of human expression and somehow, also (in clearly limited ways) a product of revelation. In identifying the preaching of the Word of God with the Word of God itself, the Reformed tradition has not typically meant that the preacher is inspired in the same way that prophets and apostles were inspired. Rather, it has meant to point to the derivative authority of the sermon insofar as it remained a faithful expression of biblical truth for a particular time and place.^{iv} The category of secular parables similarly recognizes mixed texts, but at one more remove, so to speak, from the foundational revelation in Christ. This final remove is what makes them "secular," of the age rather than of the Church, spoken from outside the Church rather than inside.^v

Barth's expansion of his original threefold account of the Word of God to include a fourth "fold" orders these varieties of revelation on a continuum expressed in terms of distance from the source, nearer to further, inside to outside: from the Word who is so near to God that he is himself God, through the Word accommodated to human speech in the Bible, to the Word expressed for a particular time and place within the Church, and finally, with secular parables, to the Word expressed from a particular time and place outside the Church. Barth develops this near-to-far explanation a little further in distinguishing varieties of secular parables with respect to *how* secular they are. "If we are to be precise," he explains, "we must distinguish between a closer and a more distant periphery of this narrow sphere" — the sphere defined by Christ as center — "between a secularism which approximates to a pure and absolute form and another which is mixed and relative. From both, Jesus Christ can raise up extraordinary witnesses to speak true words of this very different order" (p. 118). Secular parables of the "mixed and relative" variety may be found

especially in what seems to be the common pattern in so many countries to-day of men who have been reached in some way by the Gospel in its biblical and churchly form, who have been affected by it to varying degrees, who have been influenced and determined by it in some measure, who have a certain deeper or more superficial acquaintance with it, and who either sincerely or not so sincerely accept it, or at least do not deny it, yet whose life as a whole [seems] impelled by its own laws and tendencies.^{vi} (pp. 119-120)

Perhaps Shakespeare's plays would fit into this subcategory of secular parable. Since they are not obviously churchly, the "secular" label fits, but even if Shakespeare was not personally (a biblical) Christian, his plays were clearly written by an inhabitant of Christendom. Ralph Wood (1988), in a study of twentieth-century writers of fiction, includes in this "partly secular" category several authors who have been more or less content to be identified as Christians: Flannery O'Connor, Walker Percy, John Updike, and Peter DeVries.

Barth is perhaps more intrigued by "a secularism which approximates to a pure and absolute form" made up of those who "stand unwittingly in full isolation from the Gospel in its biblical and churchly form" and who are likely to respond with hostility when they are confronted with the gospel (p. 118). "Yet we must not conclude too hastily that this constitutes a limit to the sovereignty of Jesus Christ and the power of His prophecy, so that true words are not to be expected on human lips in this sphere" (p. 119). Barth mentions as his only example of this type the mysterious prophet Balaam who, though hostile to the children of Israel, is used by the Spirit of God to speak true prophecy: "Even from the mouth of Balaam the well-known voice of the Good Shepherd may sound, and it is not to be ignored in spite of its sinister origin" (p. 119).

What I have just been saying explains what Barth means by "secular," but what does he mean by calling these cultural artifacts "parables" as well? In a brief description of Jesus' parables, Barth mentions several characteristics which are probably relevant. He notices, first, that Jesus tells stories that make use of ordinary, everyday scenes and events, but uses them in such a way that they point (metaphorically) beyond their surface meanings to something else. Each narrative is simultaneously "disclosing yet also concealing revelation" (p. 112).^{vii}

Perhaps secular parables also work by pointing to a reality beyond their surface fictive or creative character. The disclosing/concealing character of Jesus' parables means, secondly, that only "those to whom it is given to hear" will understand Jesus' parables. This feature of Jesus' parables surely also applies to secular parables. As Barth emphasizes later in the discussion, secular parables are not even for the whole Church, but will only be recognized in particular contexts where they carry some relevance for a particular subset of believers.

According to Barth, Jesus' parables characteristically bear "the mark of the extraordinary," and he seems to think that the same is true of "secular parables." He doesn't offer much explanation, but "extraordinary" as he applies it to parables points to whatever it is in them that makes us aware of something there beyond the bare tales they tell. Secular parables appear to be for Barth works which for some reason (perhaps in various ways) invite reflection. They raise questions about truth and, by so doing, invite readers to perceive more clearly or receive more fully biblical truth.

Barth nowhere names particular examples of secular parables. He does, however, describe some generic possibilities, and it will be worth quoting at some length to hear what he suggests:

One such true word may, e.g., speak of the goodness of the original creation, a second of its jeopardizing, a third of its liberation, a fourth of the future revelation of its glory. Each

does this authentically if and as and to the extent that what it says individually and specifically is only apparently and at a first hearing an abstraction, but really declares the goodness, peril, triumph and future glory of the divine work of creation which is enclosed in Jesus Christ...so that...it really declares the totality of this work.... (p. 123)

If I understand what Barth is suggesting here, then works by Stephen Jay Gould which relish the wonders of the natural world (what we have just seen Barth call “the goodness of the original creation,”) or a work like Rachel Carson’s *Silent Spring*, which focuses on the “jeopardizing” of the natural world, might be received as secular parables by Christians who recognize in them the Spirit’s call to praise God or to steward God’s creation—even though neither author wrote as a Christian or for a specifically Christian audience.

Barth continues with other examples:

Again, such a true word may speak of the psycho-physical or social determination of man, or of his defects, rights, or dignity, or perhaps of the forgiveness of his sins, or the marching orders which he is given, or the shadow of death under which he lives, or the joy in which he may live even under this shadow, and it does so authentically to the extent that the abstraction or isolation of what it says is only apparent, since each in its own way points beyond itself to that centre and totality, and therefore to Jesus Christ the true Son of Man.... (p. 123)

Would Kate Chopin’s “The Storm,” which I mentioned in my introduction, fit here? Though Chopin resists Christian moral assumptions, her story may properly evoke in Christians edifying reflection on the “social determination” of human beings, on their “defects, rights, or dignity,” perhaps even on their need for “forgiveness of...sins.” If the Spirit of God chooses to use the story, then it may be a secular parable.

Are there limits to the notion? Barth recognizes the potential for misusing the category. “It is obvious and understandable,” he admits, “that we should fear all kinds of lurking dangers which might overwhelm us if we listen to” secular parables. “These fears and suspicions may often prove to be justified” (p. 124). Hearing secular parables does not mean abandoning one’s commitments; on the contrary, it requires clear priorities. Barth identifies three tests which the Christian listener must bring to bear on a work when considering whether it fits the category. First, “we must always ask concerning its agreement with scripture...we should expect that, if it is a true word, its message will harmonise at some point with the whole context of the biblical message” (p. 126). Notice: “at some point.” Barth does not expect full agreement, but he does expect that listening to a secular parable will drive the listener back to scripture and that it will bring out more clearly *for her in her context* the relevance or significance or application of some scriptural truth.

Barth insists, secondly, that works which are really secular parables be brought into dialogue with the creeds and confessions of the church. Though the authority of these documents

is less than the authority of scripture, they express the understanding of the communion of saints (*communio sanctorum*). "If they [the secular works] lead to a breach with them [the creeds], they will show themselves to be false words" (p. 127). But the Church must really consider whether such words require it to address new issues that have not been addressed by earlier generations. As history unfolds, the Church may need to deal with social justice issues, for example, that never occurred to the fathers. It may happen that a word from outside will call the attention of the Church to some issue which it has overlooked, but which it must face. Finally, Christian listeners for secular parables must consider their fruits. This criterion for evaluation is inevitably ambiguous and relative. Nevertheless, it must be considered: "in all their relativity they acquire emphasis and significance by the fact that in them, too, the ruling hand of God and of His Christ is active and displayed" (p. 128).

What Barth calls his "final question" brings me to my conclusion. This question "concerns the right procedure in relation to such words, the right use to make of them if they impress themselves upon us as true words and show themselves to be such" as we question them with respect to their conformity with scripture and confession. "If and to the extent that they are true words," then the Church "must receive them...as a commentary on Holy Scripture which is the primary and proper source of all knowledge of the Christian life, as a corrective of the tradition of the Church, and as an impulse to its reformation" (p. 130).^{viii} If the Church must receive these words (and I am inclined to agree with Barth that it must, in the carefully qualified ways he has laid out), then there must be some who are committed to the Church and to the confessions of the Church who are also committed to listening for secular parables for the sake of the Church. There is a risk, admittedly, in such listening. But such risk-taking is work that may be done for the glory of God.

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ⁱ See Calvin (1960), 1.5.8; 1.6.2; 1.14.20; 2.6.1, 3.9.2, and elsewhere.

ⁱⁱ Although I have several important reservations about Barth's doctrine of inspiration, which I touch on when I mention his ideas in class, the weaknesses I perceive are not directly relevant to his treatment of secular parables, so I will ignore them here.

ⁱⁱⁱ See also *Church Dogmatics I/1*, p. 107, where Barth cites Luther to the same effect.

^{iv} There have been some, of course, who famously have failed to make this distinction—John Milton, for example, seems to consider his poetic inspiration as essentially the same in kind as the inspiration of prophets and apostles.

^v And it should be emphasized that Barth very firmly rejects any possibility of equating secular parables with the Bible; see especially his discussion on pages 133-135.

^{vi} My "seems" softens Barth's claim a little.

^{vii} This wording suggests interesting similarities with ideas in Martin Heidegger's work, especially in "The Origins of the Work of Art."

^{viii} Such a word may even prophetically call the Church to repentance; see p. 129.

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