

# A Conversation With J. David Richardson

## EDITORS' NOTE

*This is the first in a series of conversations with Christian economists, inspired by Arjo Klamer's book, Conversations With Economists. Its purpose is to introduce our membership to the ideas and contributions, especially on the relationship between their faith and discipline, of some of our more published members. This conversation with J. David Richardson was conducted and recorded by Bulletin co-editor Bruce G. Webb on January 5, 1998 at the close of the ASSA meetings in Chicago. Some minor editorial changes were made to enhance clarity and readability.*

*J. David Richardson is professor of economics, Syracuse University.*

**W**hen, and under what circumstances, did you become a Christian?

I was a freshman at McGill University and had been a kind of social Christian up to that point but I encountered members of InterVarsity Christian Fellowship who to my amazement seemed to believe what they had heard as opposed to seeing it as a socially useful convention. The more I studied what they knew and how they acted the more I came to think this may have something to it. And the more I studied and the more I hung around with them and watched them act the more I decided, yes, it does. During my freshmen year I became, like them, a follower of Jesus who lives.

**Could you summarize your Christian pilgrimage since then?**

It's been a pilgrimage in which He has built into me a discipleship of emotion and caregiving that wasn't part of my personality by nature. I think that's been most beneficial to my wife and to my students and to my daughters and to those who walk with me in congregations. But it's not natural.

The other part of the pilgrimage that's more natural to me but has continually amazed me is that He has made me a successful scholar. Not a great one, as you'll see, but a successful one. He's provided me with graceful opportunities all through my scholarly life, many of which deepened and strengthened my faith even when they were challenging opportunities, so that I have no intellectual apology for being a Christian today. I am happy to engage anyone on intellectual grounds for my faith.

**I notice that you're wearing an InterVarsity badge; could you speak briefly about your association with InterVarsity?**

I'm wearing the badge because InterVarsity is having its staff conference right at this time at O'Hare and I'm attending it as well. I am a member of the board of trustees of American InterVarsity though I became a believer through the witness of Canadian InterVarsity. So I am a longstanding debtor to InterVarsity as well as to the Lord.

*Are you currently affiliated with a particular denomination?*

We've been independent Baptists for about ten years. But earlier we have been Methodists, and we have been Presbyterians prior to that. So we are a bit eclectic.

*Let me shift now to your professional life. Why did you enter the discipline of economics?*

My dad was a businessman and I found his descriptions of the workplace fascinating. I wasn't sure I wanted to be one but I didn't want to rule it out. I was always intrigued by how he worked. And the more I studied economics as an undergraduate the more I became persuaded that this is a relevant way to reason about human nature and it's a useful way of explaining how the world works coherently.

I haven't lost that conviction. Everything I've learned about economics deepens that conviction. It sets economics apart from other social sciences which in my judgement aren't as useful for reasoning power although they may be better in observational power.

*Why did you specialize in international economics?*

The funny answer to that is I fled from it for most of my undergraduate career and ended up specializing in it only because it was the only thing I could take as a second year graduate student.

I was in fear and trepidation, I never understood it, it's very confusing, it's awful, it's the subject I did worst in. So how did I end up in it? Well, having been forced to take it by the schedule I discovered both that it was worth figuring out despite my confusion, and in particular at Michigan at that time, that Bob Stern who was presiding over international, was a wonderful mentor and pulled me along into it because he thought I had potential even when I did not think I had potential.

*What are your current research interests?*

I specialize today in several topics. One is American export patterns and their determinants and effects, another is the effect of globalization across groups of people and across regions of the United States, and a third is what I like to call contingencies of globalization. What I have in mind in contingencies are social regulation, and economic regulation that ought to be played out on a global level, specifically antitrust in my most recent publication, but conceivably core labor rights and some of the other things that we are talking about as regulatory side agreements to international agreements.

*Could you generalize a little bit about the climate for Christians at major universities?*

I have always found the climate wonderful for Christians. I think I am different from many Christians who find it oppressive. I found it wonderful because I think the norm still is inquiry, with a certain openmindedness. If you and I as Christians are willing to be inquiring and to remain inquiring, even about fundamentals of our faith, I found that we have a ready acceptance among the community of largely inquirers at secular universities, and a welcome too, especially if we are also willing to do turf transfer and inquire on their terms as well as on our own terms. That's a wonderful opportunity because if we move to their turf and join them in inquiry it's hard for them to resist moving to our turf and joining us in our inquiry.

*Is it generally known — among your colleagues and students — that you are a Christian?*

Almost everybody who has any regular contact with me knows, I don't hide it. I use many of the standard ways of telling people both directly, verbally, sometimes in class and then symbolically through things I leave lying around. I offer to pray for and sometimes with colleagues and students, so yes, everyone knows.

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***It's one of my major goals in life to create more economists out of Christian students, to win them over, to persuade them that this is a wonderful place to practice scholarship and the gospel.***

*Are there any instances of discrimination or any examples of where you might have been harmed in any way in your professional advancement because you are known to be a Christian?*

Yes, there's definite discrimination. Serious Christians have to overcome the suspicion that on average they are anti-intellectual. That's a form of statistical discrimination, meaning it's actually statistically true that on average Christians are anti-intellectual, so everyone of us has a higher barrier to climb over to persuade our colleagues and our students that we have something worthwhile to say. And that barrier turns up sometimes in vicious places such as tenure decisions and in vicious places such as invitations to co-teach courses with colleagues or to contribute to symposia.

So yes, there is discrimination. I think we just have to swallow hard and be better than the average nonbeliever.

*What has God called you to do as a professor at a major university?*

My calling, as I see it now after almost 30 years of work, is to be as ambitious and excellent a scholar as I can possibly be with the effort and abilities that remain, but at the same time to be a visible and winsome believer in my environment, in the eyes of colleagues and in the eyes of students and in the eyes of staff and in the eyes of alumni, both things at the same time. The latter is where the Christian modeling really comes in.

*You spent some time teaching at a Christian college. Coming from a secular university, what differences did you notice?*

I thought very positively of the caring I saw going on at the college I taught at; the sense of community and responsibility for each other and for students was a wonderful, wonderful plus.

The negative thing that surprised me was I saw some shallowness in both spirituality, as distinct from caring, and in intellectual pursuit. I was dismayed by

that while being impressed with the sense of community.

*What do you think accounts for that shallowness?*

In American Christian colleges the shallowness of the spirituality is due to the lack of challenge that we see there from countervoices. There aren't any countervoices. It's there almost on purpose in part to provide a refuge, a sanctuary, for children who are at risk in a secular university and for faculty sometimes who would themselves be at risk in other secular workplaces. So the spirituality doesn't get sharpened and questioned.

As far as the intellectualism goes I think the explanation for shallowness there is distinctly American. I have found lots of answers in Mark Noll's treatment of it in the *Scandal of the Evangelical Mind*; his account of the distinct North American history and culture is one that I buy almost wholesale and have very little to add to.

*Is there a distinct role for the Christian college?*

I think so and here again I'll mention a person. Arthur Holmes has written a book on the Christian college that I find to be first rate, and his vision for the Christian college is what I would embrace, be attracted to. I don't know whether I would move to it but again I have nothing to add to that.

An earlier book of his on Christian worldviews helps explain what goes on at a Christian college in addition to how it's organized and again I have very little to add to that. I think there's a place for it but I don't see many that are fashioned after his ideal vision.

*Would you advise Christian students to become economists?*

Oh, wholeheartedly! It's one of my major goals in life to create more economists out of Christian students, to win them over, to persuade them that this is a wonderful place to practice scholarship and the gospel. But I always tell them it's a

high-risk endeavor and I scratch my head sometimes at the risks involved, because in our subject the degree of arid argumentation necessary to become an economist is so deep and so intense and so competitive that I don't think by temperament everyone should become an economist. I explain to students that risk and I have, sadly, watched students abandon their faith either because of the lure of things economic or because of the intensity of the battering that they receive in graduate school in economics. Those students are battlefield casualties. I feel very sad about them. It doesn't change my overall enthusiasm to invite students into this field, but it helps temper my enthusiasm because some will be lost.

*What role should ACE play in developing the next generation of Christian economists?*

I have long thought that ACE could help them in practical living as a Christian economist. By practical living I mean practical tips on what will help them as economists to survive, but succeed even beyond surviving, what to watch out for as economists in the profession, the temptations that are unique to our profession. ACE doesn't do a lot of that. I view that as the practical teaching of discipleship as an economist. I think we could do that. Lots of us in ACE have had multiple experiences in different venues for economists.

A good example of this was the paper on Daniel as a government economist by Gerry Brock. [Editor's Note: The reference here is to Gerald Brock, "The Christian Economist as a Dream Interpreter," *ACE Bulletin*, Fall 1994, #24.] I think we need more papers like Gerry's paper for an economist in a Christian college, an economist in a secular college, an economist in a secular university, an economist in the private sector, an economist in the financial sector. I'd love to see papers like Gerry's in that regard.

Now one way I think ACE doesn't help, unfortunately, and can't, the way we are made up right now, is that we don't help

the next generation of Christian economists much with substance. What should they be writing on? What's the wave of interest in economics for the future. And *why* I think that will probably be explained best in subsequent questions.

*Is there a distinctively Christian approach to doing economics?*

I think there are distinctively Christian approaches to doing economics. Many of them in fact, as in discipleship, there are distinctive approaches to being a disciple. They are distinctive in the triad that I describe as sign and substance and style, but the real meaty distinctions I think are in substance. I think that Christians have something unique, distinct to say about the substance of economics, and know something about gospel principles that have economic counterparts to them, such as in bankruptcy, that we simply don't usually explore. I wish more of us were doing that because we would attract the attention of other economists and because we would be making a distinctive contribution.

*How should the scholarly work of the Christian economist differ from that of his or her secular counterpart?*

Here I'll refer first to style and then to substance. I think Christians have a great chance stylistically to show that knowledge is worth spreading to the four winds as a kind of grace and that economic knowledge of any kind you want is a gift to the community for what it can improve in community decision-making of any kind. So the style of Christian economist's research and work I think is a give-away style, a graceful style, and that sets us apart from secular economists.

Their research, if it's good, is usually a proprietary goodness and secular economists will shepherd it, protect it, sell it to the highest bidder, not share data sets, not share theory, charge high honoraria for talks. I think Christians have great opportunities *not* to do those things, but in fact

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to spread their knowledge far and wide.

As to substance I have the conviction that though we work on substance that may be the same as other economists, we do have distinct contributions to make to many subject areas that stem from us being Christians. I have laid these out in several of the articles I have written. In addition to bankruptcy which I've mentioned I think we have distinct contributions to make to intergenerational exchange, and to stewardship accounting for nonrenewable resources and to the economics of altruism, and to the economics of trust and reputation. That's just the beginning of an illustration of the way the substance of what we contribute as Christian economists could be a great example of our discipleship and a contribution to the profession at the same time.

***If it were to be an example, would it not have to be recognizable as in some sense Christian?***

It has to be recognizable at some point. And often it will be natural for it to be recognizable in the first publication of such an article.

Take, for example, microenterprise lending, on which I think Christians have a great deal to say, because many of the microenterprise lending circles have been within churches. Well, on a research paper of that sort one can simply be direct on the example that Christian commitment creates in a lender circle that succeeds at small business loans. It can be an example right from the get-go. On some of the other topics it has to be visible eventually, but that can be in survey articles that draw together work on bankruptcy or on intergenerational transfers rather than in the papers themselves.

ACE itself can be a vehicle, or could be a vehicle, for pointing out the Christian roots in research that is not transparently or directly Christian in any way, such as in some of the research we saw in the panel yesterday on discrimination and on environment. It wasn't directly or visibly Christian but it wouldn't take more than

one or two ACE survey articles to show you that in fact Christians have made some of the great contributions to discrimination and to environment.

***Last year you presented a provocative paper entitled "Why Christian Scholarship Must First Of All Be Good Scholarship" at a conference on "Reviving the Christian Mind" held at Wheaton College. Since most of our members have not read this paper, could you summarize the main points?***

That paper was an expansion and a broadening of a paper that appeared in the *ACE Bulletin* in the spring of 1994. I don't know why, as an economist, I was asked to write such a broad paper on Christian scholarship of all kinds, but I was asked and I couldn't say no. So here are the main points. There are three of them.

One is that mere scholarship, mere professional scholarship, is worth doing well for Christ's sake. Second, I myself don't do it all that well. Third, integrative scholarship is an even higher, more demanding calling than mere professional scholarship. It's only to be done by a minority of scholars, only to be done by a minority of seasoned scholars, only to be done by those who have attained scholarly recognition in both or all of the disciplines they are trying to integrate.

***What kind of responses have you received to this paper?***

Largely negative. People are put off by the first and third of those main points. They view my conviction that mere scholarship is worth doing well as a kind of narrow co-option and sellout to secular values. They totally reject my conviction that integrative scholarship is for only a minority of us, seasoned in many, many disciplines with credentials in all. I think they are threatened by that conviction.

***You write, "As an economist, I see no way of doing [integrative work] well without sacrificing either the quantity or quality of my skills as a professional economist. And***

*I worry that too many of us, as nascent Christian scholars, have made an equivalent sacrifice, shifting our attention from our professional calling to unskilled and unschooled introspection about our methods, our ethics, our intellectual history, and our discipleship." Would you say that all Christians trained in economics are necessarily called to do mainstream economic research?*

I have a pretty direct answer. I think all Christian economists are called to prove themselves *capable* of doing mainstream economic research. They have got to do *some* to prove themselves capable of it. I think most Christian economists, not all, but most Christian economists are called to do it, just do it. I think only some Christian economists are called to integrative work, and when I say integrative work I mean integrative scholarly work; that's the work that I'm talking about in this paper.

*Many of the arguments you make in "Why Christian Scholarship Must First of All Be Good Scholarship" and elsewhere are theological in character, for example, your argument that "professional scholarship is worth doing as a disciple of Jesus, and worth doing well." Yet you are critical of those who would seek to integrate theology and economics, because economists are not properly trained to take up this integrative task. Is this a contradiction?*

I don't think so. I use theology no doubt to argue in that paper, or theological constructs. But I use theology in the same way as I use language or rhetoric or any other device in argumentation. What I don't do in that paper is I don't pretend to be doing theological scholarship. Nor do I think any of us should pretend to theological scholarship or integrative theological economic scholarship without scholarly training in theology. The one place I've changed my view from what is in that paper, however, does concern theology. I've decided that the language of theology that I do use in that paper admittedly is baby language. It's maybe enough for the purposes of the paper but I'm coming to

the opinion that the one place I'd change is that each of us has to learn theology, no matter what discipline we're in, to at least the extent of theological literacy, whatever that is. So as we have taken 12 years of English composition and grammar maybe we need x years or months or an MA degree in theology. That goes for economists as much as for anyone else. We could differ or argue about whether an MA is the right degree. But that conviction which I reached after writing the paper is born of some of the discussions I've had with my critics.

*In "Why Christian Scholarship..." you define scholarship "as the professional practice of intellectual art and craft, with the primary goal of influencing the creativity, ideas, and discourse of other professional practitioners." The implication here is that work which aims to influence policy, or address a broader audience than professional economists [e.g. the Christian community] is not really scholarship. Is this a rather narrow view of scholarship?*

I don't think it's a narrow view. The key word in what you read is *primary*. That's the *primary* goal of scholarship. It's influencing the rest of the profession. I don't think the other is scholarship. I think it's communication of scholarship or it's the teaching of scholarship. As such it's communication or it's teaching, but it's not scholarship. I would hold to those kinds of distinctions while not wanting to draw them so sharply as to say there's no scholarship in teaching—that's too sharp—or there's no scholarship in communication. But let's get things straight; scholarship is influencing other professional scholars, and that's not a narrow definition.

*Why is it important to distinguish what is, from what is not, scholarship?*

Because the role of the scholar is to be in a kind of battle for ideas in which the judge of the worth of the ideas is those people in society who use ideas and who

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evaluate ideas. So it's important to distinguish. Not all ideas are good or useful or valuable or even holy ideas. We need to have some mechanism for distinguishing good, useful, holy from not so good, not so useful, and certainly not so holy. What is the mechanism we have? It's the mechanism of peer review, it's the mechanism of debate, it's the mechanism of argumentation.

All of that, all of those mechanisms are mechanisms to distinguish good from bad, intellectual from nonintellectual, holy from unholy. Making distinctions is something we must do. Jesus tells us in castigating the pharisees that their trouble is that they can't distinguish cup washing rules from broader and far more important rules of Christian life. I think as scholars we have to make distinctions too, as to what is a minor contribution from a major contribution, a good from a bad idea and so on.

***It's important to make distinctions but is it necessary to establish a sort of hierarchy which seems to rank the work of some Christian scholars/inquirers above that of others?***

A hierarchy is inevitable. We can argue about whether the existing hierarchy undervalues certain kinds of contributions and overvalues others. But some kind of hierarchy is the outcome of a process that distinguishes, so I think we ought to accept that as a fact of scholarly life, then argue about whether the values in our present hierarchy are good, holy and so on. You'll find me to be a much more critical arguer on that issue than I am on the general work of mainstream economics.

***Christian theologians and ethicists, who are "unskilled and unschooled" in economics, often write about, and even pronounce confidently, on economic issues. Is it important for some Christian economists to respond to these writings?***

Yes, it is important for *some* Christian economists to respond to them. I think some of us are called to respond to them. I

think some of us are called to study ethics with the intensity we study economics and to study theology with the intensity that we study economics. But not most of us. Unfortunately among Christian economists, most of us when we write for these audiences are responding to the theologians and the ethicists. Some of us should, but certainly not most of us.

***Why is it necessary for Christian economists doing integrative work to obtain formal credentials in other fields?***

Remember when I talk about integrative work in this paper I'm talking about integrative scholarly work. If you accept my definition of scholarship as influencing other professionals in the discipline, then the answer to your question becomes fairly straightforward. To influence theologians one has to know enough theology to meet them on their turf. The only way out of that is to do joint work, which is not really a way out. Joint work between a theologian and economist necessarily involves some teaching of concepts, language, conclusions, argumentation, one to the other.

***Is this realistic?***

Well, it's costly in time, in effort, in money, in energy. It may not happen very often given the costs of it. But that's fine, it shouldn't happen very often. This is work for a minority of us economists to be doing, not for a majority. So it's fine with me if only a few go down this very tough path to do good work in integrative areas.

***What about integrative work which is judged to be of high quality by peer reviewers such as articles by economists which appear in a journal such as Economics and Philosophy or Douglas Vickers' recent book on Economics and Ethics? I would imagine that most of the economists who contribute to Economics and Philosophy do not hold degrees in philosophy or ethics, yet their work is judged to be of sufficient quality to merit***

*publication in a refereed journal. How would you characterize this sort of work?*

I'll bet you may be wrong on that, that more than half of the contributors to those journals have some sort of formal training in both disciplines, probably at the masters level. We could find that out as a matter of fact, of course.

Now more directly in answer to your question I think that kind of work is great. That is exactly the kind of journal in which someone who is doing integrative work should be publishing. The way in which we get trained to publish in that journal and make scholarly contributions to philosophy and economics is in fact by taking courses in the philosophy of economics, which are offered in many philosophy departments, or the philosophy of social science in many other philosophy departments, and then interacting with philosophers as economists. So I think that kind of work is actually fine and I'm in favor of it. What bothers me is the impression I have that the majority of members of our Association aspire to that kind of work without taking on the effort required to do it well in a peer reviewed outlet like *Economics and Philosophy*.

*In your article, "Frontiers in Economics and Christian Scholarship," you note that, "Markets require ethical, legal, and institutional foundations to work" and that, "Modern economics consequently builds on ethics, law, political science, and sociology." You also note that, "Modern economics is inspecting its ethical, legal, and institutional foundations much more attentively today than just a few years ago." This is obviously integrative work. How is this different from the sort of integrative work on which you think Christian economists spend too much time, and lack the proper training?*

I said "build on" ethics and law and political science and sociology. Extensions are not integration, building on things is not integrating them. Economists who try to build on those broad foundations

themselves do have to understand them at a level where they are able to build successfully. So it does require some extra work, just as I recommend for anyone doing integrative work. But integrative work is a step beyond work that builds on, and requires all the more preparation and scholarly probing and digging and peer review in order to work on it. So I was not in those sentences recommending a different kind of integration. I was recommending an agenda from other professions that economists would then use their mainstream tools to extend and advance.

*Do you see any value in formal Christian statements on the economy, such as the Oxford Declaration?*

Yes, I do. I think the *Oxford Declaration* was a good first step. But it was only a first step, and it was only a baby step, and it never got to the point where deep economics was relevant to anything it said.

*So do you think that a follow-up conference is necessary to make that sort of extension?*

Yes, but a follow-up conference that got to the level of deep economics would have to be organized a little differently, and would have to let economists and ethicists and others who took part in the Oxford process teach each other what was necessary in order to reach that next stage where both deep economics and deep ethics were showing in the statement.

*Are there examples of Christian scholarship in economics that you would deem exemplary?*

I've been a fan for a long time of Donald Hay's last book length treatment on *Biblical Economics Today*. But I'm also a fan of what I see going on in the agricultural economics community under the leadership of a small group that is arranging sessions at the agricultural economics meetings, much as our ACE sessions are. Chris Barrett has been instrumental in some of that work and writes in a way that

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I think is exemplary to those of us who want to make mainstream contributions but on topics that have interest to a broader Christian audience.

*What can ACE do to promote Christian scholarship in economics?*

If you accept my definition of Christian scholarship in economics, the answer is ACE can't do anything until I or others persuade you better than you are persuaded.

*What recommendations do you have regarding the future of ACE?*

A similar answer. I think ACE is great. I'm still an active member. I don't recommend any changes until I or others persuade you that changes are in order.

One of the things that has worried me over the past few years is how little response I seem to get to my convictions from other ACE members. I worry that perhaps I've been too blunt and haven't spoken the truth enough in love, but just spoken it in arrogance or in annoyance. I hope that's not true but I don't have any other explanation for what I view as conviction falling on more or less deaf ears. I'd love to know from my brothers and sisters in ACE what they think. ■