ESSAY

Engaging with Scripture Naysayers in their Own Vernacular: Proffering the Kingdom of Heaven

Mario J. Miranda, Victoria University, Australia

Much of the controversy between theologians and sceptics with regard to the Kingdom of Heaven remains unresolved. This can be attributed in part to the ambiguity of language each party employs, which remains incomprehensible to the other. Yet each side insists on using their own vernacular to justify their position. Jesus on the other hand was careful to choose local symbols, examples, and metaphors when instructing his audiences via parables, so that people of that era and place could immediately comprehend the intended meaning of his messages. Toward the end of his second year of ministry, just after he had raised Lazarus from the dead (John 11), Jesus changed his method of instructions from doctrinal teaching of the word of God to preaching in parables. Biblical scholars suggest that change was provoked by the Pharisees and chief priests who attributed Jesus' miracles and what he said to the power of the devil in him. Jesus knew that they were building this dubious evidence to do away with him. Not that Jesus was frightened by the attitude of the clerics. He was purposefully challenging many of their laws, such as the rules relating to public behavior on the Sabbath regarding work, worship, and leisure, both by his own teaching and by his actions on Sabbath day.

By preaching and performing acts of mercy on the Sabbath, Jesus was seen to be inciting public rebuff of strictures concerning genuine work on the Sabbath. Jesus was well aware that his teaching was motivating the calumny being drummed up against him. He therefore changed the character of his teaching from presenting theological doctrines in a propositional manner to narrating moral issues in the form of stories that did not allow the nefarious gang to bring direct evidence against him for inchoate offences.

Among those whom Jesus engaged, many were his detractors and doubters to whom he narrated moral lessons around local symbolisms that contained immediate connotations about his message of the Kingdom of Heaven. When Jesus was asked by his disciples why he spoke in parables, his response reflected that the messages in his narratives were no more esoteric to some in his audience than the siege of their spiritual understanding prosecuting their hardened hearts. In effect, the allegorical vernacular and familiar contexts Jesus used allowed him to connect deeply at an *affective* level with *all* those who heard him speak. Unfortunately, the language Christian proponents of scripture have used to engage with the scripture naysayers over the millennia has not always been conducive to advancing the spiritual message. Each side

gets embroiled in the use of their own idiosyncratic language rather than using the others' vernacular, which is not only counter-productive, but confrontational at best.

The vernacular can be described as a form of a language that a particular group of speakers use most naturally and comfortably in informal situations. People of the same profession, trade, or social position generally have similar attitudes and views representative of their past and present living coordinates, which they inevitably express in a common idiom unique to their community of belonging. It is not unusual for people who belong to the same tribe to be at their evocative best when engaging with their own vernacular. The motivation for conversing with each other through their vernacular is that they are more inclined to certain lines of reasoning positively, if it is expressed in the language of their heart, as it were. Or to change the metaphor, this language is the preferred diet which they ingest for sustenance.

The Bible itself abounds with figures of speech in stories that were composed to illustrate God's wisdom and power. The narratives are cast in phrases and images with which the audience of the day were familiar, and were meant to persuade them about the omniscience, omnipresence, and omnipotence of God the Creator of the Universe. When these stories are considered in today's context, they may come across as lacking cogency. However these narratives are not to be understood literally, but rather to convey God-breathed instruction of living a good life and celebration of creation by the Supreme Being. The Scriptures are writings that engage with the supernatural, and from which all of humanity can draw inspiration to conduct affairs during their earthly existence in order to justify the purpose of their creation. Scripture is not a treatise on science or any other theoretical discipline and does not pretend to elucidate natural laws and social phenomena. However, the Bible is not divorced from the practicalities of life and does allude to several natural laws and social transactions. For example, the Bible contains information that far predates the actual discovery of related principles in the field of medicine in matters pertaining to sanitary practices, bacteria, laws of quarantine, antiseptics, and blood clotting.

To a significant extent, disagreement with Scripture by its naysayers arises from their divergent views in terms of the place of humans on earth and in nature. Jesus had similar challenges when engaging with people of his time. He regularly adopted a vernacular as the *lingua franca* when narrating his parables to his detractors and doubters who were skeptical of his utterances.

A sizable segment of scriptural skeptics has traditionally come from the scientific community. Scripture and science have always been strange bedfellows. Dialogue between these camps is problematic partially because both jostling factions choose to use their own particular vocabulary to convey their arguments, resulting in a clamor of voices with little understanding of each other's views. Since the rise of modern science, the stakes of power, money, and credibility climb ever higher, and the mutually unfamiliar language employed by

the two parties simply makes their debate more adversarial. Depending on which lobby has held sway at a particular point in history, heads have literally rolled on one side or the other. It is a well-known blight on the Church that the noted astronomer Galileo Galilei was forced to recant and placed under house arrest for life by the incumbent Pope for advancing Copernicus' theory of the earth revolving round the sun.

The naysayers of Scripture among the scientific community allege that Scripture is mystical, is bereft of reason, and lacks empirical validity. The science community claims that they take instruction from a reasoned process and rely on natural laws and history for evidence. People outside this community of belonging who confront the *lingua franca* of the scientific community are often unable to comprehend the full import of what is being communicated. The language comes across as jargon and can confound the development of meaningful dialogue. In turn, theologians are often victims who also fall prey to the use of Scriptural jargon. They do not see the unsettling potential of using terms which, while familiar to clerics and the faithful, could further confuse those who already approach the Christian message and communicator cynically because of their predisposition.

In the mid-1980s, sociology professors Richard Petty and John Cacioppo developed an Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM) which postulates that message recipients decide to agree with the message based on cues other than the strength of the argument(s) or reason in the message. Petty and Cacioppo contend that the symbolisms constituting the local vernacular in the expression of the message are the most effective cues in persuading the message recipient in its intended direction. There are also considerable studies that assert the achievement of "oneness of minds" when "signals" coded in a vernacular familiar to a distinctive audience are decoded by these receivers in the way the message is intended to be interpreted. The science community will typically consider an eschatological approach confrontational, but will be more amenable to a language of Scripture expressed largely in terms of their own vernacular.

Jesus made good use of vernacular appropriate to his audience in his various teachings. For instance, when Jesus cautioned about getting rich through moral turpitude, he used the metaphor of a rich man finding it harder to get to heaven than it was for a camel to get through the eye of the needle. In medieval times it was common belief that to have wealth was an honor from God, and to be rich was considered virtuous. Jesus debunked that notion as he taught that the Kingdom of Heaven was available to people who did not crave material possessions or advancement by dishonest means. The needle's eye, a constricted oval cutout in the wall on the boundary of Jerusalem, was used by fugitives trying to avoid the public view of normal gates that allowed entry and exit into Jerusalem, when smuggling their ill-gotten wares in and out of the city. Often the camels which carried the contraband had to be stripped of their saddle, including saddlebags and saddle cloth, and perhaps even had to diet to reduce weight in order to contort their bodies and squeeze themselves though the needle's eye. Jesus

deliberately chose to illustrate a camel as the beast of burden because camels are the only animals that can crawl and push themselves forward on their front legs in a crouched position, which would make advancement through a restricted space somewhat more feasible than for any other beast of burden. Every one of the elements referred to in this story was common knowledge to people who lived in the area, and easily lent themselves to be incorporated as part of Jesus' language spoken to people of the region. In contemporary times, however, to what extent the likes of wealthy Mossack Fonseca clients who surreptitiously stash away illicit wealth in tax havens would feel indicted by Jesus' message is a moot point, especially if the strictures narrated by Jesus are not expressed in present day popular symbolisms.

Central to the skepticism of some scientists in accepting Scripture is the mysticism surrounding "the Kingdom of Heaven" being accessed in one's present life or in life hereafter. Jesus himself understood that many of the naysayers of his message regarding Heaven's Kingdom were seeking justification of his claims from empirical reality. His message was in a significant sense supra-empirical, and did not lend itself to empirical verification. Nonetheless, Jesus used similes that epitomized contexts with which his audience was familiar without the description of the Kingdom of Heaven losing gravitas on the "rule of identity." The rule of identity is a classical law of thought that states that each concept is composed of its own unique set of characteristic qualities, which the ancient Greeks called its essence. Comparing the Kingdom of Heaven to a mustard seed to address the apprehension of the Kingdom of God in Matthew 13:31-32 (NIV), Jesus said that in essence the Kingdom of Heaven is like a grain of mustard seed (botanical name *Brassica nigra*), a seed smaller than all seeds, which a man took, and sowed in his field. But when it is grown, it is greater than the herbs, and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and lodge in its branches. The mustard seed was commonly recognized by Palestinians as a small self-seeding grain that germinated in any soil where the wind or birds carried it, and grew with strong bark and branches. The varied reference to the proliferation of mustard seeds in the differing contexts of a garden, field, or orchard in the synoptic Gospels of Luke (13:18–19), Mathew (13:31–32) and Mark (4:30–32) is because each of these Gospels was delivered to distinct audiences, namely, Gentiles, Jews, and Romans respectively.

Jesus is suggesting here that the Kingdom of Heaven is manifest in little acts of righteousness that can often be as tiny as the mustard seed, but have potential to reproduce, grow, and give comfort to others infinitely. In that sense the propagation of the Kingdom of Heaven has its genesis in tiny bits of goodness, has no bounds, and tends to grow exponentially. Just like birds have occasion to rest on the boughs of strong mustard trees, all humans have the opportunity to get comfort through engagement with the Kingdom of Heaven by living a life conforming to the beatitudes. On the other hand, because of the very nature of the mustard tree's self-seeding character, its seed will often drop among other vegetation that inhibits the

development of useful plant life. The wayward seeds quickly sprout into undesirable trees and may choke the productive growth of valuable vegetation. Marsupial pests are known to take refuge in such unwanted trees. To that end the mustard plant can also be considered, like sin, a weed with significant takeover properties of good plant life, and therefore needs to be rooted out. Poignantly, the random increase of the mustard plant as a weed is also exponential. Like the mustard seeds gone awry, a mother's love when lavished on her children without careful judgment could be sowing seeds that future generations may rue. Children of such overzealous mother affection grow with a sense of entitlement that often stays unrealized, resulting in dysfunctional lives.

Just as Jesus conveyed his message of the Kingdom of Heaven through the metaphor of the mustard seed that related to the everyday lifeworld of his audience, scriptural doctrine could be presented to its naysayers using social and technical proxies that give the discourse a vernacular feel. Christians have a mandate in Mathew 28:18-20 to make disciples of all nations, presumably including detractors and doubters of all types. Jesus' eloquence about the celebration of retrieving even one missing sheep could not be more unequivocal than when narrating the parable of the lost sheep (Luke 15: 5-6 NIV) "And when he finds it, he joyfully puts it on his shoulders and goes home. Then he calls his friends and neighbors together and says, 'Rejoice with me; I have found my lost sheep.'"

When engaging with cynics of Scripture, there may be opportunities to configure some of Scripture's lessons with the relevant idiom and metaphor with which naysayers are comfortable, for the purpose of making the messages coming from the Bible more compelling to them. In Christian belief, God reveals Himself in both the written book of the Bible and the created book of the natural world. Because of the consistent character of God, these two cannot conflict. Bible literature has largely ignored considerations of interpreting Scripture in languages that are familiar to different disciplines and cultural orientations. Alluding to principles of natural and social sciences to articulate analogous areas of Scripture in a shared language that Scripture dissenters recognize is more likely to connect with them. Robust principles of communication give us reason to believe that such an emotion can be generated if Scriptural discourse with scientists is circumscribed in a well thought out vernacular that persuades the spirit of a scientist's soul to evoke the heart of God. A shared language with the scientific community may take time and effort to develop and nurture, but future studies can investigate an active process of sociological understanding between scholars of scripture and scientists that would facilitate the development of such a dialogue.

An additional and necessary part of presenting and re-presenting the Kingdom of Heaven is through values and acts of mercy. Such actions by Christians will give particular practical evidence to scriptural vernacular that could well elicit a discourse where callous attitudes to the divine are moderated and Scripture is seen, in the words of Pope Francis, as a

place of mercy where everyone can feel welcomed, loved, forgiven, and encouraged to love the good life of the Gospel when they hear the wonders of God in their own tongues.

Direct correspondence to Dr. Mario J. Miranda at Mario_J_Miranda@hotmail.com