

## FAITH (ONCE AGAIN) SEEKING UNDERSTANDING: ALVIN PLANTINGA AND THE RENAISSANCE OF CHRISTIAN PHILOSOPHY<sup>1</sup>

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### Introduction

In the halcyon days of post-positivistic analytic philosophy, philosophy of religion and philosophical theology were considered by many to have been relegated to the forgotten realms of outmoded superstition they so richly deserved. This was particularly true of approaches from the standpoint of faith. Philosophical inquiry and religious commitment had finally been shown, in the opinion of many, to be inescapably incompatible.

Anyone aware of the state of analytic philosophy of religion at the start of the twenty-first century knows that the current picture could not be more radically different from that just described. Research programs abound, and many of the philosophers conducting them profess and defend a belief in Western theism in general and Christianity in particular. Many such philosophers number among the finest of this generation. There are many reasons for this amazing turnaround and many philosophers who share the credit—William Alston, Richard Swinburne, and Nicholas Wolterstorff, just to name a few. But there can be no doubt that one of the premier champions of this team is the American philosopher Alvin Plantinga<sup>2</sup>

Alvin Plantinga is John A. O'Brien Professor of Philosophy at the University of Notre Dame, and one of the leading metaphysicians, epistemologists, and philosophers of religion in America over the past

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<sup>1</sup> This paper is in large part a combination and revision of parts of two previous works: James Sennett, "Alvin Plantinga: An Appreciation," in James Sennett, ed., *The Analytic Theist: An Alvin Plantinga Reader* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), xii-xviii; and James Sennett, "Alvin Plantinga," in Graham Oppy and Nicholas Trakakis, eds., *The History of Western Philosophy of Religion*, vol. V (Dublin: Acumen Publishers, 2009), forthcoming. I thank Eerdmans and Acumen for permission to utilize copyrighted material herein.

<sup>2</sup> Plantinga's influence on contemporary philosophy of religion has been profound, but it has not stood alone. He has, along the way, made significant contributions to analytic metaphysics and epistemology as well. He developed a vocabulary for possible worlds discourse and modal logic in *The Nature of Necessity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1974) that is still in common usage throughout the discipline. Furthermore, the externalist theory of knowledge articulated in *Warrant and Proper Function* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993) has provided some of the liveliest discussions in post-Gettier epistemological research. More will be said about these and other influences as they pertain to Plantinga's philosophy of religion. It must suffice here to say that very few contemporary philosophers have had both the breadth and depth of impact on the discipline that Plantinga has.

forty years. He is also a dedicated Christian of the Reformed persuasion, whose worship and devotional life are as pronounced as his academic.

I first met Plantinga when I was a graduate student at the University of Nebraska. A friend and I drove from Lincoln to Wheaton, Illinois, to hear him present the 1986 Wheaton College Lectureship on Christianity and Philosophy. The lectures he presented there evolved over the next few months into his 1987 Gifford Lectures (I remember Wheaton Philosophy Department Chair Art Holmes quipping that it was quite gracious of Aberdeen to accept Wheaton's hand-me-downs). That same material then developed over the next few years into an important and impressive two-volume work in the theory of knowledge that would become the center of much philosophical discussion in the years to come.<sup>3</sup> Of course, as a second year graduate student I had no grasp of the momentous nature of those ideas.

But something else was happening at that Wheaton conference that was just as momentous, that was just as much Plantinga's doing, and about which I was just as ignorant. I did not realize how amazing it was, given recent history, that over 100 professional philosophers should be gathered together on the basis of their common faith and their common interest in issues at the intersection of Christianity and philosophy. Little did I know that such a scene would have been unheard of just one generation previous or that the difference between that generation and this was due in large part to the efforts of the man we had all come to hear.

In the spring of 1980, *Time* magazine reported, "In a quiet revolution in thought and arguments that hardly anyone could have foreseen only two decades ago, God is making a comeback. Most intriguingly, this is happening not among theologians or ordinary believers ... but in the crisp, intellectual circles of academic philosophers, where the consensus had long banished the Almighty from fruitful discourse."<sup>4</sup> This revolution has continued and grown in the nearly three decades since that *Time* report. Kelly James Clark names Plantinga as the leader of this revolution,<sup>5</sup> and *Time* called him "America's leading orthodox Protestant philosopher of God."<sup>6</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Alvin Plantinga, *Warrant: The Current Debate and Warrant and Proper Function* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993).

<sup>4</sup> "Modernizing the Case for God," *Time* 115, no. 14 (April 7, 1980): 65.

<sup>5</sup> Kelly James Clark, *Philosophers Who Believe: The Spiritual Journeys of Eleven Leading Thinkers* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1997), 66.

<sup>6</sup> "Modernizing the Case for God," 66.

Clark lists two catalytic events in the renaissance of Christian philosophy, and Plantinga is at the center of both of them. First is the formation of the Society of Christian Philosophers in 1978, when Plantinga joined together with other leading Christian philosophers to begin what has become “the largest single interest group among American philosophers.”<sup>7</sup> Plantinga later served as the third president of the Society.

The second event Clark discusses is “the presentation, publication and subsequent discussion of Plantinga’s lecture ‘Advice to Christian Philosophers,’”<sup>8</sup> his inaugural address at Notre Dame. In this address Plantinga issued a call for those who would become “the philosophers of the Christian community” — not satisfied simply with forensic, reactionary philosophical sparring with the unbelieving academic majority, but determined to explore the rich and profound philosophical implications of a wide range of Christian claims and practices.<sup>9</sup>

Over the past two decades, Plantinga’s challenge has drawn many young Christian scholars into the study of philosophy and the pursuit of “faith seeking understanding.” It is important to realize, however, that a big reason Christian philosophers have been able to take up that challenge is because Plantinga himself has done so much to pave the way. He has done a great deal to shatter the façade of invulnerability that atheistic philosophy boasted through the first six decades of the last century and to demonstrate that theistic claims can be rationally held and systematically defended.

Plantinga’s influence on Christian philosophy can be charted along two axes: content and methodology. The former has, naturally, received the most attention from proponents and critics alike. But the latter may be the more wide-ranging, since it has influenced many philosophers with research interests far afield from those to which Plantinga has contributed. A proper analysis must take both dimensions into account. Therefore, we will briefly survey the content of his program in the next section, and his pioneering methodology in section three.

### **Plantinga on the Rationality of Theism**

The main flow of Plantinga’s philosophy of religion career has moved through several stages:

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<sup>7</sup> Clark, 9-10.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.

<sup>9</sup> Alvin Plantinga, “Advice to Christian Philosophers,” *Faith and Philosophy*. Vol. 1, No. 3 (1984): 253-71.



- *The Rational Theism Stage*, an initial foray into the requirements for epistemically justified theism;
- *The Modal Stage*, an exploration of the implications of modal metaphysics for classical philosophy of religion issues; and
- *The Reformed Epistemology Stage*: a detailed defense of the rationality of theistic belief from a Reformed theological perspective.<sup>10</sup>

In the opening sentence of the preface of his first book, *God and Other Minds (GOM)* Plantinga states, "In this study I set out to investigate the rational justification of belief in the existence of God as He is conceived in the Hebrew Christian tradition."<sup>11</sup> In many ways this statement could also serve as the theme for Plantinga's career in the philosophy of religion. Always an epistemologist at heart, Plantinga has concerned himself for over forty years with the question of the rationality or epistemic propriety of religious belief.

From this perspective, then, the initial project of *GOM* is a surprising one: over one hundred pages showing that three venerable theistic arguments – the cosmological argument, the ontological argument, and the argument from design – all fail to demonstrate conclusively that God exists. But in the second part of the book Plantinga delivers the same verdict for the most common defenses of *atheism*, and one begins to wonder if religious skepticism is not the unavoidable conclusion. It is here that Plantinga prepares to fire an epistemological shot heard 'round the philosophy of religion world.

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<sup>10</sup> Plantinga has also offered new and creative critiques of arguments for and against the existence of God (*God and Other Minds: A Study of the Rational Justification of Belief in God* [Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1968]), a powerful attack on *a priori* probability and other notions crucial to any inductive form of the argument from evil ("The Probabilistic Argument from Evil," *Philosophical Studies* 35 [1979]: 1-53; "Epistemic Probability and Evil," *Archivio di Filosofia* 56 [1988]: 557-84), and occasional ventures into the deepest waters of philosophical theology, with typically well-argued and surprising results (e.g., *Does God Have a Nature?* [Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 1980]); "How to Be an Anti-Realist," *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Association* 56 [1982]:47-70; "On Ockham's Way Out," *Faith and Philosophy* 3 [1986]:235-69). At the time of this writing, Plantinga is engaged in a fourth major stage of research, which could be called the *Science and Religion Stage* – a so far somewhat sporadic examination of various issues at the crossroads of science and religion. This stage was foreshadowed by two controversial articles in 1991: a critique of Darwinian evolutionary theory ("When Faith and Reason Clash: Evolution and the Bible," *The Christian Scholar's Review* 21 [1991]:8-32) and an argument that philosophical naturalism is irrational given Darwinian evolutionary theory. (This argument was first presented in "An Evolutionary Argument against Naturalism," *Logos* 12 [1991]: 27-49, and was later revised and expanded to become chapter 12 of *Warrant and Proper Function*.) This stage did not get fully up to speed, however, until after the publication of *Warranted Christian Belief* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), the apex of the Reformed epistemology stage. The subject continues as a central interest for Plantinga, and was the subject of his 2005 Gifford Lectures. I do not treat this stage in the present essay because of its contingent status – both its conclusions and its impact on the state of contemporary philosophy of religion are unclear at this point.

<sup>11</sup> *God and Other Minds*, 3.

In the third section of *GOM*, Plantinga turns to a classic philosophical problem, the so-called “problem of other minds.” This problem addresses the question, “How can we know that other persons exist – that the bodies we see around us do not house very elaborate robots or automatons?” Plantinga examines the most promising argument for the rationality of belief in other minds, what is called the “argument from analogy,”<sup>12</sup> and shows that it suffers the same fate as the arguments for and against the existence of God.

But all is not lost. These results lead Plantinga to a startling and intriguing examination of the nature of rational belief and its relation to philosophical argument, which in turn leads to one of Plantinga’s most significant contributions to Christian philosophy. He argues that religious claims need not be judged any more rigorously than other claims. Criteria that count for rationality in other areas must also count as such in religion. Plantinga goes on to examine the standard of rationality to which belief in other minds is held, concluding that demonstrative proof is seldom if ever required for rationality. We certainly do not consider ourselves irrational for believing in other minds, even though there is no compelling philosophical argument for the conclusion. But then why should we think such a failing renders our theistic belief irrational?

The closing words of *GOM* summarize Plantinga’s conclusion and prognosticate the coming forty years of Christian philosophical endeavor: “If my belief in other minds is rational, so is my belief in God. But obviously the former is rational; so, therefore, is the latter.”<sup>13</sup>

In *GOM* Plantinga also constructed an elaborate and sophisticated version of the “Free will defense” against the argument from evil – the view that evil in the world is the result of human free choices, and therefore God is not to blame. Over the next several years Plantinga reworked and sharpened his free will defense, using the tools of modern modal logic. In *The Nature of Necessity (NN)*, Plantinga presents his mature version of the defense, based in a concept he calls “transworld depravity.”<sup>14</sup> This version of the free will defense has been recognized by

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<sup>12</sup> The argument from analogy reasons that our immediate awareness of our own behaviors as motivated by mental activity gives us grounds to infer that analogous behavior observed in others is likewise motivated by mental activity. The argument is generally considered to lack persuasive power because classical induction theory holds that an analogical argument based on a single sample case is unacceptably weak.

<sup>13</sup> *God and Other Minds*, 271.

<sup>14</sup> *The Nature of Necessity*, 184-90. *NN* is not a study in philosophy of religion but rather the presentation of a full-scale theory of modality – of the metaphysical concepts of necessity, possibility, and contingency. However, in the last two chapters Plantinga applies his modal framework to two classical philosophy of religion issues: the free will defense and the ontological argument. Plantinga also treats these two subjects, along with



theistic and atheistic philosophers alike as perhaps the most important contribution to the debate over the problem of evil in the several generations.

As I have noted, Plantinga argues in *GOM* that the ontological argument for God's existence fails. The ontological argument was a remarkable philosophical effort by the Medieval philosopher St. Anselm to prove God's existence based simply on the concept *God* itself. Plantinga's dismissal of this old theological chestnut was tentative at best. He cautioned, "I can scarcely claim to have refuted the argument *überhaupt*. But until other interpretations are suggested, the verdict must be that the ontological argument is unsuccessful."<sup>15</sup>

It is ironic then, though not at all surprising, that the most famous and controversial defense of the ontological argument since Plantinga penned those words comes from that selfsame pen. In *NN*, Plantinga offers a version of the ontological argument which he argues is valid and contains premises that theists can rationally accept.<sup>16</sup> He claims that, while the argument "cannot, perhaps, be said to *prove* or *establish*" theism, it nonetheless shows "that it is rational to *accept* that conclusion. And perhaps that is all that can be expected of any such argument."<sup>17</sup>

Here Plantinga continues the theme begun in *GOM* – that religious belief need not be grounded in compelling argument in order to be rational. That is, one can be rational in her theistic belief even though her reasons are not such that they would elicit assent from all reasonable people. But later in his career Plantinga began to argue that belief in God could be rational without appeal to argument or reasons *at all*. Those familiar with the work of the Protestant reformer John Calvin would not be surprised at such a suggestion. But to the philosophical world at large it first appeared to be the height of epistemological nonsense.

other issues in philosophy of religion, in *God, Freedom and Evil*. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974). While these discussions lack the sophisticated logical framework of the versions in *NN*, they are nonetheless technical and detailed enough to gainsay the label "popular" often affixed to them.

<sup>15</sup> *God and Other Minds*, 81-2.

<sup>16</sup> The version Plantinga presents is similar to those offered in the previous decade by Norman Malcolm ("Anselm's Ontological Arguments," *Philosophical Review* 69 [1960]:41-67) and Charles Hartshorne (*The Logic of Perfection* [LaSalle, Ill: Open Court, 1962]). These are *modal* versions (modality is the branch of metaphysics that examines the concepts of necessity, contingency, and impossibility). They are all based on a version of the argument presented in chapter three of Anselm's *Proslogion*, one chapter over from the saint's more popular offering. Here Anselm concentrates on the necessity of God's unsurpassable greatness, rather than on its purported facticity. Plantinga had examined and dismissed Malcolm's version of this argument (albeit reluctantly) in *GOM*. In *NN* he revisits his criticism and presents a way to repair it, resulting in what he claims to be a sound version of the argument.

<sup>17</sup> *The Nature of Necessity*, 221.

In a series of articles throughout the 1980s Plantinga developed and defended a view he called “Reformed epistemology”: that theistic belief can be perfectly rational without recourse to argument, and even if the one holding the beliefs is unable to defend them to someone else’s satisfaction. In other words, theistic belief can be *properly basic* – basic in that it is not based on other beliefs we hold, and properly so in that it is perfectly rational that we accept basic theistic belief. One significant objection raised in the early years was the charge that, even if theistic belief is rational in some weak sense, Plantinga had not yet shown that it could ever count as knowledge, even if theism is true. In other words, for all Plantinga had said, it may still be that one could never *know* that God exists without argument.

Plantinga’s response to this critique was to raise the question of what must be added to true belief to convert it into knowledge – a question that has bothered epistemologists since the time of Plato. Dubbing this mysterious conversion property “warrant,” Plantinga set out on a quest for the proper analysis of warrant that resulted in the two-volume work on epistemology that I mentioned at the beginning of this essay.<sup>18</sup> Along the way he developed stinging critiques of both traditional and contemporary approaches to epistemology. He then presented his own theory, called “proper function,” which states (roughly) that a belief has warrant if and only if it is produced by properly functioning epistemic faculties operating in an environment conducive to their proper function. In *Warranted Christian Belief*, a huge book that many consider Plantinga’s *magnum opus*, he argues that human beings have a cognitive faculty or mechanism (what Calvin called the *sensus divinitatis*) that produces warranted beliefs without propositional support.

### Plantinga’s Philosophical Methodology

The methodological approaches to philosophy of religion Plantinga has pioneered and shaped include:

- An *indirect approach* that challenges the skeptic to make the charges against belief explicit and philosophically rigorous enough to establish their point without proving too much;

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<sup>18</sup> See n. 3 above.



- A *descriptive approach* that takes the facts of human experience at face value, then attempts analysis that retains as much of their legitimacy as is philosophically feasible;
- A *modest approach* that understands rationality and other epistemic concepts to be person-relative in the sense that it is possible for one to be rational in holding a belief, even though others might not be rational in holding the same belief; and
- A *mature approach* that utilizes state-of-the-art tools in analytic philosophy, including sophisticated logical instruments like modal logic and probability theory and advanced dialectics that utilize the most current approaches in epistemology, philosophy of science, and other related disciplines.

These methodologies reflect the best of contemporary analytic philosophy. They have penetrated significantly into Christian philosophy, due largely to Plantinga's influence, resulting in a noticeable maturation in the discipline. Today's Christian philosopher must be well trained in contemporary philosophy in order to keep up.

Though it developed at the beginning of his career, Plantinga's rational theism stage was already teeming with these methodological nuances. His defense of rational theism in *GOM* is indirect in that he concentrates on showing the lack of formidable charge against theism. It is descriptive in that it turns on the undeniable claim that belief in other minds is considered patently rational, and that any attempt to deny such would be unacceptably revisionary. It is modest in that Plantinga nowhere charges the atheist with irrationality. And it is mature in that the criticisms of arguments utilize state of the art concepts and tools in logic, metaphysics and epistemology.

Plantinga's defense of his ontological argument is quite modest. Concerning its key premise he says, "I think this premise is ... true. Accordingly, I think this version of the Ontological Argument is sound."<sup>19</sup> In response to the charge that the argument is question-begging he asserts, "It is by no means obvious that anyone who accepts its main premise does so only because he infers it from the conclusion. If anyone *did* do that, then for him the argument is dialectically deficient ...; but surely [it] need not be thus dialectically deficient for one who accepts it."<sup>20</sup> In other words, Plantinga is not claiming to have *proved* the existence of God in

<sup>19</sup> *The Nature of Necessity*, 216-7.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 218.



any strong or compelling way. But he does claim that it is possible that theism be rational based on one's acceptance of this argument.<sup>21</sup>

When endorsing his free will defense, Plantinga displays none of this characteristic philosophical modesty. Instead he states categorically, "I conclude that the Free Will Defense successfully rebuts the charge of inconsistency brought against the theist."<sup>22</sup> However, Plantinga's free will defense and ontological argument do exemplify the mature approach to philosophy of religion. The complex modal metaphysics developed in the first eight chapters of *NN*, now a staple in the field, is brought to bear fully in the construction and defense of these two powerful archetypes of contemporary philosophy. Indeed, the logical intricacies of Plantinga's free will defense are so complex that virtually every critic who has argued that the defense fails has been shown actually to have misunderstood it in some crucial way. When the misunderstandings are corrected, the criticisms dissolve.<sup>23</sup>

The early stage of Reformed epistemology is clearly driven by Plantinga's indirect approach. The arguments are exercises in dodging objections with precious little in the way of positive argument. But Plantinga is not being coy or evasive. A major purpose of his early program is to clear out traditional but flawed prejudices against the idea of rational theism. This project is also a modest one. Plantinga is not claiming that theistic belief is properly basic for all who hold it, much less that everyone should hold properly basic theistic belief. Rather, the clearest message of the early Reformed epistemology project is that there is philosophical room for the *idea* that *some* theists may hold *some* of their

<sup>21</sup> I argue elsewhere that Plantinga's ontological argument is question-begging in an unavoidable way; *viz.*, that one can only understand its key premise if one already understands it to entail the conclusion. See James Sennett, "God and Possible Worlds: On What There Must Be," *Southern Journal of Philosophy* 27 (1989): 285-97; and *Modality Probability, Rationality: A Critical Examination of Alvin Plantinga's Philosophy* (New York: Peter Lang, 1991), 24-8. However, I have been forced to rethink my position due to Colin Ruloff's excellent analysis, "Plantinga's S5 Modal Argument, Obvious Entailment, and Circularity: A Response to Sennett," *Philo* 7.1 (2004): 71-8.

<sup>22</sup> *The Nature of Necessity*, 193. It is not coincidental that, since the publication of *NN*, the attention in philosophy of religion has shifted dramatically away from the logical argument from evil to the *inductive* argument from evil (also called the *probabilistic*, *empirical*, and *evidential* argument in the literature). This argument concedes that the concepts *God* and *evil* are compatible, and instead charges that the extent and intensity of evil in the world counts as strong inductive evidence against the existence of God. See Daniel Howard-Snyder, ed., *The Evidential Argument from Evil* (Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 1996). See also Plantinga, "The Probabilistic Argument from Evil" and "Epistemic Probability and Evil" for his criticisms of this version of the argument.

<sup>23</sup> See Sennett, *Modality Probability, Rationality*, 60-61, for a clarification of several vital points that have been misunderstood by critics, and an exposition of how Mackie in particular misinterpreted the argument (*The Miracle of Theism* [Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1982], 174).

theistic beliefs in a properly basic way – a triply modest thesis. Plantinga's later case for warranted Christian belief is indirect and modest in the same ways the early Reformed epistemology project is. It is also descriptive in its inductive and externalist approach to epistemology – an approach that assumes that beliefs generally considered rational are indeed rational, unless persuasive philosophical argument can be found against them.

### Plantinga's Influence on Christian Philosophers

Plantinga's impact on the resurgence of Christian philosophy in the ways outlined in the previous two sections cannot be overestimated. However, there is yet another way in which he has been vital to the revival — one that is not as public nor as measurable, but is nonetheless as important. I speak of the personal interest that he has taken in young and developing philosophers, many of whom were not even his students. And here I employ personal testimony. During the years that I wrote my dissertation on Plantinga, he made himself available to me in many ways. He always made time to speak with me extensively at various professional meetings. Several times he read many pages of draft material that I sent him, and composed thoughtful, penetrating response and criticism.<sup>24</sup> And through it all he took every effort to help me believe I could succeed – even when that success entailed constructing criticisms of his work.

In his contribution to Kelly Clark's *Philosophers Who Believe* Plantinga penned these words:

[I]t is ... hard to think of any task more important, for a Christian philosopher, than doing what one can to train and equip the next generation of Christian philosophers. This means seeing younger philosophers, fledgling philosophers and graduate students as of immense value. Their well-being and development as members of the community of Christian philosophers is a source of real concern: it requires our best efforts and any encouragement and help we can give.<sup>25</sup>

It is my testimony that Plantinga is a man of his word. These sentiments are not hollow rhetoric, but an accurate description of the attitude and

<sup>24</sup> A fact more impressive because this all happened before the glory days of email and attachments – all of this correspondence was of the snail mail/hard copy variety!

<sup>25</sup> "A Christian Life Partly Lived," in *Philosophers Who Believe*, 81.



concern he took for this fledgling Christian philosopher. And I know from years of experience that my testimony is by no means unique.

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