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Socratic Club aims to 'follow the truth, wherever it leads'

By Peter Tormey

The Gonzaga Socratic Club not only allows non-Christians to share their views and challenge Christian beliefs but encourages them to do so. Having atheists, folks of other faiths, and reflective Christians engage in public discourse about religion is well supported by the Catholic Church and the Jesuit educational tradition.

Some might ask, "Is not religion too sacred to be bandied about in public?" Others might decry the audacity of trying to develop a rational proof of God's existence. After all, if faith depends upon a belief in the unprovable existence of God, why defend arguments against it?

One answer might be found in the works of C.S. Lewis, well-known for the books he wrote examining and explaining problems with the intellectual reasoning behind big religious and moral questions. Lewis' name has been in lights of late from the recent opening of the film version of "The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe," one of seven books in his children's series, the "Chronicles of Narnia."

The point of the Gonzaga Socratic Club, says David Calhoun, associate professor of philosophy and its founder, lies in the truths that emerge from the rich dialogue. The club includes faculty and students – many of whom are philosophy or graduate students.

The Club takes its inspiration from the Oxford Socratic Club, which first met at Oxford University in 1942; Lewis was the club's only president until he left Oxford in 1954. Raised Anglican, Lewis turned to atheism as a teen before returning to Christianity in his early 30s.

At the Gonzaga Socratic Club's first meeting on Sept. 10, 2004, Calhoun, a Baptist, spoke on the topic, "Follow the Argument and Two Other Socratic Principles for the Christian Academic." In

the address, Calhoun said few Christians today are willing to engage in a rational justification of faith, preferring instead to consider faith in "existential-fideistic" terms. By that, Calhoun said he means "the standard contemporary account that faith is a matter of 'just believing,' of passionately giving assent to beliefs that in principle cannot be justified rationally."

Calhoun disagrees with the notion that Christians should not look for reasons to ground their faith-lives. And Socrates, he said, is not as odd a patron saint for the club as he may seem.

After all, Socrates "sought to guide his life by principles of rational intelligibility that are entirely in concert with a broad Christian outlook," said Calhoun, who explained Socrates' method for rational argumentation (underscored by the injunction to "follow the argument wherever it leads") and linked it to a Christian account of faith and reason.

"The point of this club is to address these questions at a more fundamental level. How should I think about my faith from an intellectual point of view?" Calhoun said. "One of the key things that motivated me to do this is a prevalent view of Christianity, and religion in general, that has more to do with emotion and choice than thought and reflection. People talk about faith and say, 'I can't really provide reasons for my religious beliefs but I strongly believe in them.' One important goal of this club is to focus some critical analysis on those reasons."

After all, Calhoun noted, there is a long tradition within the Catholic Church of being prepared to provide reasons for faith. As is noted in the Bible: "Always be ready to make your defense to anyone who demands from you an accounting for the hope that is in you, yet do it with gentleness and reverence" – (1 Peter 3: 15-16).

At monthly public meetings each semester, speakers have broached topics ranging from philosophy Professor



The Gonzaga Socratic Club was started by David Calhoun (far right), associate professor of philosophy. Joining Calhoun for the showing of the new "Narnia" film are philosophy Associate Professors Brian Clayton (center) and Richard McClelland.

Michaek Tkacz's fall (2005) lecture on "Thomas Aquinas vs. The Intelligent Designers (and The Materialists): What is God's Finger Doing in my Pre-Biotic Soup?" to College of Arts and Sciences Dean Robert Prusch's lecture last spring on "Biology and Science." Also, panel discussions have covered topics such as how to think about God, suffering, and evil and the Christian stance on pacifism and war.

"The purpose of these presentations is to explore thoroughly issues of interest from all perspectives," Prusch said. "My focus was the interface between evolutionary theory and religion, trying to point out that there is no real conflict between religion and science. In addition, accepting the reality of evolutionary theory allows us to gain a better and more realistic, grown-up, perspective of God."

Biology Professor Hugh Lefcort, who is Jewish, spoke at a panel discussion in October on a topic of concern to both Christianity and Judaism: "How Religions

Can Survive Today in a Sea of Moral Relativism." Lefcort said he felt the group was open and receptive.

"I think it's a great thing that we have that kind of place to share ideas compared with, say, a state school where people stay in their own little areas," Lefcort said.

Philosophy Professor Tom Jeannot spoke at a meeting this fall.

"I think the Gonzaga Socratic Club is doing a very important thing for the campus: giving us the opportunity for intellectually serious conversation about the crucial issues of a Jesuit university," Jeannot said.

The slate of monthly meetings this spring will include an April 17 lecture by Lyra Pitstick on the topic, "Why Christ's Descent into Hell Matters for Christians."

For more information about the Gonzaga Socratic Club, including archives of past presentations and a schedule of upcoming events, please check its Web site at <http://gwweb2.gonzaga.edu/faculty/calhoun/socratic>. ■