C.S. Lewis’ legacy kept alive at GU

Professors and students celebrate the life, works of Christian philosopher and author

GONZAGA BULLETIN

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Although C.S. Lewis died five decades ago, many students and scholars around the world still hold his life and his works in high esteem.

Six academics from an assortment of universities kept his spirit alive Nov. 22 by celebrating his contributions to philosophy and intellectual debate. The Socratic Club-sponsored panel included Dr. Forrest Baird, Dr. David Calhoun of GU, Dr. Brian Clayton of GU, Dana Mannino of Dominican University of Illinois, Dr. Jennifer Mills of Moody Bible Institute and Dr. Catherine Tkacz of Bishop White Seminary.

The group shared their favorite works from the author and philosopher in GU’s College Hall 101. The event marked the 50th anniversary of Lewis’ death.

Clayton, GU’s professor for the PHIL 417 C.S. Lewis course, said he believed that Lewis continues to be of great importance to the study of philosophy. Lewis, he said, is an excellent way for people to obtain a panorama-like view into the ideas of a wide variety of other Western thinkers due to how Lewis employed their ideas in his own thought processes.

“I see material to draw from, to discuss philosophical issues – to see what Lewis is saying at kind of a popular level and then to see what the more complicated versions of the issues are. And so he’s a starting point,” Clayton said.

Having received a start in philosophy because of Lewis, Clayton thought he could get GU students involved in the same way. As it turns out, he said, students are very interested in approaching philosophy from this angle.

Ben Walker

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Clayton poses with a recently published book by Alister McGrath that challenges some common beliefs about Lewis’ life.
Due in large part to how Lewis approached the issues in a very accessible way, Clayton also said that Lewis is important to remember because of how he called attention to issues that we face daily, but don't necessarily take the time to think about on a philosophical level.

"Lewis is an accessible way of getting at a lot of [moral issues] too, which I think are important for college students to think about too," Clayton said. "I'd be willing to bet that . . . out of my students not one in a hundred will have to make a decision about whether to turn the runaway railway car to the left-hand side or the right-hand side -- to make the decision between the 10 people over here and the Nobel laureate over here. Most of us will have to deal with roommates, or mates, or whatever . . . Lewis helps us to do that."

According to Bethany Bjur, a philosophy minor taking Clayton's class, Clayton has succeeded in conveying the importance of Lewis to his students.

Bjur said that out of the classes she has taken for her minor, the class on Lewis is her favorite.

"C.S. Lewis, he does a very good job helping you not feel like you're reading philosophy which can sometimes be very daunting," Bjur said. "He does a really good job of implementing it and showing how it's applicable to everyday life."

Bjur said another great part about Lewis' works is how connected they are and how the connections he draws have helped her to start looking for connections in other things around her. She said these ways of thinking can be useful even for those who don't share Lewis' Christian faith.

"The concepts that he has and the ideas he explores are valuable outside of Christianity as well," Bjur said.

Not all people believe Lewis to be as valuable as Bjur and Clayton do. During the Q-and-A session following the presentation, one person talked about how they had encountered an individual who argued Lewis was not a real philosopher. Bjur was surprised to hear this in light of the value she's found in Lewis' works beyond his most famous, "The Chronicles of Narnia."

"I didn't really know that he was a philosopher until I took this class because the only thing I had read was Narnia," Bjur said. "Having read some of his other books and then re-reading the Narnia series, there are so many philosophical ideas interwoven throughout the series . . . To say that he's not a philosopher, I think, is an ignorant and ridiculous statement."

Clayton said due to potential changes to core requirements, the course could go away.

"I think that would be a terrible thing to lose for the program," Bjur said.

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