

African religions as “parables of the Kingdom”? Karl Barth and Kwame Bediako on revelation and culture¹

Hartman, Tim

Columbia Theological Seminary, Georgia, USA
hartmant@ctsnet.edu

Abstract

This article engages Swiss theologian Karl Barth’s understanding of true words of revelation coming through cultural media (“parables of the Kingdom” in *Church Dogmatics* IV/3, §69.2) in juxtaposition with Ghanaian theologian Kwame Bediako’s understanding of African traditional religions as “evangelical preparation” for the Christian faith, claiming that since God has been active among Africans for millennia, Africans have been worshipping the same God as Christians. In contrast, Barth understands Jesus Christ to be prophetically proclaiming a message of good news that opposes many (Western) cultural assumptions. Barth’s understanding of Jesus Christ as the “Light of Life” serves to desacralize the Christian community and the Biblical Scriptures and collapses the categories of “sacred” and “profane.” Eliminating this binary categorization opens the possibility of affirming traditional African religions as media of revelation.

Keywords

Karl Barth; Kwame Bediako; divine revelation; culture; parables of the Kingdom; African traditional religions.

1. Introduction

The starting point for Barth’s reflections on revelation and culture is the incarnation of the Son of God in the human flesh of a Jewish Nazarene,

1 For a more extensive engagement with the thought of Bediako and Barth, see my forthcoming book *Theology After Colonization: Kwame Bediako, Karl Barth, and the future of theological reflection* (South Bend, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 2019).

Jesus Christ. In this consideration of revelation and culture, I will analyse *Church Dogmatics* IV/3, §69.2 – “The Light of Life,” by asking the question: what does it mean that revelation takes place in non-religious parables? And more specifically, could African traditional religions be considered parables of the kingdom?

Barth’s understanding of how revelation occurs, that is, God’s self-revelation in Jesus Christ, is very particular. Revelation is always mediated in specific cultural forms, most notably in the person of Jesus of Nazareth. Barth went to great lengths, particularly in *Church Dogmatics* IV/1, to stress Jesus’ Jewishness. For Barth this emphasis underlined both that Jesus is human and, more specifically, that Jesus possessed a specific ethnic identity, like all humans, that located him within God’s chosen people of Israel, not some sort of generic human essence. The revelation of God that took place in Jesus Christ occurred within and through the Jewish culture of first-century Palestine. The incarnation encompassed a particular culture and history.

By extension, one might say that all ongoing revelation through the prophetic activity of Jesus Christ must also take cultural forms. In *Church Dogmatics* IV/3, §69.2, Barth discussed “true words” and “parables of the kingdom” as two forms of revelation God uses today. Certainly, revelation is *always* in Christ, by Christ, and from Christ. But revelation is not restricted to the Bible and the Christian community. Barth defined true words as follows: “true words, i.e., words which, whatever their subjective presuppositions, stand objectively in a supremely direct relationship with the one true Word, which are not exhausted by what they are in themselves, which may even speak against themselves, but which are laid upon their lips by the one true Word, by Jesus Christ, who is their Sovereign too” (IV/3, 125).² While it may appear that Barth views true words as an overcoming of culture, I read Barth as valuing cultural forms, including language, preserving their authenticity, while filling them with additional meaning as “true words”.

In the end, Barth saw a “positive relationship” between “the light of life [and] the lights” (IV/3, 165). Jesus Christ was, is, and will be the light of life

2 Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, vol. IV, part 3 (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1961). All additional citations of the *Church Dogmatics* will be given parenthetically in the body of the essay.

(IV/3, 135). All lesser lights are not deemed “revelation” because “no faith is needed to grasp them” (IV/3, 143), implying that the human reception of revelation is a matter of faith. Meanwhile, the “world as such can produce no parables of the kingdom of heaven” (IV/3, 143). Only God can ordain creaturely media to (temporarily) serve as vehicles for divine self-revelation. Therefore, creaturely truths are only partial truths (IV/3, 159), the lesser lights cannot replace the *one* light of God’s self-revelation (IV/3, 153), and the little lights are integrated into the one great light (IV/3, 156).

Barth used the concept of “parables of the kingdom,” sometimes translated as “parables of the kingdom of heaven,” to explain the relationship of the Light (Jesus Christ) to the lights, in the best-known section of *Church Dogmatics* IV/3, paragraph §69 (IV/3, 114–135). In contrast to the lack of scholarly attention paid to the bulk of §69 and to Barth’s treatment of Christ as prophet, Barth’s “parables of the kingdom” have received careful scholarly treatment, most significantly as “Secular Parables of the Truth” by George Hunsinger in his Epilogue to *How to Read Karl Barth*.³

The parables of the kingdom that Barth described in §69.2 are not “secular” *per se*; it is rather that they occur “in the secular sphere” (IV/3, 117). Hunsinger’s exposition seeks to correct a misperception that Barth’s “exclusivist Christology is incompatible with recognizing truth (i.e. theological truth) in non-Christian sources and writers.”⁴ In doing so, he helpfully demonstrates how these “secondary forms of the one Word of God” outside of the scriptures or the Church, drive the community back to the scriptures.⁵ *Pace* Hunsinger, I do not believe that the qualifier “secular” helpfully captures the significance of Barth’s claims about the parables

3 George Hunsinger, *How to Read Karl Barth* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 234–280. See also: Glenn A. Chestnutt, *Challenging the Stereotype: the Theology of Karl Barth as a Resource for Inter-religious Encounter In a European Context* (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2010), esp. chapters 3 and 4; Geoff Thompson, “‘As open to the world as any theologian could be . . .’: Karl Barth’s Account of Extra–Ecclesial Truth and Its Value to Christianity’s Encounter with Other Religious Traditions” (PhD thesis, University of Cambridge, 1995); Geoff Thompson, “Religious Diversity, Christian Doctrine and Karl Barth,” *International Journal of Systematic Theology*, 8, no. 1 (January 2006): 3–24; and Tom Greggs, *Theology Against Religion: Constructive Dialogues with Bonhoeffer and Barth* (New York: Continuum, 2011), esp. chapter 4, 74–98.

4 Hunsinger, *How to Read Karl Barth*, 235.

5 Hunsinger, *How to Read Karl Barth*, 255.

of the kingdom of heaven in §69.2. In fact, in Barth's *Dogmatics*, there is only one mention of a "secular parable" (IV/3, 115). Hunsinger imports the sacred/secular dualism without sufficient textual support from Barth's work. His reading seems to suggest that Barth distinguishes between the "secular" and the "holy." While the significance of Barth's "parables of the Kingdom" is certainly that God's revelation occurs *outside* the Bible or the Church, calling everything outside the Church "secular" is obstructive and possibly even pejorative. Barth's word translated here as "secular" means all that is profane, that is common or ordinary. "Secular," here, describes *where* the parables occur (outside the Christian community), *not* the character of the parables themselves. The imagery Barth employed then encourages Christians to "eavesdrop in the world at large" (IV/3, 117) to hear true words that are not directly addressed to the Christian community yet may be beneficial to hear.

Appealing to the parable in John 10, Barth suggest that one "hears the voice of the Good Shepherd" in parables of the Kingdom (IV/3, 117).⁶ Barth's central claim had to do with God's sovereignty in revelation. God's self-revelation through the prophetic activity of Jesus Christ can happen anywhere, not simply within the walls of the church or only through previously sanctioned mediums or oracles. Barth was diminishing the force of the distinction between the church and the world, the so-called sacred and secular – not intensifying the distinction as Hunsinger risks doing. Specifically, Barth is simultaneously trying to disrupt those Christians who have become comfortable and complacent within European Protestant culture while opening the possibility of the work toward political justice for peace, for the poor, etc., being done by socialists and other left-leaning activists, as the work of God's kingdom.⁷ The parables of the kingdom then, are not secular in and of themselves but instead underline that parables can still happen today. This is a claim about the ongoing nature of Christ's prophetic activity.

Barth used "parables of the Kingdom" only twice in his *Dogmatics* outside of IV/3, §69, both in IV/2. The first, in §64, to refers to the parables Jesus

6 See also Barth's discussion of John 10 a bit earlier in §69.2: *Church Dogmatics*, IV/3, 95.

7 Clifford J. Green, *Karl Barth: Theologian of Freedom* (San Francisco, CA: Collins, 1989), 43.

told in the synoptic gospels about practices of the kingdom of heaven (IV/2, 174). The second usage is in §67: where Barth referred to “the synoptic parables of the kingdom.” (IV/2, 657). The other ten uses of parables of the kingdom (of heaven) in the *Church Dogmatics* all appear in §69.2.⁸

Outside of the *Dogmatics* there are three uses that shed additional light on Barth’s use and understanding of the term – in Barth’s teaching on the Heidelberg Catechism (1948), in his tribute to Mozart (1956), and in *The Christian Life* (1962), as well as two less direct uses.⁹ The first use appeared in 1948 (in the midst of the writing of Church Dogmatics III: The Doctrine of Creation), in the publication of Barth’s teaching on the Heidelberg Catechism. In response to Question 28: What advantage comes from acknowledging God’s creation and providence? An advantage Barth described was patience, based in “the fact that God will act in his good time, which does not despair when it sees no parables of the kingdom of heaven.”¹⁰ Here in 1948, Barth was already deploying, a decade prior to the composition of §69.2, the category of “parables of the kingdom of heaven.” Barth may have borrowed the language itself from C.H. Dodd’s book *The Parables of the Kingdom* that Barth alluded to in a letter to the French Jesuit theologian Jean Daniélou in October 1948.¹¹ This usage in his commentary on the catechism pointed to how parables of the kingdom of heaven can

8 See *Church Dogmatics* IV/3, 114 x2; 117 x2; 120; 122; 125; 128; 130; and 143.

9 Barth speaks of some New Testament parables (the Lost Son and the Good Samaritan) as parables of the Kingdom in his 1956 lecture on the humanity of God (See Karl Barth, *The Humanity of God* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1960), 51). Earlier, Barth had spoken about theological beliefs translated into political terms as “examples of parables, analogies and corollaries of the Kingdom of God” in his 1946 lecture on “The Christian Community and the Civil Community, §27” in *Karl Barth: Theologian of Freedom*, 289.

10 Translated from *Die christliche Lehre nach dem Heidelberger Katechismus* (Zollikon–Zürich: Evangelischer Verlag A.G., 1948) by Shirley Guthrie in Karl Barth, *Learning Jesus Christ through the Heidelberg Catechism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964), 62–63, emphasis added.

11 Barth cited this book as C.H. Dodd, *The Parables of the Kingdom* (London, 1935) in Karl Barth, “12 Gespräch mit Vertretern der Herrnhuter Brüdergemeinde (12.10.1960)” in *Karl Barth Gesamtausgabe: Gespräche 1959–1962* (GA IV/25), ed. Eberhard Busch (Zürich: Theologischer Verlag Zürich, 1995), 146. See also, Karl Barth, “An Prof. Dr. Jean Daniélou S.J., Paris, 1948,” in *Offene Briefe 1945–1968* (GA V.15), ed. Diether Koch (Zürich: Theologischer Verlag Zürich, 1984), 169. Barth and Willem Visser’t Hooft also corresponded about Dodd’s work both in 1948 and 1957.

provide hope to a community of faith where God is at work in spite of the present adversity they are facing.

One of the highlights of Barth's career was the opportunity to offer a public tribute to Mozart at the Music Hall in Basel on January 29, 1956, the 200th anniversary of Mozart's birth, which he called "Mozart's Freedom."¹² Near the end of his speech, Barth came very close to naming Mozart's music as a parable of the Kingdom. These are his words: "How can I as an evangelical Christian and theologian proclaim Mozart? After all he was so Catholic, even a Freemason, and for the rest no more than a musician, albeit a complete one. He who has ears has certainly heard."¹³ Barth continued with a nod to his critics and those who might be wary of hearing the voice of God in Mozart's music: "May I ask all those others who may be shaking their heads in astonishment and anxiety to be content for the moment with the general reminder that the New Testament speaks not only of the kingdom of heaven but also of *parables* of the kingdom of heaven?"¹⁴ Barth was hinting that God in Jesus Christ divinely proclaims and reveals an analogy of who God is through Mozart's compositions (IV/3, 73).¹⁵ That is, the distinction between the kingdom of heaven itself and *parables* of the kingdom helpfully differentiates between the sign and the thing signified.¹⁶

-
- 12 Karl Barth, *Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986[1956]), 43–60.
 - 13 Karl Barth, "Mozart's Freedom," in *Mozart*, 56–57. For the German see: Karl Barth, "Mozarts Freiheit," in *Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart* (Zürich: Theologischer Verlag, 1982), 43; Barth's emphasis.
 - 14 Karl Barth, "Mozart's Freedom," *Mozart*, 57, Barth's emphasis. Barth quipped: "There are probably very few theologians' studies in which the pictures of Calvin and Mozart and of Calvin are to be seen hanging next to each other and at the same height." in Karl Barth, *How I Changed My Mind* (Richmond, VA: John Knox Press, 1966), 72.
 - 15 Barth is said to have owned vinyl records of every piece of Mozart's work that had been recorded and fell asleep and was awakened to Mozart's music as well. Barth "died peacefully sometime in the middle of the night [from 9–10 December 1968]. He lay there as asleep, with his hands gently folded from his evening prayers. So, his wife found him in the morning, while in the background a record was playing the Mozart with which she had wanted to waken him" (Eberhard Busch, *Karl Barth: His Life from Letters and Autobiographical Texts* (Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 2005), 498–499).
 - 16 Busch referred to the beginning of Barth's work on IV/3, §69, in 1956 as "a happy coincidence that while Barth was preoccupied with Mozart in this way, his Dogmatics lectures (from the beginning of the winter semester he had begun on the material for a new volume, IV/3) were an extended and thoroughgoing discussion of the theological problem of the 'parables of the kingdom of heaven' in the human and earthly realm" (Busch, *Karl Barth*, 410).

The parables point to the kingdom, but are not the kingdom itself. For Barth, Mozart's music was the epitome of the good that Western culture could offer, whereas religion was a hindrance to the gospel of Jesus Christ. In this way, Barth differentiated between his understandings of religion and culture.

Barth's final use of the phrase "parables of the kingdom" appeared in the posthumously published *The Christian Life*.¹⁷ Barth asked: "When we meet outspoken children of the world, and read expressly secular literature, do we not sometimes at least, quite unexpectedly and to our shame, get the impression that God the Creator does not contradict the contradiction of his creature for nothing?" (TCL, 121–2). While being careful to avoid any twinge of natural theology, Barth could not help but "not[e] that Jesus obviously in his addresses ... found very worldly (profane) processes and relations apt and worthy for use as parables of the kingdom of heaven" (TCL, 121–2). This commentary on IV/3 that Barth provided in §77.2, highlighted the main point of §69.2: the revealing of veiled knowledge of God in so-called worldly forms outside the church or the Bible.¹⁸ The source and content of this revelation is the Word of God, Jesus Christ. Barth named these "processes and relations ... parables of the kingdom of heaven" (TCL, 122). Barth's late claim, by *Church Dogmatics* IV/3 and *The Christian Life*, was that God used contemporary images (i.e., updated and contextualized from the Sower and the Seed, or other parables in the Bible) to reveal who God is.

Always for Barth, Jesus Christ is the source of revelation; otherwise, words or a parable are not "true words," not God's self-revelation. Barth was quite clear that listening for the distinct sound of the Word of God in the secular sphere is *not* "natural theology" (TCL, 121–2, and IV/3, 117). As opposed to a "natural theology" that allegedly enables a degree of knowledge about who God is to Christians and non-Christians alike, the audience of Barth's parables of the kingdom is those who already have faith in Christ. Barth

17 Karl Barth, *The Christian Life: Church Dogmatics IV.4, Lecture Fragments*, eds. Hans-Anton Drewes and Eberhard Jüngel, trans. Geoffrey Bromiley (London: T&T Clark, 2004). Abbreviated as TCL for parenthetical citations within the text.

18 John Webster described §77.2 as "an especially important commentary on CD IV/3," in John Webster, "Eloquent and Radiant," *Barth's Moral Theology: Human Action in Barth's Thought* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 141.

expresses the relationship this way: “In sum, the New Testament parables are as it were the prototype of the order in which there can be other true words alongside the one Word of God, created and determined by it, exactly corresponding to it, fully serving it and therefore enjoying its power and authority” (IV/3, 113). Similar to the parables of Jesus in the New Testament, the message, the truth, of the parables of the kingdom is for those with “ears to hear” (Mk 4:9, 23).¹⁹ At the same time, these parables of the kingdom truly offer, “attestations of the self-impartation [of God],” not “only abstract impartations” (IV/3, 117). The truth(s) that is imparted is real, not abstract, and personal, not formal. Certainly, these “attestations” must “be materially tested by and compared with this witness ... present in Scripture” (IV/3, 117). In these parables of the kingdom, unlike natural theology: “We do not leave the sure ground of Christology” (IV/3, 117). Barth appealed to Christ’s sovereignty in his resurrection whose witness is “not restricted” to the Bible and the Church (IV/3, 118).

The unrestricted nature of the freedom of God in Jesus Christ to reveal God is the central meaning of Barth’s parables of the kingdom. He states his argument succinctly: “Our thesis is simply that the capacity of Jesus Christ to create these human witnesses is not restricted to His working on and in prophets and apostles and what is thus made possible and actual in His community. His capacity transcends the limits of this sphere” (IV/3, 118). The significance of Christ’s unrestricted revelation is that it can (and does) make other women and men into “His witnesses, speaking words which can be seriously called true” (IV/3, 118). The revelation of God in Jesus Christ is not merely informative but is transformative. The words, indeed the very lives, of ordinary human beings are transformed by the living Word of God to be God’s witnesses in the “wider sphere” (IV/3, 118).

2. “Secular” and “periphery”

In making his argument concerning the parables of the Kingdom, Barth seeks to minimize, if not eliminate, the sacred-secular dichotomy, or rather to prevent it from having any kind of traction. Instead of neatly demarcated boundaries, the world is in the church and the church is in the world. While

19 See Barth’s discussion of these texts in IV/3, 112.

there is “a pure and absolute form” (IV/3, 118) of secularism, there is also “a world of mixed and relative secularism” (IV/3, 121). What this meant for Barth was that “there is no secular sphere” (IV/3, 119, emphasis added) that has been abandoned by God. To make such a claim would both limit the power and scope of the resurrection and inhibit one from recognizing the voice of God in the world. For Barth, humans must “be prepared at any time for true words even from what seem to be the darkest places. 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” (IV/3, 119). Regardless of the appearance or form of the witness or what appears to be “the darkest places,” God in Jesus Christ can and does speak true words of revelation.

The revelation of God in Jesus Christ pervades the entire worldly sphere. Barth developed his imagery of the sphere with Jesus Christ as the centre of the circle that constitutes a periphery in order to assert the in-breaking of God’s kingdom into human existence. God’s prophetic self-revelation in “true words ... pierce the secularism of the worldly life surrounding it in closer or more distant proximity” (IV/3, 122). This passage reaffirmed Barth’s point that revelation that occurs through human words comes from and has its origin in the one, solitary Word of God. He wrote, “All human words can be true only as [the Word’s] genuine witnesses and attestations” (IV/3, 122). Further, this indirect revelation is partial and incomplete. Nonetheless this revelation has the power to “pierce the secularism of worldly life” (IV/3, 122) both in its ‘pure’ and “mixed” forms. The witness of revelation defines the secularism as secularism, categorizes it as pure or mixed, and constitutes the sphere of divine-human relating by providing its centre.

Though the periphery represents the “secular,” even there, the revelation of God in Jesus Christ is present. Barth continued, true words are “genuine witnesses and attestations of the one true Word, real parables of the kingdom of heaven, if ... the centre and therefore the whole of the periphery, i.e., Jesus Christ Himself, declares Himself in them” (IV/3, 122–123). While the parables of the kingdom are found on the periphery, not in the centre, they contain and convey the same Word of God as constitutes the centre because they are products of Christ’s self-revelation. These parables communicate true words and are “true segments of the periphery” and their role is to “point to the whole” (IV/3, 123).

The significance, again, is that “Jesus Christ Himself, declares Himself” in the whole – the centre *and* the periphery. Since Jesus Christ himself is present in the periphery as well as the centre, then the true words, the parables of the kingdom, “do not express partial truths, for the one truth of Jesus Christ is indivisible. Yet they express the one and total truth from a particular angle, and to that extent only implicitly and not explicitly in its unity and totality” (IV/3, 123). Barth reaffirmed that Jesus Christ is *THE* Light of Life; there is only *one* truth, not multiple truths. He wrote, “they manifest the one light of the one truth with what is from one standpoint a particular refraction which as such is still a faithful reflection of it as the one light” (IV/3, 123). Yet, even though revelation through true words and parables of the kingdom is incomplete (meaning that it does not present the whole picture) the truth that the periphery conveys is not partial, for – to express it tautologically – the truth is entirely true. Barth demonstrated that revelation is *ongoing* through the prophetic activity of Christ.

Hunsinger helpfully articulated the relationship between the centre and the periphery: “whereas the truth of the periphery imparts itself to the centre by participating in and manifesting the totality which the centre has established, the truth of the centre imparts itself to the periphery by filling it and endowing it, at each and every point, with the fullness of uncreated light.”²⁰ Hunsinger rightfully claims that, “Barth’s controlling metaphor was not creation but resurrection.”²¹

The Light of Christ fills and penetrates the entire worldly sphere, both the centre and the periphery. Thus, for Barth, “We must be prepared to hear, even in secular occurrence, not as alien sounds but as segments of that periphery concretely orientated from its centre and towards its totality, as signs and attestations of the lordship of the one prophecy of Jesus Christ, true words which we must receive as such even though they come from this source” (IV/3, 124). The Christian community can in fact *expect* revelation in true words to come from secular parables and not simply from the Bible,

20 Hunsinger, *How to Read Karl Barth*, 262. For Hunsinger’s understanding of “uncreated light” in Barth see, “Uncreated Light: From Irenaeus and Torrance to Aquinas and Barth,” in *Light from Light: Scientists and Theologians in Dialogue*, eds. Gerald O’Collins and Mary Ann Meyers (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012), 208–235.

21 Hunsinger, “Uncreated Light,” 222.

the Church, or preaching. Why? Because of its encounter with Christ's extravagant light.

At same time, Hunsinger identified the potential difficulties of navigating this discernment process. He wrote, "This point about the contextual ambiguity of secular parables – their immediate context being merely apparent, their true context being veiled though real – suggests the extent to which Barth tends to think in terms of differing contextual wholes that are at once inwardly integral and mutually incompatible."²² These differing contexts serve as containers for revelation in Jesus Christ. In his analysis, Hunsinger retracted his designation of the words and parables of the kingdom as "secular," when he wrote: "the real contextual whole in which these words participate is only apparently secular, in reality it is actually Christocentric."²³

3. African Traditional Religions as parables of the kingdom?

While Barth does not even hint at the possibility of primal religious forms being used by God as parables of the kingdom of heaven, it is appropriate while standing on the Africa continent to ask if African traditional religions could be considered to be parables of God's self-revelation in Jesus Christ as an expression of Christ's ongoing prophetic activity. Barth's deeply Christocentric account of revelation in the event of reconciliation and the ongoing prophetic activity of Jesus Christ within and outside the walls of the Church allow a reassessment of Barth's understanding of the category of religion itself and can reopen the question of revelation and culture.

For Barth, the Word of God, Jesus Christ, cannot be prevented from speaking through anyone and anything. After his claim earlier in *Church Dogmatics* I/1 (55) – that God could speak through a dead dog or a flute concerto – Barth clarified that no one can prevent God from entering into unions with the words of people "outside the sphere of the Bible and the Church ... as a form of [God's] free revelation of grace" (IV/3, 101). All revelation is in, by, and about Jesus Christ. Yet revelation can come *through* a variety of media. The revelation of God in Jesus Christ whether

22 Hunsinger, *How to Read Karl Barth*, 264.

23 Hunsinger, *How to Read Karl Barth*, 265.

through true words, parables of the Kingdom, or traditional religions, can, at least in principle, be understood by Barth as gifts from God to humanity, expressions of God's grace.

God is active in revelation while humanity is receptive; God in Christ speaks through the Holy Spirit, while humans listen. However, Barth sees an inversion of the proper mode of revelation when Christians or non-Christians create syntheses between Jesus Christ as the one Word of God and any other words. These syntheses imply a control over Jesus Christ, to which none of us has any right, and which can be only the work of religious arrogance (IV/3, 101). Barth's Christocentric focus is on full display in his insistence on the unidirectional movement of revelation from God to humanity, never from one human to another – though at times the Word of God may choose to use humans to witness to revelation. Humans, as recipients of God's self-revelation must always be *testing* human words to see if they are pointing beyond themselves to *the* one Word of God, the Lord, the Prophet, Jesus Christ.

For Ghanaian theologian Kwame Bediako, God used and uses traditional religions to prepare Africans for the full revelation of God in Jesus Christ as revealed through the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments. Bediako's understandings of creation, divine providence, and even history, were displayed through his belief in the infinite translatability of the gospel. He understood African traditional religions (ATRs) as *evangelical preparation* for Christianity.²⁴

For Barth, the issue with Bediako's claim that humans can come to know God through traditional African religions would be the abiding connection that Bediako posited between Christianity and African traditional religion. Barth's fear would be that if Christ were constantly revealed through traditional religions, then the freedom and distinctiveness of Christ would be lost. So does Bediako's understanding of Christ's revelatory presence within African Traditional religions amount to a "suspiciously loud but empty utterance," in Barth's words (IV/3, 102)?

24 Kwame Bediako, "Jesus in African Culture: A Ghanaian perspective" in *Jesus and the Gospel in Africa* (Oxford: Regnum, 2000), 20–33; esp. page 21.

Barth used the imagery of Jesus as the Light of Life to express the irrepressible nature of God's self-revelation. The Light of Life permeates all places and may use a parable of the Kingdom to reveal who God is, but God's presence (and corresponding revelatory intent) does not remain within the creaturely medium indefinitely. The revelation is real and true, though partial (as it was for Bediako). For Barth, the revelation that resulted from the parables and true words is *ad hoc*. An illustration: in the parable of the Sower, there is nothing special about the Sower, the seed, or the soils. This ordinary event *became* a parable of the kingdom through the way that Jesus incorporated it into his teaching. The revelatory meaning in the parable lies not in the media (the Sower, seed, or soils) but in the (true) words of Jesus Christ that reveal the Word (*Logos*) – God in Jesus Christ. God is not orchestrating events to create parables of the kingdom. The light of Jesus Christ shines widely upon all people, just for the sake of it, without requiring a deeper significance.

For Barth, humanity cannot apprehend a pristine gospel unadulterated by human culture. The Church is in the world and the world is in the church. While they can be distinguished, they cannot be separated. Barth is quite clear that in many ways the identity of Western Christians has become too cosy with Western cultural assumptions, including the exceptional view that a peculiar form of Western Christianity is best for the entire world. If one cannot identify the gospel in the life of a Christian or a Christian community, then the distinctiveness of the gospel has been lost.

The works of Bediako and Barth – in spite of their differences in theological emphases and socio-cultural locations – together point to the *impossibility* of apprehending a “gospel” apart from material culture. Both appealed to the incarnation of the son of God in the person of Jesus of Nazareth as the key moment of gospel and culture coming together. Thus, though a pure gospel is not apprehensible, neither is the gospel inseparable from, nor identical with, culture.

The main difference between Bediako and Barth regarding the ongoing nature of revelation is that Bediako posited a perpetual relationship between ATRs and revelation while Barth insisted that revelation *extra muros ecclesiae* (outside the walls of the Church) was only occasional, or

ad hoc. For Barth, Christ's revelatory presence does not remain within cultural media indefinitely.

Jesus is the sole Mediator of both revelation and reconciliation. Indeed, in Christ, reconciliation *is* revelation! Barth then does not allow Christ to be confined to one historical epoch or the pages of a human book (the Bible); Christ the Prophet continues to speak "good words ... *extra muros ecclesiae* (outside the walls of the church)" (IV/3, 110), if and when God so chooses.

"God spoke to our ancestors ... God has spoken to us by a Son" (Hebrews 1:1, 2), and God continues to speak, as Barth expressed it: "words of genuine prophecy ... that meet and match with the one Word of God Himself and therefore with that of His one Prophet Jesus Christ" (IV/3, 111 rev.). In spite of the completeness of the self-revelation of God in Jesus Christ through the witness of the Bible, through the "universal prophecy of Jesus Christ" (IV/3, 129), God can choose to reveal who God is in distinct and novel ways through contemporary forms. While affirming God's self-revelation outside of the Bible or the Church, Barth is also preserving a kind of occasionalism. The chosen medium – whether a religion, a sunset, or a farmer sowing seeds – does not *possess* God's self-revelation. Instead, the medium is a conduit for the light of Christ's prophetic activity that shines on Christ's reconciling life. Revelation itself is an *act* of God. Revelation does not exist in a vacuum apart from Christ's ongoing prophetic activity.

While Bediako would affirm God's ongoing activity, his understanding of revelation is more static and less dynamic than Barth's. In many ways, Bediako's project was an ongoing process of trying to understand and appropriate in light of African culture the God who has been revealed in Jesus Christ. He was continually seeking to strip away Western interpretations of the scriptures of the Old and New Testaments to get a better grasp of the revelation of God that has already occurred – without looking for additional sources of revelation in contemporary cultural forms – while also binding the gospel to ATRs. In this way, Bediako was seeking to separate Jesus Christ and the gospel *from* Christianity as a Western religion.

Bediako saw tremendous possibilities in reading the Epistle to the Hebrews today: "It seems to be that the new African theology will have to attempt what the writer of the Epistle to the Hebrews did: that is, to make room,

within an inherited body of tradition, for new ideas, for new realities which, though seemingly entering from the outside, come in to fulfil aspirations within the tradition, and then to alter quite significantly the basis of self-understanding within that tradition.”²⁵ Bediako viewed Hebrews as a way of reading the presence of Jesus Christ in African culture from the inside out. His starting point was within African culture and sought to understand and appropriate revelation from within culture. Bediako described his method in one of his earliest publications: “My own approach is to read the Scriptures with Akan traditional piety well in view. In this way, we can arrive at a Christology that deals with the perceived reality of the ancestors, I also make the biblical assumption that Jesus Christ is not a stranger to our heritage.”²⁶ On the other hand, Barth began with an understanding of God’s self-revelation that cannot be separated from the unique person of Jesus Christ. For him, revelation began outside culture and penetrated culture through Christ’s ongoing prophetic activity. These differences in their understandings and appropriations of revelation are closely related to their Christocentric theological positions. The revelation of God is ongoing in and through the forms of material culture.

To conclude, Barth would say, “Yes, God *could* use ATRs as a parable of the Kingdom.” However, Barth would not agree with the claim that ATRs *are* a parable of the Kingdom. Barth understands parables as moments, events, of Christ’s prophetic activity, not an ongoing relationship.

Bibliography

- Barth, Karl. *Church Dogmatics*, 4 volumes in 13 parts, eds. G. Bromiley and T. F. Torrance. Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1956–1969.
- *The Humanity of God*, Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1960
 - *Learning Jesus Christ through the Heidelberg Catechism*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964.
 - *How I Changed My Mind* (Richmond, VA: John Knox Press, 1966).
 - *Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986[1956]).

25 Kwame Bediako, *Christianity in Africa: The Renewal of a non-Western Religion* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1995), 84.

26 Bediako, “Jesus in African Culture,” 24.

- *Offene Briefe 1945–1968* (GA V.15), ed. Diether Koch. Zürich: Theologischer Verlag Zürich, 1984).
 - *Gespräche 1959–1962* (GA IV/25), ed. Eberhard Busch. Zürich: Theologischer Verlag Zürich, 1995.
 - *The Christian Life: Church Dogmatics IV.4, Lecture Fragments*, eds. Hans-Anton Drewes and Eberhard Jüngel, trans. Geoffrey Bromiley. London: T&T Clark, 2004.
- Bediako, Kwame. *Christianity in Africa: The Renewal of a non-Western Religion*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1995.
- *Jesus and the Gospel in Africa*. Oxford: Regnum, 2000.
- Busch, Eberhard. *Karl Barth: His Life from Letters and Autobiographical Texts* (Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 2005).
- Chestnutt, Glenn A. *Challenging the Stereotype: The Theology of Karl Barth as a Resource for Inter-religious Encounter In a European Context*. Oxford: Peter Lang, 2010.
- Green, Clifford J. *Karl Barth: Theologian of Freedom*. San Francisco, CA: Collins, 1989.
- Greggs, Tom. *Theology against Religion: Constructive Dialogues with Bonhoeffer and Barth*. New York: Continuum, 2011.
- Hartman, Tim. *Theology after Colonization: Kwame Bediako, Karl Barth, and the Future of Theological Reflection*. South Bend, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, Forthcoming.
- Hunsinger, George. *How to Read Karl Barth*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1991.
- “Uncreated Light: From Irenaeus and Torrance to Aquinas and Barth,” in *Light from Light: Scientists and Theologians in Dialogue*, eds. Gerald O’Collins and Mary Ann Meyers. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012, 208–235.
- Thompson, Geoff. “‘As open to the world as any theologian could be ...’?: Karl Barth’s Account of Extra-Ecclesial Truth and Its Value to Christianity’s Encounter with Other Religious Traditions”. PhD thesis, University of Cambridge, 1995.

- “Religious Diversity, Christian Doctrine and Karl Barth,”
International Journal of Systematic Theology, 8, no. 1 (January 2006):
3–24.
- Webster, John. *Barth’s Moral Theology: Human Action in Barth’s Thought*.
Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998.