

The Chance of a Lifetime

You're holding the hand of your business colleague sitting across the aisle because there's no longer any doubt that your plane is going to crash. The commuter jet goes down in a residential neighborhood, splitting open and tossing you 30 yards, seat and all. You're badly injured, but alive, while everyone else on the plane is killed. As a Christian, you wonder why God saved you but not the other passengers, most of whom were good people with loving families and bright futures. Did God play any role at all in the accident, or is there room for chance in the universe?

Such questions, normally the bread and butter of theologians, have captivated Samford business professor Tom Woolley for many years, especially since reading about such an accident shortly before he joined Samford's faculty in 1993. Around the same time, he immersed himself in the writings of English statistical science professor David Bartholomew, which include such provocative titles as *The God of Chance*, *Is It Rational to be a Christian?* and *Probability, Statistics and Theology*.

"Bartholomew's contention is that a rational person's belief must rest upon uncertainties," Woolley explained. "It is probability theory that provides the methodology for measuring uncertainty and therefore provides the Christian with the best opportunity for fashioning a rational basis for belief."

Woolley, who once considered attending seminary, saw in Bartholomew's ideas a way to combine his faith and profession. "As a statistician and an evangelical Christian, I found Bartholomew's suggestions provocative and evocative; his words rekindled feelings that had been dormant within me for decades." Woolley continued to ponder the intersection of faith and statistics, gaining a reputation as an exceptional teacher along the way.

In 2000, the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching honored Woolley as its Alabama Professor of the Year. The following year, Woolley led 23 undergraduate students in exploration of theology and chance at Daniel House, Samford's campus in London. There, the group had the



Tom Woolley explores the intersection of faith and chance.

unique opportunity to meet and learn from Bartholomew and Rev. Drs. Arthur Peacocke and John Polkinghorne. That experience, Woolley's participation in the *British Science and Religion Forum* and the encouragement of his British colleagues led him ever deeper into his statistical/theological inquiry. The British connection soon proved to be vitally important.

The Rookie

In 2003, Woolley was among only 35 scholars throughout the world chosen to participate in the prestigious John Templeton Oxford Seminars on Science and Christianity at Oxford University in England. Woolley spent this summer at the second of the seminars, which enable faculty to engage in scholarly research in science and religion, and to enjoy dialogue with each other about their scholarship.

Although he completed over 10,000 pages of preparatory reading before the first seminar, Woolley said his lack of philosophical and theological foundations has presented a significant challenge. "Of the 30 or so scholars participating in the program, roughly half are theologians or philosophers,"

Woolley said. "The other half are scientists of one stripe or another. The reality, however, is that a number of the scientists chosen for the program already have published in the field of science and religion, and as a result, have a reasonable grasp of the philosophical/theological language."

Woolley, a self-described rookie, said he has struggled to learn that language, but added that he and his colleagues in the program have come to respect each other and understand their respective limitations. "I now have a cohort of scholars, consultants and friends in a wide variety of fields who are actively interfacing with science and Christianity; I can ask them questions and dialogue with them without worry that they will view my questions as dangerously naïve," he said. Such dialogue has been the highlight of the seminar experience, he said. "The other participants have been unbelievably helpful and supportive of my research, providing me with a great deal of invaluable feedback."

Chance and the Evangelical Mind

For his seminar research project, "Chance and the Evangelical Mind," Woolley is studying the writings of

Oxford theologian Leonard Hodgson, who in the 1950s proposed that, “for the rational purpose of ensuring fair play we create conditions in which decisions shall be left to chance; for the furtherance of His purpose in creation God gives to His universe a mode of reality which admits of the existence and occurrence of such irrationalities as contingency, freedom and evil.” In his project proposal, Woolley noted that Hodgson’s theology has special appeal to him

because “it retains its orthodox elements while incorporating chance as a positive tool that can be used by God to achieve his purpose.”

Of course, not all survivors of air crashes, illnesses and life’s other trials find an agreeable or logical way to credit God for creation without blaming God for its course. The presence of evil and suffering in the world leads some to believe that God is either powerless, indifferent or simply doesn’t exist. To

them, Woolley suggests a fourth possibility—that God *is*, and is omniscient, omnipotent and sympathetic to suffering, but, to make humans truly free, also allows the degree of contingency that accounts for sin and suffering. “However, God, in his infinite love for us, has also given us a plan of salvation, redemption,” Woolley said. “Does this point to a way to prevent or eliminate suffering and pain in God’s creation? Absolutely not. However, it is the ground of our hope.” **SB**

Ethics Speaker Challenges Separation of Faith, Business

Chris Seay, founder of the University Baptist Church in Waco, Texas, and pastor of Ecclesia, the progressive Christian community he founded in Houston, is fussy about public restrooms, and not without good reason. The goal, he feels, is to get in and get out without touching any handles, knobs or assorted other bacteria-laden fixtures.

Speaking to Samford students in October as the School of Business’s 2004 Gerow Hodges Speaker, Seay pointed out that many Christians take a similar approach to their spiritual life. “How will I get in and out of this place without actually having to get my hands dirty, without actually having to touch something?”

As spiritually squeamish as many Christians are, Seay explained, “what Christ did was touch what no one else would touch, go to places no one else would go. That’s what was so compelling and beautiful, and that’s how redemption permeated the darkest places.” Contrary to that spirit, Seay said, many Christians have created a separate, hypocritical and, ultimately, alienating culture. As a result, he said, “people are saying ‘I don’t buy it, I don’t want to go there.’” He noted that the ethical failures of prominent, self-described Christians further isolate Christianity from the culture in which it could do so much good.

Citing examples from his book, *The Tao of Enron: Spiritual Lessons from a Fortune 500 Fallout*, Seay offered a unique perspective on how business ethics fit into the problem of self-defeating, isolationist Christian culture.

Seay interviewed with many people whose lives were upturned by the



Chris Seay

ethical lapses of Enron executives. He described meeting with an Enron employee who had multiple sclerosis and had lost her job, her home and her health insurance as the result of the company’s bankruptcy. Only two hours later Seay interviewed former Enron CEO Kenneth Lay, the son of a Baptist minister, and whose own son was studying to enter the ministry. “I had to tell him, ‘I can’t fathom how you can own 17 homes and this woman can’t pay her doctor’s bills,’” Seay said. “This doesn’t fit with the ethic of Christ.”

“How did we get to this place?” Seay and co-author Chris Bryan wondered. They decided such profound ethical failures occur because Christians adopt that “restroom” mentality, getting their spiritual life out of the way quickly and cleanly one day each week and bringing nothing of that experience into their daily business lives. “But the reality of the Gospel,” Seay said, “is that it permeates everything every place you live,

what you do for a vocation, the way you treat your family, the way you treat the environment, all these things.”

Seay said a recent survey revealed widespread dislike of evangelical Christians. The reason for that stunning finding, he said, is that although the message of Christ “is a message of grace, love, redemption, reconciliation between God and man, man and man, man and the Earth,” the people who responded to the survey apparently look at Christians and see only actions at odds with the core values of their professed faith. In much the same way Americans scorned Ken Lay, Seay said, “people were turning to us in this survey, I believe, and saying ‘unless you’re going to live what you say you believe—which is about love and grace and reconciliation—we want to have nothing to do with you.’”

“What we’ve got to learn to do in business, life, art and culture is live amongst the people,” Seay said. And, he added, “you must do business in such a way that instead of becoming the most hated person in America, you become the most beloved because you do what you say you’re going to do, you do it with hard work and with good ethics and compassion and love for the people who surround you.”

Seay left the Samford students with a troubling prediction, but also affirmed their ability to rise to the ethical challenges they will face. “You will be called to a place in life, in business and family, much like (Enron whistleblower) Sherron Watkins was, where you must either speak truth and live truth or deny the essence of the Gospel,” he said. “Sometimes you may have to leave. But more often, I believe, you learn to be a Christian in that place.” **SB**