

INTERVIEW WITH PETER ARCIDIACONO, PROFESSOR AT DUKE UNIVERSITY



Interview conducted by Quentin Wodon

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EXCERPTS:

- “Knowing that there are others out there who share your values makes a big difference when operating in highly secular environments. Second, it serves a bridge between theology and economics, working towards a fuller understanding of each.”
- “At least once a year, when self-absorption rears its ugly head, I read *The Hiding Place*. It brings me to tears every time. It models for me how to live the Christian life and the accompanying unconditional love.”

You are a Professor of Economics at Duke University. Could you tell us a bit about the university?

I received my PhD in economics in 1999 and I have been at Duke ever since. When I first arrived, there were 23 tenure-track faculty. We’ve just about doubled in size. The university is secular with a loose tie to the Methodist church. The Duke Catholic Center is first-rate though Duke as a whole is not particularly supportive of religion, especially on issues that go against the progressive culture.

What is your main area of research and what do you teach? Why did you choose these fields within economics?

Much of my research centers on higher education, especially choice of major and affirmative action. I also have research in applied econometrics that has spilled out of the work on higher education. But my interests are broad: from teen sex to peer effects in the NBA. I got into working on affirmative action in part because there were so many strong feelings on the topic but little understanding of its actual effects. Part of that little understanding is the result of many not wanting to touch something associated with those strong feelings. But that was actually a draw for me... at least before I knew better!

Box 1: Interview Series

What is the mission of the Global Catholic Education website? The site informs and connects Catholic educators globally. It provides them with data, analysis, opportunities to learn, and other resources to help them fulfill their mission with a focus on the preferential option for the poor.

Why a series of interviews? Interviews are a great way to share experiences in an accessible and personal way. This series will feature interviews with practitioners as well as researchers working in Catholic education, whether in a classroom, at a university, or with other organizations aiming to strengthen Catholic schools and universities.

What is the focus of this interview? In this interview, Peter Arcidiacono, a Professor of Economics at Duke University, talks about his teaching and research. This interview is part of a series on Catholic economists in partnership with the Catholic Research Economists Discussion Organization (CREDO).

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Are you able to share your values in your teaching? What seems to work and what does not?

I try to love my students and model treating people with dignity. My first lecture in intermediate micro leads with economics as a great model of fallen man, where self-interest is the primary driving force. There are opportunities when students are struggling with life to say what helps me. I have a set of Bible verses that are particularly useful for anxiety. But unless I am sure they are Christian, I also provide other non-Christian examples of ways to deal with the anxieties of life.

Do your values affect your research? If so, in what way? And what are some challenges you face?

Yes. Being Catholic leads you to see the world in a different light, which also results in ideas that might be foreign to others. The challenge is to be honest about your work no matter what results you get; to not compromise on the truth. This is becoming increasingly difficult as research in some of the subareas of economics where I work is increasingly geared towards particular agendas rather than the discovery of truth and getting the 'wrong' answer is associated with bad intent.

You have been involved with CREDO for some time. What has CREDO achieved, and what needs to be done to strengthen the association and increase its impact?

When I think of CREDO, I think of two things. First, knowing that there are others out there who share your values makes a big difference when operating in highly secular environments. Second, it serves as a bridge between theology and economics, working towards a fuller understanding of each.

Is being a Catholic economist easy or hard, and why is that?

I would say both. My faith life makes my life better, including my job. The more I can keep my eyes on Jesus the more I can keep my job in perspective. But it is getting harder. Some just see you as ignorant. Colleges in general—and elite private universities in particular—are moving more from tolerating those who are religious to low levels of hostility. What is hard is standing up for what you believe to be true when it contradicts the narrative of the university. I have a fantastic job and until recently would have loved for my kids to pursue a similar path. Now I am not as sure about that.

What is your advice for graduates who may be Catholic or have an affinity with Catholic values and are contemplating doing a PhD?

Get support and keep some balance in your life. One of my undergrad professors advised me that getting a PhD was a marathon, not a sprint. But in order to have that balance, it is important that you keep the spiritual component as a priority. This is best done in community. I am forever grateful to the Catholic small groups I was a part of in graduate school. I am sure that they saved my marriage and kept me (reasonably) sane.

Could you share how you ended up in your current position, what was your personal journey?

I was an undergraduate at Willamette University, a small liberal arts college in Salem, Oregon. My future wife and I did a mission trip to help build houses in Mexico. When I was there I realized that the people I was interacting with were much happier and more at peace than I was. Making money became less important, to be replaced by quality of life. And the professors at the Willamette had a high quality of life. I played tennis, racquetball, and golf with the faculty there and dreamed of returning there as a professor.

God had other plans. I generally joke that God doesn't trust me with choices. I was admitted to one graduate school, University of Wisconsin, despite also applying to much lower ranked programs. It was the year John Rust let many students in... there were 53 in my first-year class of which 17 got PhDs. But somehow I muddled through. Since I had viewed a liberal arts job as what I would like to do, working at a university was a priority on the job market. I received one academic offer—from Duke---and that came in the second round. Things just sort of worked out from there.

Finally, could you share a personal anecdote about yourself, what you are passionate about?

At least once a year, when self-absorption rears its ugly head, I read *The Hiding Place*. It brings me to tears every time. It models for me how to live the Christian life and the accompanying unconditional love.

I am also passionate about my lovely wife and my five boys.

