

INTERVIEW WITH IDESBALD NICAISE, PROFESSOR AT KU LEUVEN



Interview conducted by Quentin Wodon

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EXCERPTS:

- “Especially in the human sciences, research is always value-driven. The most ‘dangerous’ theoretical frameworks are those that claim to be neutral, disguised in mathematical models, without making their assumptions explicit.”
- “For many years, I have felt like an outsider at university, frustrated by the terrible competition as well as the arrogance of some scientists. I kept doubting whether an academic career was my destiny. My friends convinced me that this was the way for me to follow my ideals. Today, I’m happy that I stayed.”

You recently retired as Professor of Economics in the School of Education at KU Leuven. Could you tell us a bit about the University?

KU Leuven was founded in 1425 and is a comprehensive university. It is one of the largest and most dynamic universities in Europe, with over 60 000 students (1 in 5 are international students). It scores very high in international rankings. As the name suggests, it is a catholic university, although the links with the church have weakened in the past decades.

This Catholic denomination implies that a balance is sought between a value-driven, engaged and inclusive policy on the one hand, and the very competitive business that characterizes universities worldwide. It is a difficult exercise: the pressure on faculty staff has grown out of hand, with a worrying impact on their work-life balance, on gender equity and mental health. Students and young researchers also experience that pressure, along with the wonderful opportunities that we offer them. All in all, teaching at university is a fascinating job, and I’m happy to continue working as emeritus.

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, Ides Nicaise, recently retired as Professor of Economics in the School of Education at KU Leuven, 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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What has been your main area of research and what did you teach? Why did you choose these fields within economics?

My research focuses on social inclusion, linked with social protection, labor market policies and – mainly - education. My PhD research in the economics of education dealt with the role of education as a leverage to grow out of poverty. When I started doing research in this field, economists had very stereotyped views about the intergenerational transmission of poverty and educational inequalities: research had revealed very attractive rates of return on education; hence, if poor children tend to drop out early from school, it was assumed that the returns were lower for them due to lack of ability, or that the poor don't behave rationally.

Together with other researchers in this field, I concentrated on alternative explanations such as inequalities in material, human, social and cultural resources at home, as well as social and ethnic discrimination and systemic barriers in education. The logical next step was the study of the effectiveness of policy reforms to foster equity and inclusion in education. I have been teaching subjects such as 'education and society', 'equal opportunities in education and lifelong learning' and 'educational economics', which allowed me to share my research insights with students.

Were you able to share your values in your teaching? What seemed to work and what does not?

Belgium is one of the most secularized countries in the world. I have never openly shown my religious affiliation with students, but given that education is always value-driven, my courses focused very explicitly on equity, social inclusion and anti-discrimination policy. In lectures on intercultural education, I referred to religion as a key dimension of intercultural tensions. One of my most interesting research projects related to interfaith relationships in primary schools: we found that children discuss issues such as creationism versus the big bang theory on the playground, while paradoxically, most teachers tend to avoid them in class. It was an opportunity for me to emphasize that school education needs to be holistic (including the children's religious and philosophical development), and to advocate active intercultural dialogue rather than so-called neutrality.

Do your values affect your research? In what way? And what are some challenges you faced or still face today?

Especially in the human sciences, research is ALWAYS value-driven. The most 'dangerous' theoretical frameworks are those that claim to be neutral, disguised in mathematical models, without making their assumptions explicit. Economic research often lacks that

critical reflection, resulting in caricatures of human behavior and indeed harmful prejudices. In the economics of poverty, for example, one of the popular topics is the alleged dilemma between the adequacy of social protection and work incentives: decent benefits are considered at odds with poor people's motivation to take up work. Implicitly, the behavior of unemployed people is reduced to a choice between leisure time and earnings from work. To begin with, this approach ignores the whole demand side of the labor market; but also the intrinsic desire of job seekers to work, their need for personal fulfilment, their quest for citizenship, etc. A more holistic labor market policy should rather invest in the skills, health, connectedness and well-being of job seekers and their families.

In the economics of education, I already alluded to the simplistic view that attributes early school dropout to irrational behavior or lack of ability or motivation, as if home resources and unequal treatment in education did not matter. More fundamentally, there are different concepts of 'equity' that reflect different worldviews and conceptions of mankind. The meritocratic view of equity, which attributes a major role to innate abilities in the explanation of educational achievement, tends to accept more 'natural' inequalities in education than the egalitarian view; the latter tends to grant more credit to children's potential to develop their cognitive skills (the so-called 'growth mindset'). Although the opposition between both theories offers interesting avenues for empirical research, I think that the egalitarian view is more consistent with the 'Christian worldview' than the meritocratic one.

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

I don't think that there is any tension between being a Christian and an economist. Being a follower of Christ is demanding, just because the key message of the gospel (the Sermon on the Mount) rows against the stream. It puts our worldly values (wealth, success, competition and power) upside down, and it calls upon us to identify with humble and suffering people.

I carried out a lot of policy-oriented research on social inclusion, social protection and equity in education, trying to foster social and educational reforms in my own country. Yet I saw some of our governments do the opposite: tighten access to social protection, reduce social benefits, push people into poverty and turn back equal opportunity measures in education. It can be frustrating – but this is not commensurate with the suffering of people at the bottom of the social ladder. We have no right to be discouraged, as long as this injustice persists.



Photos: A school visit in Phnomh Penh in the context of a programme impact evaluation for a Belgian NGO; a visit to some alumni in Hanoi; and a 'debate' between classes in The Swallow, a primary school in The Gambia.

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

I would encourage them to be critical: to check all assumptions of the models they use against their own values and examine the implications for the models they test. Of course, this does not mean that empirical evidence needs to be 'molded' into ideological straightjackets: we rather need to test alternative hypotheses against each other. This is genuine scientific research.

I would also encourage them not to hide their religious affiliation. I have a lot of respect for our Muslim co-citizens who publicly affirm their faith. Religion is, after all, the 'cement' of society. A secular society is OK, but this does not mean that religion should be banned from the public sphere. I have always felt that our students and young researchers are searching for more than just knowledge and methods: young people are searching how to build a meaningful future, and many of them have great ideals. Should we then hide our own values from them?

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

For many years, I have felt like an outsider at university, frustrated by the terrible competition as well as the

arrogance of some scientists. I kept doubting whether an academic career was my destiny. My friends convinced me that this was the way for me to follow my ideals. Today, I'm happy that I stayed; I discovered that many academics share the same ideals and I feel much more comfortable.

Looking back, I'm also surprised how flexible scientific careers can be. Ending up teaching in education sciences as an economist is rather uncommon. But the university provides the freedom to follow your own creative path and to achieve what you deem valuable.

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

University is also an incredible cultural crossroads. In our international masters' programme in education studies, we have students from all continents: from the Philippines to Peru, from Canada to Ghana and China and Japan, from Russia to Bolivia. It is a real privilege to teach such an audience. I learned so much from those students: many of them already have some professional experience. Each class is an unbelievable experience of comparative co-construction. I asked some of them to write down their own journey for a "friends' album" at the occasion of my retirement. I secretly hope to visit some of them in the coming years.