

INTERVIEW WITH ROBERT WHAPLES, PROFESSOR OF ECONOMICS AT WAKE FOREST UNIVERSITY

*Interview conducted by Quentin Wodon
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EXCERPTS:

- “I believe that all scholars' values affect their research. How could they not? They guide every decision we make. Economics is all about weighing costs and benefits in making decisions. Moral values are about what we consider to be costs and what we consider to be benefits.”
- “Unfortunately, the Western World -- and especially academia in these countries -- has become increasingly hostile toward religion in all its forms. Fortunately, the economics profession doesn't seem to share this hostility. Do good work and you will succeed. So, the welcome mat is out and there are innumerable research topics where you can do good and do well at the same time.”

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

I have taught for 30 years at Wake Forest University in North Carolina. Wake Forest is at the intersection of a liberal arts college and a research university. The classes are small -- our Introduction to Economics courses are capped at 35 students, other economics courses are capped at 25 students -- and the student body is fairly selective. U.S. News & World Report ranks Wake as 28th among national universities in the United States.

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

Wake's "teacher-scholar" ideal aims for a balance between teaching and research. My research began in the field of economic history, with a focus on labor markets, but it has evolved toward a broader set of issues related to public policy and moral issues.

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, Robert Whaples, Professor of Economics at Wake Forest 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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This progression can be seen by the titles of the books I have edited (or co-edited) in the past decade: *The Handbook of Modern Economic History* (2012), *The Handbook of Major Events in Economic History* (2013), *The Economic Crisis in Retrospect: Explanations by Great Economists* (2013), *Future: Economic Peril or Prosperity?* (2016), *Pope Francis and the Caring Society* (2017), *In All Fairness: Liberty, Equality, and the Quest for Human Dignity* (2019), and *New Thinking about Social Justice* (forthcoming). Since 2013 I have co-edited the journal *The Independent Review*.

I love teaching and have taught an overload of courses for more than a decade. I think there is more value added in Introduction to Economics courses than in any other, and regularly teach that class. I also regularly teach Current Economic Issues and Natural Resource and Environmental Economics. I have also taught courses like American Economic History and Economics of Entrepreneurship.

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

Yes. At the beginning of the semester, right after I have handed out the syllabus and discussed what will be covered for the semester, I say a short prayer in class. Usually it's something like this: "Almighty God, thank you for bringing us together this semester to learn economics. Please guide, guard, and protect us throughout the semester, throughout our lives, and throughout eternity." I close the semester with a similar prayer. Late in the semester I let students know that I've been praying for them by name throughout the semester.

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

I believe that all scholars' values affect their research. How could they not? They guide every decision we make. Economics is all about weighing costs and benefits in making decisions. Moral values are about what we consider to be costs and what we consider to be benefits.

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

Being a Catholic is an utter joy, so being a Catholic economist isn't so much easy or hard, but unavoidable if you are both a Catholic and an economist.

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

Unfortunately, the Western World -- and especially academia in these countries -- has become increasingly hostile toward religion in all its forms. Fortunately, the economics profession doesn't seem to share this hostility. Do good work and you will succeed. So, the welcome mat is out and there are innumerable research topics where you can do good and do well at the same time.

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

You never know where you will end up in the academic job market. Fortunately for me, Wake Forest was looking for an economic historian when I was on the market as a newly minted Ph.D. And fortunately for me they didn't have a lot of money to spend, so their offers were rejected by a couple people ahead of me on their list!

I became an atheist while an undergraduate, but life left me asking questions, which were answered when I was baptized at the Easter vigil mass twenty-five years ago, and felt the power of the Holy Spirit. (Interestingly, I was baptized the same year that I earned tenure.)

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

I am very passionate about the faith, regularly attend mass about four times a week, and am a lay member of the Order of Preachers (Dominicans). I am also a dedicated walker. I commute by foot and take lengthy walks on weekends -- averaging close to two hours of walking per day. While I walk I pray.