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# KARL BARTH AND ENVIRONMENTAL EDUCATION, LAW AND CUSTOM

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## Abstract

A major cause for the current environmental crisis, specifically biodiversity loss and land degradation, lies in the sharp distinction that Western thought has often created between human society and the nonhuman environment. Such thought places chief value in isolated human relationships, failing to realize the greater community in which humans actually live their lives on Earth. In his *Ethics*, Karl Barth utilizes the Christian concept of ‘neighbour’ to provide guidance for an individual’s life in community; the neighbour proves authoritative in this regard through *education, law, and custom*. By acknowledging the greater community that humans share with all creatures of the Earth, one can re-read Barth’s text in a non-anthropocentric manner. Thus, the paper will investigate humans’ encounter with their nonhuman neighbours as such an authority and the implications this has for human actions and lifestyle. As Educator, the nonhuman neighbour shows the human that he/she does not exist as an isolated individual, but lives within greater human and Earth communities. Law, then, addresses our agreement to live with these others and accept the limitations that their needs place upon our own. Environmental Custom, finally, places the human within the context of a specific community of place, or ecosystem, with its own unique rules for living together. Encountering our fellow creatures as an authority in such ways draws humans into ecological communities that cannot separate human livelihood from the flourishing of all creatures and the land on which they live.

*Keywords:* Ethics, non-anthropocentric, implications, limitations

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A major cause of current anthropogenic environmental crises lies in the sharp distinction that Western thought has often created between human society and the nonhuman environment. Larry Rasmussen, for example, laments the environmental alienation that even 20<sup>th</sup> century Christian, and especially Protestant, thinking has advanced. As powerful as theologians such as Karl Barth were at articulating the faith in times of historical crises, such Protestant theologies, Rasmussen argues, “were miserably deficient as cosmologies” [1]. By placing chief value in isolated human relationships, they fail to realize the greater community in which humans actually live their lives on Earth. As such, in his *Ethics*, Karl Barth utilizes the Christian concept of ‘neighbour’ to provide

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guidance for the individual human's life in community; the neighbour proves authoritative in this regard through *education, law, and custom*. Yet, by acknowledging the greater community that humans share with all creatures of the Earth, I hope to critique Barth's anthropocentrism, pushing his three categories of authority to consider both human and nonhuman neighbours. Such a re-reading of Barth's text will provide guidance for human life in the greater biotic community.

Barth conceives of neighbourhood on two levels. On one level, humans exist within a community of others based on creation. Here he describes the solidarity that an individual shares within ever-expanding circles of created relationship. He begins with the closest circle of family, progresses out to the cultural or ethnic group, and finally arrives at what he sees as the broadest circle. "Even the deepest loyalty to kin and people", Barth claims, "cannot close our eyes to the fact that both these inner circles are enclosed by an even wider circle of . . . *humanity*." [2] At this point, however, Barth closes his own eyes to the fact that even this circle is enclosed by a wider circle of relationship. He fails to recognize the larger creaturely circle that envelopes even our relationships as humans. A possible explanation for such an omission might be the sheer expansiveness of the circle. Even humanity, Barth admits, represents "a circle that is so universal that at first glance one might ask whether we are not uttering an empty word in mentioning it" [2, p. 178]. Createdness contains an even greater universality, giving it the even greater risk of coming across as an empty concept. "The refusal to take the concept of humanity with full seriousness," Barth claims, "itself proves to be an empty rationalistic reaction which is artificial and has no basis in reality." [2, p. 194] Denying one's relationship to all creatures, because of their common created nature, is just as much a rejection of reality as denying one's relationship to all humans, because of their shared human nature.

When we think of neighbourhood in terms of the community of creatures, the individual ego realizes its relationship with family, humanity, and finally all creatures. Egotism, or what Barth calls 'I-centered ness', constitutes a sin because it denies our existence as beings in community; it denies that "we ourselves are not ourselves without them [our neighbours]" [2, p. 345]. We need to know our neighbours to truly know ourselves. Recognizing our families, races, and humanity provides self-identity as fellow humans. Recognizing our connection to other animals and even plants identifies us as fellow creatures.

The great irony of Barth's theology, H. Paul Santmire notes, is that in Barth's efforts to reclaim all of creation under the universal lordship of Christ, he fails to fully persist past the circle of humanity. It may be underdeveloped, but it is not antithetical to the thrust of Barth's theology to "extend the liberating triumph of grace and the unifying intimacy of charity, in proper proportion, to include all the creatures of nature . . . rather than being prompted to pass nature by, as it were, on the other side" [3]. It is under the kingdom of Christ that Barth finds his second basis for neighbourhood. Under the previous concept of creation, we realize *that* we live with others. Under the concept of the kingdom

of Christ, we ask *how* we are to live with these others. At this level the question of authority becomes central. The question of authority actually occupies a central position in Barth's understanding of Christian ethics in general. Christian ethics begins with the 'divine ethics' and the command of the Word of God on the individual. Thus, the neighbour is only authoritative as a representative of the original divine authority [4]. An individual, Barth insists, does not have the unlimited self-authority to act in such a way that the self remains the sole focus and goal. Existing as created beings means that authority for our lives comes from God rather than ourselves; existing as beings created in community means that the divine authority meets us in our encounters with others as neighbour – both human *and* creature. Seeing God's command in my neighbour "shows them to be the authority in relation to which I alone really exist" [2, p. 344]. In this way, Barth repeatedly criticizes I-centeredness which implies self-authority and consequently a denial of the reality in which we truly exist. The neighbour shows its authority in three ways: through education, law, and custom.

"The neighbor as teacher", Barth asserts, "with his claim that I should learn something from him - whatever it may be - can be for me . . . the finger of God which makes a correction in my exercise." [2, p. 370] In this way, the neighbour provides guidance for our life in community by representing the divine authority. Because of sin, Barth believes, human intellect, memory, and will are in need of instruction. The teacher, therefore, "is in general the Thou of the neighbour that reminds us of our limits and therefore of God as the one by whom we were made, from whom we have fallen, but by whom we are not allowed to fall but are upheld" [2, p. 367]. The primary limit that human neighbours teach is the limit of sin – humans are sinful and in need of God's grace for forgiveness and eternal life. Yet, ecological neighbours have important lessons to teach as well. These neighbours teach the limits that humans possess as creatures living in a community of other created beings. Humans have a special responsibility toward the nonhuman world, Barth claims, because "the world of animals and plants forms the indispensable living background to the living-space divinely allotted to man and placed under his control. As they live, so can he" [5]. Yet, if we see animals and plants as neighbours, we must also recognize the authority they possess that claims limits to human notions of control. Only with the flourishing of nonhuman life can human life exist. Human use of finite natural resources without regard for the effects on the environment and livelihood of other human and nonhuman neighbours represents an illegitimate use of power because such reckless control ignores the communal existence into which humans were created. Study of the natural environment elucidates the limits within which human actions might properly fall. Furthermore, the authority that these neighbours possess as law and custom will show that plants and animals exist less as a simple backdrop for human living and more as a grand community into which humans are invited.

Accepting the tutelage of the neighbour benefits both the teacher and the student. “Education is a blessing” Barth states. “Salvation comes to sinners as they are put in their place. They could live their own lives only to their destruction.” [2, p. 374] Our ecological neighbours teach us that, because of our existence as creatures in community with other creatures and our Creator, there are limits to the individual lives that we live. Industrial exploitation of the natural environment and a culture of consumerism with its emphasis on individualism are creating a world of environmental and spiritual ruin. Our neighbourly educators, however, caution us about the destructive consequences of living I-centred lives. Conversely, the blessing of education teaches the true prosperity possible when living within our created limits, under God and in community.

Constantly aware of the propensity for sin in human hearts, Barth warns against false or profane educators. “Profane education is that in which an effort is made to make me holy and righteous instead of sinful, to make me forget my limits instead of seeing them more sharply, to deify me instead of putting me in my place on Earth.” [2, p. 370] Barth warns against profane educators who promote an unreal image of the human individual – of an individual without sin, without limits, without community. On a similar note, Daniel C. Maguire observes that under its present form, consumerist capitalism and the global market are carrying out “the greatest seduction in the history of the world” [6]. The modern threats of pollution and anthropogenic climate change press the need to consider false educators in ways and institutions that Barth never imagined. The greatest flaws in the founding of the World Bank and the World Trade Organization, for example, Maguire claims, were the philosophy that the planet and economic growth could know no limits. Such philosophy relies on the false teaching that human wellbeing lies in gaining ever increasing amounts of material wealth rather than in developing community or living within natural limits.

Like education, Barth places the neighbour’s authority as law, or ‘right’, under the concept of ‘the kingdom of Christ among sinners’ [2, p. 376]. The authority coming from law takes for granted the fact that humans exist in community and deals instead with how humans are to live in community. “The problem of right”, Barth claims, “begins where the collision of my own activity with the social order begins; where this collision cannot be eliminated; . . . where [my neighbour] claims publically acknowledged and protected right for himself against me; . . . where obedience then, is not doing what I want to do but concrete obedience to the law that concretely encounters me in this person.” [2, p. 377]

Education teaches the reality of limits. Law intervenes at those times when limits are exceeded. Laws constitute the neighbour’s public defense against the excesses of another. Laws like the US Bill of Rights attempt to establish fair communities by limiting the control and excesses of centralized powers. In this way, the US Constitution, Thomas Berry remarks, represents the height of the good aspects of the modern world; yet it also represents, for him, a

dangerous document. “The Constitution rescues us from the domination of monarchical government, but by rescuing us from that control it makes victims of everything nonhuman. That which is not human was given no protection.” [7] Berry’s non-anthropocentric theology provides a helpful critique of Barth on this point and of laws that include only human neighbours. For laws to represent the true state of human existence, they must acknowledge both the human and the creaturely communities of which we are members. Our laws fall short of fully realizing the claim of the neighbor when they do not protect the broadest circle of neighborly relation. In this way, obedience to the divine authority, which finds expression in the authority of the neighbour, means forgoing the excessive pursuits I may desire whenever my excess means my neighbour’s harm, both human and nonhuman.

Yet, collisions between an individual and his/her community may come from a simple conflict of interests rather than an explicit case of excess. In either case, the duty of law remains the same. “The aim of society”, Barth claims, “is to prevent, so far as possible, the possibility of collisions of interests that run on more or less converging tracks, and, where collisions are unavoidable, to make them as harmless as possible on both sides.” [2, p. 379] Both humans and animals require food and space in which to carry out their lives, for example. At times, especially with rising human populations, these two interests may appear to collide. Therefore, the duty of law, and those who create and enforce law, is to find ways to prevent such conflict or at least mitigate the negative results when impact cannot be avoided. A consideration of the needs and interests of *all* neighbours must be considered. “Life together is to be ruled by an arrangement which partly prevents or restricts convergence, or at least heads off its foreseeable consequences.” [2, p. 379] Although simple collisions of interest may exist, Barth implies that the great majority of these conflicts actually occur because of human sin and selfishness. Just as law presupposes life in community, it also presupposes “fallen Adam expelled from paradise”. [2, p. 378] Through disobedience to the divine authority, humanity has set itself up as its own authority. In so doing, humans have largely lost the ability to live in harmony with both our human and nonhuman neighbours. Humans require laws, Barth claims, because we have a sinking suspicion that without publically enforceable restrictions on our actions, our own specific right to life will negatively impact our neighbours. Thus, Barth observes, societal laws unwittingly accept a theological presupposition; “we are forced,” he claims, “to say that the dogma of original sin is much better preserved by the police than by teachers or even by modern pastors” [2, p. 378]. For Barth the very idea of law makes sense only in a situation where the human is a sinner against whom others must be protected. In light of global environmental abuses, it is becoming increasingly clear, that this protection must be extended to all creatures.

Yet, law not only safeguards the neighbour, it also benefits the individual. “For all the pain that it means concretely for those that it smites,” Barth insists, “. . . it is still a blessing. The aim of right, like that of education, is that those who in their folly and wickedness are always inclined and ready to

forget this should be reminded of God and put in their place.” [2, p. 388] For Christians, law reminds us of our sinfulness and inability to live together, and hence of our need for God’s grace. Law reminds individuals that they are not gods because the rights and interests of others must be respected. There is a “danger that threatens us . . . , namely, that of the deifying or idolizing of man and his right, by which the latter destroys itself” [2, p. 389]. Thus, profane law, as well as profane education, must be avoided. Profane law forgets our common solidarity, extending its protection to only a few while forgetting the many. Most modern democratic constitutions include all human citizens; yet, they fall short of realizing any larger community. The significance of a document like the 1982 United Nations World Charter for Nature, Thomas Berry notes, lies in its “awareness of our responsibility for more than the human” [7]. Thus, if we consider our truly widest circle of community, a law can be shown to be profane by overlooking not just human, but creaturely solidarity - attending solely to human interests while dismissing all others.

Finally, the neighbour becomes “an authority to us from the standpoint of the *custom* which he represents” [2, p. 390]. Like law, the neighbour’s authority as custom considers the individual’s life in community with others. Unlike law, Barth does not imagine custom as needing to be publically codified and enforceable as legislation. Thus, even in the unlikely absence of educators or police, the authority of custom remains. “If I cannot boast of being Robinson Crusoe”, Barth claims, “the neighbor or fellow human is still [present], and even before he wills to teach or correct me, . . . he expects from me my willing assent to a specific line of conduct which makes it possible for him to live with me” [2, p. 391]. Although it falls last in his discussion, the authority of custom forms the very foundation for life together, providing the beginning place for education and law. Barring shipwreck on a deserted island, one must consent to certain human customs in order to live well with others; yet even a Robinson Crusoe must submit to the environmental customs of his biotic community.

The conduct expected by custom will vary according to place and circumstance. Custom “will be different in times of carnival and times of fasting, in rural and urban areas, . . . in London and Patagonia, in middle-class society and proletarian society” [2, p. 391]. In this way, custom possesses a flexibility not found in law. Thus, environmental custom can and should be specific to a particular ecosystem. A desert ecosystem, for instance, necessitates different customs than a wetlands ecosystem. Each creature living in its specific ecosystem must obey that system’s unique rules for living together in order for the whole community to thrive. When humans transplant non-native species from one location to another, for example, the possibility exists for the newcomers, unaware of the specific ecological customs of their new environment, to become invasive, displacing native species and destroying the land. Although humans have a greater ability to adapt to new environments than many other creatures, we too can become an invasive species. Paving over a wetlands or a floodplain in the Eastern US in order to build a southwestern, ranch-style housing complex does not pay sufficient attention to that place’s

custom. Giving voice to custom, Barth proclaims, “If you do not give your willing assent to what is customary here . . . you will be an impossible person for us. . . We shall no longer talk *to* you; we shall only talk *about* you.” [2, p. 392] Breaking custom breaks relationships. By ignoring the environmental customs of a particular place, we become invasive intruders rather than members of the biotic community, making life together impossible. Environmental educators go unheard and law becomes exclusive.

Jared Diamond describes several past human societies that have collapsed due largely to the societies’ disregard for environmental custom. The collapse of the isolated Easter Island society provides a helpful example. Within 500 years of human settlement, the island experienced complete deforestation, massive topsoil erosion, and the extinction of almost all of its native and seafaring bird populations. The consequences of such environmental impacts on the human inhabitants resulted in “starvation, a population crash, and a descent into cannibalism” [8] Diamond does not characterize the inhabitants of Easter as being unusually bad; they simply occupied a fragile Pacific Island environment and allowed their own human customs to oppose the island’s basic environmental constraints. Similarly, Michael Northcott articulates the need for human habitats to conform to the environmental particularities of their specific ecosystems. In opposition to the “one size fits all approach” of much modern architecture, Northcott argues that “in many premodern settlements living spaces are formed not simply according to function, but reflect instead a sensitivity to place and local energy flows” [9] By aligning human custom with the environmental custom of a place, humans are able to integrate their own community into the larger biotic community in ways that sustain both. Thus, although Barth considers primarily human custom, a human awareness of environmental custom also proves critical for successful life in community.

Like education and law, custom may appear somewhat burdensome, but it too truly provides a blessing to the life of the individual. “We have to count on it that the custom of those around us, with all the burdens it means for us,” Barth acknowledges, “. . . contains within itself, like education and right, an inescapable divine claim . . . upon the sphere of private life which education and right cannot touch, a final correction of the arrogance of individual life.” [2, p. 395] Thus, the three forms of neighbourly authority benefit the overall life of the community as well as the personal, spiritual life of the individual. Custom cultivates our private lives and actions toward our community, law assures a degree of public protection for all neighbours, and education aids in elucidating those limits that individuals must recognize in order to live together. In this way, Barth’s concept of neighbourly authority, if it includes all creaturely neighbours, works to remedy both the individualism and alienation that plagues many modern, human societies’ ability to live successfully within their greater Earth communities.

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