

Test of faith

Students' religious beliefs lost and found in the classroom

By Kendra Kingsley
THE BATTALION

It's standing room only in Professor Richard Stadelmann's philosophy of religion class. One student raises his hand and asks about existentialism's role in religion; another wants to know the difference between a "cosmic Jesus" and Jesus of Nazareth. Stadelmann isn't stumped. He's been answering tough religious questions from students for more than 30 years.

"Often students don't know their religion, so when I go over the foundation of it they're really surprised," Stadelmann said. "I've seen many students who are here seeking belief and meaning."

Stadelmann's students aren't alone. During the spring of 2003, a national study conducted by the Higher Education Research Institute surveyed 3,680 students from 46 colleges and universities on religious issues. The study found that 76 percent of students are "searching for meaning and purpose in life," and 39 percent say their religious or spiritual beliefs have been strengthened by "new ideas encountered in class."

Stadelmann said his religious studies classes have been filled to capacity since Sept. 11, when students' curiosity about different religions soared. Now, Stadelmann said, many students are taking what they learn in the classroom and applying it to their own belief system. One former student, he said, made a remarkable career choice after learning about different religions.

"Several years ago, I had a student who was president of an atheist organization at A&M," Stadelmann said. "He took every single religious class we offered and argued with professors the entire time about why God could not exist. I got a call from him a few weeks ago, and he told me that he'd decided to become a minister. I wasn't completely surprised, because he put so much time and energy into proving that a creator couldn't exist that I knew he had a real interest in religion."

Stadelmann's current students have a genuine interest in religious studies, as well. John Wilson, a junior philosophy major, said taking Stadelmann's class forced him to think more critically about his Christian beliefs.

"It's humbling because you can go into class and think that you know everything, but what you learn can turn everything on its head," he said. "(The class) has challenged me to look at what I believe and how to respond to people who have certain arguments against Christianity."

Wilson said some majors, such as philosophy and science, are more likely to stir up religious debates and questioning. But for

Mandi Vest, a graduate student in plant pathology, an evolution-based class strengthened her belief in creationism.

Vest said she dated an atheist in high school and during her freshman year of college. That relationship, she said, forced her to question her religion and find the truth.

"I grew up having a strong faith because my parents did," Vest said. "But, when my boyfriend didn't believe in anything, I just wanted to know how he felt that way. He was an intelligent person, and I wanted him to believe what I did."

After Vest and her boyfriend broke up, she said, she struggled with rebuilding her belief system. While studying evolution, she said, she found more evidence for creationism than against it.

"In class, we learned a lot about evolution, and I started realizing that people make a lot of assumptions when they base theories on evolution or naturalism," she said. "But no matter what you believe, you have to have faith. Some people have faith in science; some people have faith in the Bible."

In spite of the course's emphasis on Darwinism, Vest said, she left her class convinced that evolution could not have taken place without a higher power.

"Seeing the complexity of life and seeing the processes that happen all around us secured what I had always known," she said. "Some people use science to prove God doesn't exist, but for me it proved the exact opposite and showed me that there's a creator behind all of this."

Other students, however, find a different lesson in the classes they take. Mike Surovik, a junior computer engineering major, said a philosophy class weakened his belief in some of the Bible's teachings.

"I grew up in a very Christian home, but it was always hard for me to believe a lot of the Bible's miracles," Surovik said. "My philosophy professor said you can't be a true Christian and a true scientist, and I agree with that. I still consider myself to be religious, but I don't take the Bible completely literally anymore."

Tori Sikes, a psychology graduate student, said she had similar problems interpreting the Bible when she left her hometown of Austin for Vermont's Middlebury College.

"The Bible teaches that if you're not a Christian, you're going to hell. I was really turned off by that," Sikes said. "When I went to college, I found that people were very open to (religious) experimentation."

Sikes said one of her friends convinced her to attend a Sufi healing session to learn more about Sufism, a mystic sect of Islam that



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