

Spiritual Check: The Economics of Good and Evil

TRANSFORMINGBUSINESS

by Peter Heslam



The Czech Republic is known as Europe's most secular country. In this article Peter Heslam argues that this distinction needs to be understood against a background of church complicity with the communist regime. But he thinks things may be poised to change and highlights a book by a young Czech economist which, despite its biblical foundations, is taking the global media by storm.

Secularisation has proceeded at such a pace in the Czech Republic that religious knowledge has plummeted. It has left many young Czechs bewildered when they see paintings of Jesus in art galleries. When one young woman saw a painting of the crucifixion she asked, 'Who did that to him?', to which her friend replied, 'The Communists.'

Ironically, church leaders are partly responsible for the church's demise. Many colluded with the former communist regime, some even as spies. It has left a generation of regular churchgoers resentful about the anxiety and trauma they endured at the hands of the secret police. Many of them now help swell the ranks of Czechs who proudly proclaim that their country is the most atheist in Europe.

There are some signs, however, that things may be changing. Younger Czechs, like the two art connoisseurs, may have scant religious knowledge. But they have less recalcitrant sentiments towards religion than their parents. And it is towards *organised* religion, rather than towards faith and spirituality *per se*, that Czechs have gained an aversion.

But Czech desecularisation, if that is what it is, has other stimulants. One of them is immigration from more devout countries, such as neighbouring Poland and Slovakia.

The impact of this is exponential, rather than incremental, due to the 'religious fertility premium' – the tendency of religious people to have larger families. Also influential is the growing desire for identity, belonging, purpose and direction, all of which Czech secularism has proven unable to fulfill.

No-one, however, would have predicted that the book *Economics of Good and Evil* by the young Czech Tomáš Sedláček, which argues for the relevance of the Bible to the global economy, would become a best-seller, especially not in his own country. And the fact that this book is an academic one, written by an economist at the largest Czech bank who teaches at the most prestigious Czech university and advises the Czech government, makes its runaway success even more remarkable. His book has even been turned into a sell-out play at the National Theatre in Prague.

Sedláček, named one of the 'five hot minds in economics' by the *Yale Economic Review*, argues that during the twentieth century, the integration of economics, philosophy, and ethics was unravelled. ▶▶



Tomáš Sedláček
Spiritual Czech



Prague National Theatre

▶▶ As a result, economics has been reduced to a ‘value-free’ mathematical activity, when actually it is loaded with presuppositions. This is what led to the economic crisis of 2007 and beyond. Economics now needs to rediscover its purpose. This requires a fresh engagement with ancient wisdom, especially that of the Bible and Christian tradition, that will redirect our economy away from over-indebtedness and over-work towards an economy that serves more than merely the material dimensions of earthly existence.

It is not hard to find Church leaders and theologians making this kind of argument. Most have been influenced, directly or indirectly, by the socialist-inspired ‘liberation theologians’ of the 1960s, who developed radical applications of biblical themes to contemporary economics. What makes Sedláček’s book remarkable is that it is written by someone with his CV. Formerly an adviser to Václav Havel, the first Czech President after the fall of communism, he combines a career in banking and higher education with serving on the country’s fourteen-member National Economic Council.

In Havel’s Foreword to the book, he echoes Sedláček’s critique that economics has become almost a synonym for accountancy using these words:

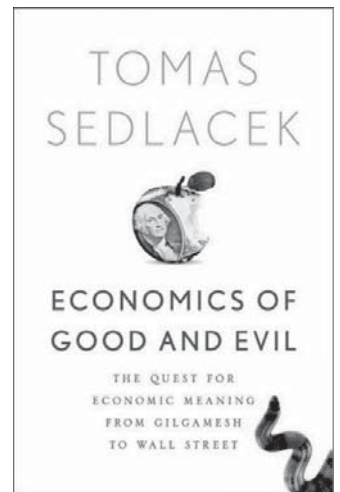
But what good is accountancy when much of what jointly shapes our lives is difficult to calculate or is completely incalculable? I wonder what such an economist-accountant would do if given the task to optimize the work of a symphony orchestra. Most likely he would eliminate all the pauses from Beethoven concerts. After all, they’re good for nothing...orchestra members cannot be paid for not playing.

Later he writes how, during his time as President, Sedláček represented a generation of young colleagues offering a fresh perspective on contemporary problems that was ‘unburdened by four decades of the totalitarian Communist regime’.

This freedom has evidently given Sedláček eyes to see the economic implications of the great stories of human civilisation from the epic of Gilgamesh to the biblical narratives, Mandeville’s *Fable of the Bees* and Tolkien’s *Lord of the Rings*. This is the subject of the first half of his book. The same freedom helps him also to see the religious dimensions of contemporary economics, the subject of the second half of his book. The normative role once assumed by myths and parables is now assumed by ‘rational’ or ‘scientific’ understandings of how the global economy works. We need to challenge, Sedláček insists, the tendency of economics to apply its worldview to spiritual realities while dismissing as illegitimate any applications in the opposite direction.

The impact of Sedláček’s book and play will be hard to quantify – sales figures are a crude measure. But it is stimulating fresh conversations in the mainstream media, student campuses and boardrooms around the world. Atheism may not be his country’s last word.

Although the friend of the young woman mentioned at the start of this article may have got her history wrong, she unwittingly spoke a profound truth. For Jesus’ executioners belonged to a regime that exacted exorbitant taxes, made the state all-powerful, enslaved ethnic groups and indulged in other terrors characteristic of communist regimes. And the Bible uses economic terminology – redemption – as a metaphor for what he did on the cross for the people of *all* regimes. ■



President Václav Havel

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