Ron Delph, Professor, History, shares the importance of “wrestling with other cultures” during his winter-break study-abroad course.

I teach classes on European History at Eastern, and in particular on medieval and early modern Europe. One of the things that I find most fascinating about examining the culture and society of Europe in these periods is how different the mentality and perceptions of the people were. They perceived the world quite differently than we do in the twenty-first century. Their world was alive with spirits, divine power, demons, witches, saints, magic, and miracles. Their notion of how the world worked, and their place in that world, is simply foreign to us today, living on this side of the scientific revolution. I work very hard in my classes to have students grasp the mentality of the Europeans who lived in these earlier ages, because without understanding how they perceived the world to work, why they believed there was good and evil, and how they believed they could protect themselves from harm in this world, I think it’s simply impossible to understand their history or culture.

My appreciation for the need to grasp the mentality of these earlier times comes in part from having spent a lot of time living and working in Italy, especially in Florence and Rome. Many years ago when I began my career as a historian, I spent months on end living in these two cities, and as I began to become familiar with the art, architecture, literature and history of these places, I realized that I couldn’t begin to understand what these cultural and historical artifacts meant to the people who created them, unless I understood their own perceptions and understanding of the world around them. I became fascinated then, with learning all I could about the mind-set of these people, and how they understood the world to work, and their place in that world.
The class that I teach each year in Italy over winter break, Power, Place and Image in Florence and Rome, focuses on the history and culture of Rome and Florence in the later Middle Ages and Renaissance eras. As I teach students the history of these two cities in the fourteenth, fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, I put a lot of energy into helping them grasp the mentality of the people who lived back then; how they relied upon religion to explain the world around them, looked to the saints and the divine for help on a daily basis, and went to extraordinary lengths to try to mollify God through numerous works of piety, charity, and devotion. Many of the great works of art produced in the Renaissance came about as a direct result of men and women attempting to appease an angry God, or show him or his saints’ devotion, in the hopes that they would receive the favor of the divine. At the same time, there was no shortage of families and leaders struggling for power, dispatching their enemies, and laying claim to wealth and treasure. How they managed to reconcile all of this in their own minds makes for a very textured world view. Needless to say, much of this is not how most of us in the twenty-first century understand the world to work. It takes an effort for students to wrap their minds around this mentality, but once they do, they begin to get a much deeper appreciation for the history and culture of the time.

One of the things that I hope students take away from my classes, and the study abroad experience that I provide for them, is an appreciation for how social and cultural differences can be created by time as well as by geography. In many ways, wrestling with the culture of earlier historical periods and trying to gain some understanding of the people who lived back then is not much different from wrestling with a contemporary foreign culture and trying to come to an appreciation of the people in that culture. Their values and perceptions may well appear to be quite foreign and opaque to us, and will remain so unless we work to understand their mentality and values, and grasp how they perceive the world around them to work.