# The Use of Biblical/Christian Metaphors in the Teaching of Economics

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**ABSTRACT:** *This paper will examine the use and significance of biblical/Christian metaphors in economics and put forth some ideas for consideration by Christians who are involved in economic education. This paper will put forth explanations for the use of metaphor and will discuss why biblical metaphors are useful and relevant. This paper includes discussion for the design of instruction in undergraduate economics, particularly in a Christian academic context, and includes a case study in the art of metaphorical economics.*

## INTRODUCTION

*Webster's Ninth New Collegiate Dictionary* defines a "metaphor" as "a figure of speech in which a word or phrase literally denoting one kind of object or idea is used in place of another to suggest a likeness or analogy between them." In recent years, a number of economists have observed that metaphors are commonly employed in economic analysis. Deirdre McCloskey is probably the most well-known proponent of this argument, maintaining that metaphor is "the most important example of economic rhetoric" (1998, p. 40). She asserts that many of the most familiar phrases in economics — model, curve, function, cycle, invisible hand, human capital — are metaphorical in nature (1998). Philip Mirowski has expressed agreement with McCloskey on this point, especially with respect to the metaphorical character of mathematics in economics, "because most extensions of mathematical formalism proceed by metaphor and analogy" (1988, p. 149). Mirowski, however, maintains that this line of inquiry should be extended into questions such as:

1. Which metaphors were chosen?
2. Why were they thought plausible when they were adopted?
3. Are they still thought to be plausible? Why? (p. 40-44)

The preceding questions, as well as others which stem from this list, can be applied to the frequent use by economists of metaphors which are derived from biblical references or Christian theology. In the second volume of his biography of John Maynard Keynes, Robert Skidelsky has documented a number of cases in which Keynes made use of biblical rhetoric in formulating and defending his arguments concerning the economy (1992). Robert Nelson has written that "economics has been said by many observers to exhibit 'scholastic' tendencies; economists are said to be a contemporary 'priesthood'; and the assumptions of economics are said to be beyond refutation and more in the nature of a 'divine revelation'" (1991, p. xxi). Kenneth Boulding referred to "the doctrine that tastes are simply given and we cannot inquire into the process by which they are formed as the 'Immaculate Conception' of the indifference curve" (1970, p. 199). In the ongoing professional and public conversation about economic issues, one consistently witnesses the use of phrases which are derived from the Bible or Christian tradition. Economic policies, ironically reflecting varying degrees of governmental intervention, are described as "the old-time religion." Advocates of the free movement of goods and capital internationally are charged with (and sometimes accused of!) promoting "the free-trade gospel." Over 50 years ago, George Soule provided an example of such rhetoric in the following characterization of the views of free-market advocates:

> Like Sunday School teachers in a slum, they bid us return to the classical gospel, so that the balance of prices and production which is supposed to emerge from unrestricted operation of the laws of supply and demand under free enterprise may prevail. The world is all but lost; not a nation in it, with the possible exception of the United States, clings to the faith, and even here false prophets have led us astray. But to these authors, the truth is clear and whole. They seem to believe that we have wandered from the truth only because we did not understand. Patiently they explain it to us all over again, often in words of biblical simplicity. Once more they convict us of sin in a score of public policies, all the way from the protective tariff to compensatory spending by government. (1951, p. 8).

Those who contradict certain elements of conventional economic theory or methodology may be characterized as "heretics" who are threatened with "excommunication" (professional ostracism) or being "burned at the stake" (denied tenure or opportunities to publish). A number of books and journal articles, such as *The Seven Fat Years* by Robert Bartley and *Day of Reckoning* by Benjamin Friedman, have also employed biblical metaphors in their titles, and the recent PBS television series, *Commanding Heights: The Battle for the World Economy* (2002), contains several examples where economic policies and theories are described in terms which include biblical terminology.

## EXPLANATIONS FOR THE USE OF METAPHOR

How might one answer the second of Mirowski's questions concerning the use of metaphors in economics: Why were they thought plausible when they were adopted? Perhaps the use of this type of language in economic discourse is a legacy of the period in the history of the discipline where economics, or "political economy," was viewed more broadly as a moral enterprise. Contemporary students of economics may not know that Adam Smith was a professor of moral philosophy, (Boulding, 1970) that the subject was once part of the moral science tripos at Cambridge University, (Skidelsky, 1983) or that approximately 40 percent of the attendees at the first meeting of the American Economic Association in 1885 were current or former members of the ordained clergy (Nelson, 1998; Fogel, 2000). The continued use of such language might suggest that the modernist/positivist attempt to purge economics of any explicitly ethical content, in the name of "pure science," may not have been entirely successful, especially in those areas of analysis that are most relevant to public policies and institutions. It could also indicate that certain economic objectives take on such a degree of importance within the field that economists feel compelled to give "sermons" that testify to the level of priority that such goals should have. Nobel Laureate George Stigler asserted that economists have often taken on a role of a "preacher," especially with respect to "social policies and institutions" (1982, p. 217). He went on to state that "in the economists' sermons the dominant theme has been that good policy favors, and bad policy interferes with, the maximizing of income of a society" (p. 6-7). Stigler offered the traditional case for free trade between nations, based on comparative advantage, as a prime example of such a "sermon," concluding that no better case "of the economists' use of efficiency as the criterion for desirable economic policy could be given" (p. 7). On a related point, Charles Goodhart has concluded that the international movement in the direction of "liberal" (in the classical sense of that term) economics over the past few decades has been "driven largely by the successful preaching of liberal economists" (2001, p. 217).

Assuming that this message is correct, the expansion of world trade will make a positive contribution to global economic growth. (The issues surrounding the consequences of free trade for the domestic and international distribution of income, as well as the question of whether the benefits of trade are dependent upon the existence of certain legal and institutional pre-conditions, are outside the scope of this analysis.) If this is regarded by the proponents of such a regime as "good news," especially for the poorest nations of the world, then one can see where the "gospel" metaphor (lower-case, of course!) might be applied to this argument. Opponents of globalization, a broader concept which implies free movements of financial capital, information, workers, and cultural values as well as goods, might counter that this is a "false gospel." Nevertheless, the biblical language is retained for the purposes of argument. It should be noted that the observation has been made that the historical use of such language might simply have represented the transfer of certain terms and phrases from one context to another without any broader intent, particularly in those decades which followed an era in which religious discourse played a more visibly significant role in public life. However, this contention fails to provide an explanation for the ongoing employment of phrases such as "market fundamentalism" in contemporary discussions of political economy. This expression has been employed by a number of critics of overly liberal (in the classical sense) approaches to economic policy and institutions, most notably Nobel Laureate Joseph Stiglitz and George Soros, the hedge fund manager turned philanthropist and political activist. As an aside, the use of this phrase is not necessarily of recent origin. For example, chapter one of George Soule's previously cited volume, published in 1951, is titled, "Economic Fundamentalism."

## WHY *BIBLICAL* METAPHORS?

Mirowski's third question can be amended to read, "Why are *biblical* metaphors still thought to be plausible?" Two possible answers to this query come readily to mind. John Tiemstra, in making the case for Christian economists to address an audience that extends beyond the parameters of the Christian community, has concluded that "there is enough of a residuum of Christianity in our culture and enough disenchantment with cynical secularism that some people are still interested in Christian perspectives on economic life" (1994, p. 3). This could possibly constitute a sole explanation for the continual and frequent use of biblical language in economic dialogue if Christian (or in the case of Old Testament images, Jewish) economists were the only ones who were engaging in such rhetoric, but this is clearly not the case. If Tiemstra is correct, however, about the residual presence of a certain degree of Christian understanding in the culture at large, then perhaps the meaning of these metaphors lies *in a search for language that will provide a broader moral justification for particular economic policies and institutions.* When speaking to each other, economists usually justify such entities in the language of efficiency; are the benefits of certain social arrangements greater than the costs, especially when measured in a quantitative manner? Such arguments, as it were, are often not nearly as persuasive in the public square as appeals to justice or equity. Joseph Stiglitz has observed that "any of us with more than one child knows the importance of issues of equity. No charge is heard more often than 'It's not fair.' (Indeed I cannot recall an occasion on which I heard the complaint, 'It's not efficient.')" (1994, p. 240). By contrast, Charles Schultze has made the case that economists, especially in the area of public policy, "should see themselves as *partisan advocates of the efficient solution* (emphasis in the original) . . . If economic advisers do not speak for efficiency, who will?" (1996, p. 31). Richard McKenzie has supported this point by maintaining that "the professional and public esteem enjoyed by (certain) economists" is due, in part, to the fact that "people sense in them a commitment to some higher goal, some transcending normative purpose, that guides and shapes their research and their social commentary" (1981, p. 714-715).

Therefore, a catalyst is provided for the search for alternative descriptions of what is taking place in the world. Susan Gallagher and Roger Lundin have written that "the metaphorical process is one of *interaction*" where in choosing a particular metaphor, *"we say that one thing is another"* (emphasis in the original) (1989, p. 23). Gallagher and Lundin went on to expand upon this argument in the following manner:

> If we think of metaphor in this way, we see that metaphors are relished by almost all who are capable of human speech. If making a metaphor involves "saying that one thing is another," rather than "substituting" a false but pleasing image for a literal but unsatisfying word, then we see that metaphorical process is at the heart of all our knowing. We acquire information, we organize what we know, and we make innovative breakthroughs through the use of metaphor (p. 23).

## HOW SHOULD WE THEN TEACH?

What are the implications of the preceding discussion for the design of instruction in undergraduate economics, particularly in a Christian academic context or other institutional environment which is open to this type of inquiry? One possibility is that the use of this language constitutes one of the "conventions" of economic instruction, along with other familiar devices such as the "positive/normative" distinction. Instructors commonly use this convention in order to distinguish between objective descriptions of economic reality and subjective judgments concerning the relative merits of alternative theories, policies, and institutions. Although the establishment of such a distinction, especially in its most rigid forms, between "facts" and "values" remains a source of some philosophical controversy, many teachers of economics find this concept to be a useful element of their instructional design. Samuel Weston has asserted that "it is worthwhile to distinguish between positive economic analysis and normative judgments, even if economics is viewed as being permeated with ethical values" (1994, p.1). In an analogous manner, the incorporation of biblical and Christian metaphors into the "rhetoric" (as McCloskey would put it) of economic instruction might represent a means of communicating the *spiritual* dimension of economic life, even though one is not "evangelizing" or "preaching the gospel" in the literal sense of those terms. Bob Goudzwaard has written about this subject as follows:

> The return of the Lord, who is the ultimate owner of the earth, is a theme that permeates the biblical texts that deal with human economy. Jesus interprets economic life as having an eschatological dimension from the outset. A judge stands at the end of all our economic efforts and institutions, for when the Lord comes back to his *oikos* — his creation — he will ask all persons and all nations to render an account of their economic behavior *(oikonomike)*… That which might appear to be the most secular, most neutral sector of contemporary economic activity will be exposed for what it is. Its underlying presuppositions will come to light (2001, p. 22).

Another option would be to view the employment of biblical/Christian metaphors as a manifestation of the "art" of economics; a third category between positive and normative economics. David Colander defines this concept, which was initially advanced by John Neville Keynes in 1891, (1992) as "applied economics" which "relates the lessons learned in positive economics to the normative goals determined in normative economics" (p. 192). From a teacher's standpoint, Colander maintains that "separating out the art of economics allows one to point out that objectivity in the art of economics is not achieved by avoiding value judgments, but, rather, by making clear what are the value judgments upon which one is basing the policy recommendation" (p. 196-197).

## A CASE STUDY IN THE ART OF METAPHORICAL ECONOMICS

Over the last two decades, a number of nations in both Eastern Europe and Latin America have pursued, to varying degrees, a process of economic transition that has been categorized by the metaphor of "shock therapy." The Web site for the "Commanding Heights: The Battle for the World Economy" television and DVD series, based on the book of the same title by Daniel Yergin and Joseph Stanislaw, defines this strategy as "a policy of rapid economic reform" which includes four primary objectives (2002):

1. Liberalization — the abolition of government control over economic activities such as production, price setting, and distribution;
2. Stabilization — the imposition of deep cuts in government spending and firm limits on the growth of the national money supply;
3. Privatization — the transfer of most government-owned enterprises to the ownership of individuals and private companies;
4. Internationalization — the opening of the economy to foreign trade and investment.

Those countries which have adopted these policies have done so in the belief that such actions would produce certain economic outcomes — faster economic growth, reductions in poverty (but not necessarily in income inequality) and inflation, a more attractive climate for international investment, greater access to global markets and technology — that they regarded as good and desirable. If one makes this judgment, and also comes to the conclusion that this set of policies and institutions is the right *choice* (given a person's ideological commitments), or the *only* choice (given the perceived failures of alternative policies and institutional arrangements), then such a program can take on some of the characteristics of a "sermon" in which the "preacher" is attempting to "convert" his/her listeners into acceptance of the message being presented. In fact, Joseph Stiglitz has stated that a great deal of the discussion over rapid, as opposed to incremental, approaches to reform in transitional economies "has been carried on in metaphorical terms," as follows (2001, p. 154-155):

Metaphor: Crossing a chasm.
Shock Therapy: Jump across in one leap.
Incrementalism: Build a bridge.

Metaphor: Repairing a ship.
Shock Therapy: Rebuild in a dry dock, which prevents being disturbed by the conditions at sea.
Incrementalism: Repair at sea; there in on "dry dock" for institutional change outside of society.

Metaphor: Transplanting a tree.
Shock Therapy: Do it decisively and all at once in order to get over the shock as quickly as possible.
Incrementalism: Prepare and wrap the roots one at a time to improve the odds of success.

In the classroom, students might be encouraged to think about these issues through the presentation of the following set of questions:

1. In what ways do the policy proposals associated with the "shock therapy" approach to economic transition in developing and formerly communist economies take on some of the characteristics of a sermon or theological doctrine? Was there a overall "message" that was associated with the *preceding* economic policies and institutions of these nations?
2. What judgments of value are associated with both the "shock therapy" program and its predecessors?
3. What kinds of metaphors are optimal for Christians who are engaged in economic analysis? Are there certain figures of speech that we should *not* use, or only use in certain ways?
4. What opportunities and risks are presented by the use of biblical/Christian metaphors in the teaching of economics?

The last question stems from the work of Thomas Green. Green has suggested that the use of metaphors in teaching is "helpful" because "they permit us to construct ways of leading the mind from the familiar to the unfamiliar," and because they are "useful in suggesting new relations and new similarities" (1971, p. 60). Along these lines, the employment of such metaphors in economic instruction might facilitate, as previously suggested, the establishment of a connection between the material and spiritual dimensions of life, and dispel the notion that economic policies are merely technical solutions to certain problems. In the case of the choice between a more rapid, as opposed to an incremental, approach to the transition towards a market-oriented economy, the utilization of metaphorical language is of value in illuminating the judgments of value that are associated with alternative programs for institutional change, the nature of the trade-offs which are associated with these policy proposals, and the potential for over-stating the outcomes that can reasonably expect to be achieved within a given period of time. For example, the presentation of "shock therapy" (or free trade, for that matter) as an economic "gospel" may very well contribute to public expectations that are unreasonably high, as well as a certain level of disillusionment with the results of these changes.

On the other hand, Green draws a distinction between "live" and "dead" metaphors, defining the latter in the following terms:

> A dead metaphor is one which we use in thought as though it were literal. It no longer impresses us as metaphorical. Its inference is so shrouded in custom and habit, its comparison so covered over by the blind convention of everyday thinking that the metaphor controls what we think. These are the dangerous metaphors. They frequently obscure useful philosophical questions that we want to raise and force us to frame our investigations within unnecessary limits (p. 62).

Therefore, the risk of using biblical/Christian metaphors in economic instruction may lie in the potential for over-reliance on such figures of speech to the point where one's student become indifferent hearers of either the true Word, or the connection to economic issues and controversies that we, as teachers, are trying to convey through the use of such language. There is also the prospect that biblical/Christian metaphors might employed in a way that is theologically misleading. As a case in point, Robert Skidelsky has observed that in the course of making his case for public policies that would stimulate consumption in the face of the Great Depression, John Maynard Keynes borrowed a phrase from the story of the Prodigal Son when he made reference to the social benefits of "riotous living." (1992, pp. 447-448). The use of this phrase in this manner appears to constitute an implicit endorsement of behavior for which the Prodigal Son eventually seeks the forgiveness of his father.

## CONCLUSION

This paper has sought to examine the use and significance of biblical/Christian metaphors in economics, and to put forth some ideas for consideration by Christians who are involved in economic education. It is the overall conclusion of this author that Christians who are engaged in the ministry of political economy need not shy away from metaphors that stem from our faith. Not only can the figurative, non-literal use of these phrases constitute a valuable element of our efforts at discerning "the signs of the times" in an economic sense, but we can also play a critical role in helping the community at large, both believers and non-believers alike, to understand and interpret such figures of speech. At the same time, we must be careful not to take ourselves, and the use of this language, so seriously and literally that these phrases are drained of their spiritual life and explanatory power. In this, as in all things, we need the wisdom, power, and guidance of the Holy Spirit.

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