



Review of Robert Sirico, *The Economics of the Parables*, Regnery 2022, 204 pp.

Paolo Santori

Tilburg University

In explaining the scarcity of encounters between the disciplines of economics and theology, the Italian economist Emanuele Sella wrote, “This is because the theological culture of economists in general is nil and the economic culture of theologians is minimal” (1930, 113; my translation). Almost a century later, Sella’s words still echo when one reads a number of works in the growing field of economics and theology. One thing is certain, however: Robert Sirico’s *The Economics of Parables* does not fall under the shadow of Sella’s judgment. The author masterfully combines theology and economics (both as discipline and as practice) in addressing the object of his analysis, i.e., the parables of Jesus. In Sirico’s own words, “I am intrigued by how the economic and commercial perspective can more unfold for us the deeper moral and theoretical implications of Jesus’ teaching” (xvii). The present review briefly summarizes the content of the book and then highlights its strengths and potential areas of criticism.

The Economics of Parables is devoted to explicating the economic dimensions of Jesus’s parables. In my understanding, the author’s aim is twofold. First, he shows how the economic (everyday life) content of Jesus’s parables made them an extraordinary means of communicating transcendental and divine messages. Second, he shows how teachings of the parables are relevant for a contemporary audience. Sirico claims that we still face some of the economic problems and decisions (and, I would add, those of daily life) that are represented in the parables. Therefore, “the parables ... contain some obvious economic dimensions and reveal a great deal about both the way we live and the way we ought to live. They are as contemporary as any modern manual on business ethics” (xx). Crucial to an edifying reading of this book are its introduction (xi), in which the author builds the frame of his analysis, and an afterword (147) that provides further methodological and substantial clarification. Between them, Sirico describes and comments on 13 parables, from “The Hidden Treasure” (1) to “The Prodigal Son” (131). Summarizing these parables is beyond the scope of this review and would risk simplifying the complexity of Sirico’s book, so I will now devote my attention to its virtues and then conclude with two points of criticism.

First, the author’s very identity adds value to the book, as Sirico’s economic and theological understandings of the parables draw from his personal experience of pastoral

work; his treatment of the parables is not merely an abstract reflection on their content and context. Complementing his contention that the parables retain meaning for a contemporary audience, the author provides examples to show the reader how and why a parable can never be outdated. One case, from the chapter on “The Rich Fool,” illustrates my point:

In my pastoral work I have encountered family members who preferred to just walk away and allow their siblings and others to have what they wanted, seeing that as preferable to an all-out familial war. Jesus may be suggesting that this would be a better path than unleashing deeply rooted and long-lasting family hatreds (40–1).

In my view, comments such as this are invaluable, because they connect theory and practice, academic work and real life.

Another merit of Sirico’s book is its contribution to the growing field of narrative economics (Shiller 2020) and, more precisely, that of narrative marketing. The main claim of this field is simple: having reached a sufficient extent of dissemination, some stories—from gossip to jokes, from urban legends to newspaper articles—determine the behavior of individuals and therefore affect the course of national and international economies, including financial markets (narrative economics). Other stories, produced for marketing purposes, try to control, direct, and transform consumers’ tastes and preferences (narrative marketing/storytelling). The “economics of parables” can offer an antidote to the latter kind of stories. Narrative marketing aspires to the never-ending force of parables. Indeed, the first, unspoken law of consumption is that it can be perpetuated over time, i.e., that the consumer’s desire will always remain unfulfilled and be directed toward new goods or services. However, commercial storytelling fails to go beyond the perspective of the creator, remaining anchored to the purpose for which it was created: profit. By contrast,

it is precisely because so many of the parables draw from the enduring realities of economics and commercial life that they provide lasting lessons. The parables deal with topics at a very practical and personal level, as well as on the more profound and higher plane of moral and spiritual obligation (xvii).

The stories of parables are not told exclusively to inculcate behaviors but also to reveal to their hearers the transcendental dimension of life and the “good news.” They are greater than their interpreters, and they seek to free rather than enchain the audience. Thus, Sirico’s book constitutes a point of difference and resistance to the widespread strategies of narrative marketing.

Having extolled the virtues of Sirico’s book, I will now expose two shortcomings. The minor one is the absence of economists’ analyses of the parables. When reading Sirico’s commentary on “The Good Samaritan,” for example, I expected a close engagement with

James Buchanan's "Samaritan's dilemma" (Buchanan 1975) or Amartya Sen's interpretation of the parable to ground his notion of open impartiality (Sen 2009). Addressing economists' previous interpretations with a theological and economic understanding of the parables would have added value to the book, but that may be a future endeavor for Sirico, perhaps to enrich a second edition of this book.

My main point of criticism was anticipated by Sirico himself:

In writing about the political economy of the parables, I am prepared for the criticism that I am 'politicizing' Jesus' teachings, and the potential for this criticism remains clearly before me as I write, but from the outset I proceed with the explicit intention to avoid any such temptation on my part. I certainly hope to correct the politicization of the Scriptures that I have come across over the years, but is it not the contemporary state that has politicized virtually the whole of commercial culture—indeed all of culture? (xviii-xix)

One might also have inferred this stance from the book cover, which mentions the titles of other books by Sirico (*Defending the Free Market; A Moral Basis for Liberty*). In my view, Sirico eschews "politicizing" Jesus's parables to promote a free-market economy. He was aware of this risk, and he avoided it, integrating his view, which is favorable to free markets, with the core topics of Catholic social teaching (subsidiarity, responsibility, charity). Nonetheless, nearly all his commentaries on the parables advance a suspicion of (if not direct opposition to) the welfare state. This is understandable, as the author is reacting to an opposite interpretation of early Christianity, one advanced by those stressing the "socialism in the Early Church" (177); however, sometimes the text of the parable is forced toward meanings that are, at best, partial interpretations of it.

I will provide examples to illustrate my point. In the commentary on the parable of "The Sower," Sirico writes,

The rocks in this parable can be seen as a metaphor for a fully controlled economy, with a static, immovable collection of obstructions that permit little possibility for development, productivity, or creativity, thus closing off growth, placing arduous and sometimes immovable obstacles in the path to creativity (28).

This might be true, but it might be equally true that there are rocks in a free market economy—inequalities, unequal starting conditions, oligopolies, monopolies—for which the welfare state and state regulation can compensate. Eliminating the intervention of the state and relying only on a free market economy, even with a role for subsidiarity and charity, risks promoting a conservative bias and legitimizing inequalities, which is surely not the message of Jesus's parables.

Starting from the same parable, Sirico also stresses the role of private ownership. Even Aquinas, who was recalling Aristotle's criticism toward Plato's *Republic*, was quoted to emphasize the advantages of private ownership. However, Christian teachings on the topic are very different. In primordial innocence, the rule was the communion of goods, such that "mine" and "yours" did not exist. In this state, the only "ours" coincided with that of all humanity, which nonetheless did not claim to own goods but only to use them. We clearly must not understand the primordial condition in a historical sense. When it is said that private property arises after sin, the message is that the private appropriation of goods was not in God's original plan for humanity. It was a deviation, a corruption, a decay. Even Aquinas kept the idea that private property is suitable for human beings after the Fall, but that 'use' of the goods should be in common. Trapped in the 20th century contraposition between "private ownership" and "forced collective ownership," Sirico failed to see that one of the most interesting and promising fields of research today has to do with the care and management of local and global common goods. Not by chance, the young economists called by Pope Francis to 'give a soul' to contemporary economy are doing research on how to integrate basic courses of economics including the commons (Rotondi and Santori 2023).

The same tendency can be seen in the commentary on the "Laborers of the Vineyard," in which the anti-meritocratic logic of the householder is downplayed by stressing the voluntary agreement between him and the laborers. Meritocracy today is one of the strongest forces of legitimization of inequalities. From different points of view, one focusing on the market and the other on the role of the state, both Hayek and Rawls argued that market societies are not and should not be meritocratic (Bruni and Santori 2022). The parable could enrich these analyses, as the logic of gift and gratuity, that might be found in the market as in the state, constitutes a *differentia specifica* brought by the Gospel. In Sirico's book, suspicion of the state hides important teachings that the parables might offer to our times.

To conclude, I recommend reading this thoughtful and challenging book. Probably no one (including myself) is able to escape a certain "politicization" of the parables, but pluralism in their interpretation fosters our understanding of their important moral, economic, and theological teachings.

References

- Bruni, Luigino, and Paolo Santori. 2022. "The Illusion of Merit and the Demons of Economic Meritocracy: Which are the Legitimate Expectations of the Market?" *Journal of Business Ethics* 176: 415-27.
- Buchanan, James M. 1975. "The Samaritan's Dilemma." In *Altruism, Morality, and Economic Theory*, edited by Edmund S. Phelps, 71-86. New York: Russell Sage.

- Rotondi, Valentina, and Paolo Santori. 2023. *Rethinking Economics Starting from the Commons: Towards an Economics of Francesco*. Cham: Springer.
- Sella, Emanuele. 1930. *La dottrina dei tre principii*. Padova: Cedam.
- Sen, Amartya. 2009. *The Idea of Justice*. Cambridge, MA: Allen Lane & Harvard University Press.
- Shiller, Robert J. 2020. *Narrative Economics: How Stories Go Viral and Drive Major Economic Events*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.