

The following feature story appeared in the campus publication Mosaic in December, 2000.

What is fair, and what is just?

Professor of Religion Frank Kirkpatrick engages his students intellectually in virtually every encounter, even when they least expect it. James L. McCloskey '01 tells an illustrative story of a recent meeting with Kirkpatrick, his thesis adviser. McCloskey happened to be wearing a leather jacket his mother had given to him. He hadn't thought much about it when he put it on, but the observant Kirkpatrick drew his attention to it immediately, for he knew that McCloskey considered himself to be an environmentalist.



What, mused the adviser and student together, were the ethical and environmental implications of wearing such a jacket? Under what circumstances and according to which philosophical beliefs might a person feel morally comfortable wearing it? After some consideration, they concluded that McCloskey's clothing choice was a laudable way of honoring his mother, a tenet of the Judaic ethical tradition. McCloskey says this impromptu dialogue shows how Kirkpatrick uses one-on-one opportunities outside the classroom to keep his students thinking about the relevance and importance of ethical inquiry in everyday life.

Kirkpatrick says, "I want students to learn to analyze ethical problems by identifying the facts, understanding the principles, and being able to project the consequences of various courses of action." This analytical process should, he believes, enable students to make decisions for themselves. He says, "I want students to see that they are the owners of their

moral values."

Service to Trinity

A graduate of Trinity's Class of 1964, Kirkpatrick joined the faculty in 1969. Appointed Ellsworth Morton Tracy Lecturer in Religion in 1987, he has taught courses on, among other things, the history of religion, atheism, fundamentalism, and the ethical traditions of a variety of cultures and religions. Associate Professor of Religion John Gettier calls his colleague of more than 30 years "the rock on which this department is built" and praises Kirkpatrick's "clarity of mind, extraordinary patience, and tremendous insight into people and the material he teaches."

Over the years Kirkpatrick's contributions to the College have also included helping develop the Guided Studies honors program for entering students, serving as chair of his department and director of the Individualized Degree Program for adult learners, and working as a member or chair of virtually every faculty committee at Trinity. He was also elected as secretary of the faculty, its highest elected office. Gettier states that Kirkpatrick's stature among faculty members is such that "no matter what he touches, he lends credibility to it."

Since 1998, Kirkpatrick has served as dean of the First-Year Program, a post that enables him to influence policy decisions affecting the program. During his tenure, he has sought to increase the number of departments that offer first-year seminars and to make the program representative of the best teaching and scholarship at Trinity. Recently, Kirkpatrick developed a proposal to require that six percent of all teaching units in departments and programs be devoted to First-Year Seminars. The proposal was given overwhelming support by the faculty at its December meeting. "He is one of the most dedicated faculty members I have ever worked with," says the programs director, Diane Martell. "He is very committed to promoting the highest standards of academic excellence for the First-Year Program."

An inspirational teacher

For many Trinity students, their first course with Kirkpatrick feels almost like a conversion experience. Such was the case for Elizabeth A. Speck 02, a Guided Studies alumna who first encountered Kirkpatrick in the "Major Religious Thinkers of the West" course. Speck, who continues to sign up for every Kirkpatrick course she can fit into her schedule, says that Kirkpatrick is the reason she became a religion major. She especially admires his ability to listen carefully to students, deftly and unthreateningly "picking their brains" with simple questions until the students themselves discover the flaws in their logic.

Robert C. Bohn 02, a history major, also considers "Major Religious Thinkers of the West" to be a milestone in his academic experience. "We read piles and piles of very dense and complicated material," he recalls. According to Bohn, however, Kirkpatrick's clear and thorough lectures systematically broke these complex texts down into more digestible sections. To their amazement, Bohn notes, students who originally considered the material daunting or dull learned it and loved it. Bohn has been a mentor during the fall semester for Kirkpatrick's first-year seminar on "Sex, Greed, and Power," a comparative examination of

the religious ethics of Judaism, Christianity, and Buddhism.

One of the teaching methods Kirkpatrick favors is requiring students to write and submit before class a few "critical questions" that probe concepts in the reading assignment, dissect weaknesses in the authors thinking, compare theories from other assignments, or otherwise employ careful reasoning with respect to the text. Says James McCloskey, "The critical questions are effective because you have to do some analytical work before you get to class." McCloskey also appreciates Kirkpatrick's skill in judiciously facilitating discussions involving topics on which people tend to have strong personal opinions, such as religious dogma, social justice, and bioethics. According to McCloskey, Kirkpatrick "does a good job of keeping things grounded in the intellectual rather than the personal level."

Thinking and acting ethically

Kirkpatrick, who earned his masters degree at Columbia and his doctorate at Brown, is well-published in the field of ethics. His fourth book, *The Ethics of Community*, will debut in April 2001 as part of a series of volumes, coedited by Kirkpatrick, that explores ethics from a variety of perspectives.

Here on campus, Kirkpatrick has served since 1991 as ombudsman to the faculty. The job entails mediating grievances that might otherwise require formal adjudication. Rules tell what is prohibited, he notes. More interesting to the ethicist, however, are the "rules of thumb" that address how we get along with each other. He says, "I like resolving disputes. I like asking, 'What is fair and what is just?' in each particular situation."

Leslie Virostek