

INTERVIEW WITH BERNHARD GUNTER, ASSISTANT PROFESSOR AT AMERICAN UNIVERSITY

Interview conducted by Quentin Wodon

April 2021



EXCERPTS:

- “Overall, I don’t think that being a Catholic economist is easier or harder than being a Protestant economist, a Muslim economist, or even an atheist economist. On the other hand, being a good, honest, fair person is more difficult than being a person who does not care.”
- “I have always been passionate about fairness and justice. When I was about six years old, I went to my aunt asking her for a kitchen knife and a cutting board. Obviously, she asked me for what. My explanation was that one of their two cats had caught a mouse. I needed the knife to cut the already dead mouse in two to make sure that both cats got their fair share of the “jointly owned” mouse!”

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

With nearly 9,000 undergraduate students and slightly more than 4,000 graduate students, American University (AU) is a mid-size university in the nation’s capital. While being a relatively expensive private university, AU is proud of the fact that currently 70 percent of graduates receive need-based or merit-based aid.

The university was founded in 1893 by John Fletcher Hurst, a respected Methodist bishop who dreamed of creating a university that trained public servants for the future. While it remains today affiliated with the Methodist Church, it is not a religious university, but a liberal arts-based university, focusing on both teaching and research. The university is currently ranked the 25th best university in the nation for undergraduate teaching.

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, Bernhard Gunter, an Assistant Professor of Economics at American 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).

Visit us at www.GlobalCatholicEducation.org.

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

My main areas of research are development macroeconomics, debt sustainability analysis, and the social impact of globalization. I am also interested in analyzing poverty reduction policies, macroeconomic development strategies, and the economic challenges of climate change. I am fortunate that my main research areas are largely corresponding with the courses I teach at AU.

I am especially proud of having developed an undergraduate course that is half development economics and half moral philosophy. Students learn not only about the key issues that determine the lives of the people living in developing countries, but also about the ethical aspects of problems like those of poverty and inequality. Given the huge demand for this course by students, it has become my main course (typically teaching multiple sections of this course every semester), although I also continue to teach development macroeconomics and introductory macroeconomics at the undergraduate level and public economics at the graduate level.

I have chosen these fields based on my conviction that knowledge is power, and my hope is that the more my students know about issues like poverty and inequality, the more likely they will contribute to making the world a better place. Ultimately, being Catholic and having been exposed to Catholic Social Teaching are the foundations for having chosen this career and these fields.

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

I am incredible lucky to being able to share my values in my teaching of at least one course, which I am teaching on a regular basis. I probably could also integrate some of my values into the other courses I teach, but actually don't want to do that as I don't consider that to be appropriate for teaching introductory macroeconomics. Instead of sharing my values by integrating them into the curriculum of my economics courses, I prefer to be a good and fair professor. Most students actually recognize if a professor is fair or not. And hence, I am not sharing my values via the curriculum, but by being a dedicated and fair professor.

There certainly are limits on being a "nice" professor, not only due to my own personal limitations, but unfortunately also as some students misunderstand being a nice professor with not being able to being strict with regards to, for example, enforcing deadlines. There is a delicate line between being accommodating to students and actually being unfair to others by being too accommodating. There are many grey areas where it is

far from clear if an exception to the rule should be granted to a student or not. Even though I am sure that my being nice has been taken advantage of, overall (and based on my students' feedback) I seem to be doing fine.

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

The way my values affect my research is through the choice of what research I do, to the degree that I have a choice. For example, I am not interested in research that benefits corporations, but research that makes the world a better place, especially by focusing on economic justice. Compared to being an economist in some organization or corporation that has its own agenda, being an academic certainly provides more such freedom.

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

Overall, I don't think that being a Catholic economist is easier or harder than being a Protestant economist, a Muslim economist, or even an atheist economist. On the other hand, being a good, honest, fair person is more difficult than being a person who does not care. But unfortunately, I don't consider religion to be the key factor for a person being good or honest.

It could be argued that being a Catholic economist is easy because economics, philosophy and theology share some basic roots. However, most economists and mainstream economics have forgotten about these shared roots. To some degree, mainstream economics has become too technical, too sophisticated for its own good. Mainstream economics is focusing too much on fancy mathematical models, and not enough on the philosophical foundation of economics. That makes it slightly more difficult for conscientious economists, but I would not say that it makes it harder for specifically Catholic economists.

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

If you have the ability to do a PhD in economics, go for it. We need more Catholic economists with a PhD. On the other hand, we also need more Catholics in other professions and disciplines. Furthermore, it is not so much being Catholic that makes you needed, but the hope that you will be the shining light we Catholics are supposed to be. We are at a crossroads, and your higher education will be useful to take the right turn. And following up on the last question: don't expect that it will be easier to complete your PhD just because you are Catholic.

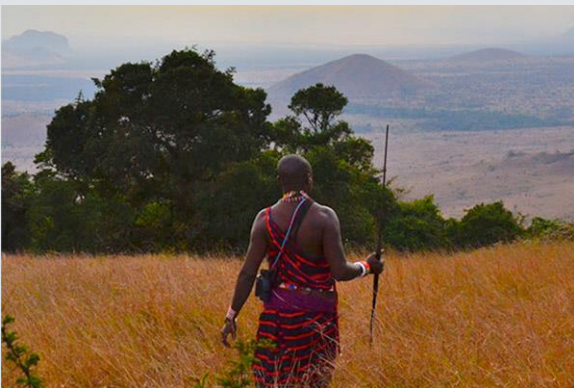
Could you share how you ended up in your current position, what was your personal journey?

Though I always wanted to make the world a better place, I did not imagine ending up as an economics professor. I had a previous career in international developmental organizations but then switched to focus more on development research. As a researcher, I found it useful to be associated to a university, and hence, I checked with my alma mater if I could teach in an adjunct faculty position. While teaching my first course in the spring of 2009, it became clear to me that I loved to teach more than I ever imagined, and I wanted to do more of it. After teaching in an adjunct position from 2009 to 2012, there was an opportunity for me to become at least temporarily a full-time professor as AU wanted me to teach more classes than I was allowed to teach as an adjunct faculty. So I became a full-time professor, initially for only one year, which was however renewed ever since.

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

I have always been passionate about fairness and justice. Even though I do not fully recall the event, my older cousins told me about the following event many times. I was about six years old when I was on the large farm of my uncle and aunt for summer vacation. One day, I went to my aunt asking her for a kitchen knife and a cutting board. Obviously, she asked me for what purpose I needed the knife and cutting board. My explanation was that one of their two cats had caught a mouse. I needed the knife to cut the already dead mouse in two to make sure that both cats got their fair share of the “jointly owned” mouse!

GLOBAL MAJORITY: A JOURNAL OF STUDENT RESEARCH



The *Global Majority E-Journal* (ISSN 2157-1252) is a biannual journal publishing on critical issues in the lives of the global majority: the more than 80 percent of the world's population living in developing countries. Topics discussed include poverty, population growth, access to safe water, climate change, and agricultural development. All articles are based on research papers written by AU undergraduate students (mostly freshmen) as one of the course requirements for AU's General Education Course: Econ-110, The Global Majority.

Source: <https://www.american.edu/cas/economics/ejournal/>