Socratic Club aims to ‘follow the truth, wherever it leads’

By Peter Torney

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

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

One answer might be found in the works of C.S. Lewis, well-known for his books he wrote examining and explaining problems with the intellectual reasoning behind the religious and moral questions Lewis’ name has been in light 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 Colhoun, associate professor of philosophy and its founder, lies in the efforts to engage in such dialogue. The club includes faculty and students—many of whom are philosophy or premed students.

The club takes its impetus 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 in Sept. 19, 2004, Colhoun, a Baptist, spoke on the topic, “Follow the Argument” and Two Other Socratic Principles for the Christian Academic.” In his address, Colhoun said few Christians today are willing to engage in a rational justification of faith, preferring instead to consider faith in “an intellectual sense” terms. By that, Colhoun said he means “the standard consciousness that faith is a matter of just beliefs,” of passionately giving assent to beliefs that “a principle cannot be justified rationally.”

Colhoun disagrees with the notion that Christians should seek for reasons to ground their faith lives. And Socrates, he said, as not to odd a patron saint for the club as he may seem. After all, Socrates “sought to guide his life by principles of natural intelligibility that are entirely in concert with a broad Christian outlook,” said Colhoun, who explained Socrates’ method for rational argumentation (underscored by the strictures to “follow the argument wherever it leads”) and linked it to a Christian account of faith and moral.

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? Colhoun said. “One of the key things that motivated me to do this is a prevalent view of Christianity and religion in general, that it is more to do with emotion and chance than thought and reflection. People talk about faith and say, ‘It can’t really provide reasons for my religious beliefs but I strongly believe in them.’ One important goal of this club is to focus on some critical analysis on these reasons.

After all, Colhoun noted, there is a long tradition within the Catholic Church of being prepared to provide reasons for one’s 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

Michael Thoma’s fall (2005) lecture on Thomas Aquinas vs. The Intelligent Designers (and The Materialists)—What Is God’s Finger Doing in My Pre-Boot Sock?: in College of Arts and Sciences. Dean Robert Friesch’s lecture last spring on “Biology and Science.” Also, panel discussions have covered topics such as how to think about God’s suffering, and evil and the Christian stance on pacifism and war.

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

Biologist Professor Hugh Lovegrove spoke to a panel discussion in October on a question of common to both Christianity and Judaism: “How Religious Can Survive Today in a Sea of Moral Relativism.” Lovegrove said he felt the group was open and receptive.

“I think it’s a good thing that we have that kind of place to show ideas compared with, say, a state school where people stay in their own little areas,” Lovegrove said.

Philosophy Professor Tom Jeanott spoke at a meeting this fall.

“I think the Gonzaga Socratic Club is doing a very important thing for the campus, giving to the opportunity for intellectually sensitive conversation about the central issues of a Jesuit university,” Jeanott said.

The date of monthly meetings this spring will include an April 30 lecture by Lyra Patrick on the topic, “Who Christ’s Deceivers and How All Men for Christ.”

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://www.gonzaga.edu/depts/collap/colha/locutor.