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Alvin
PLANTINGA

Greg Welty



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To my sons

James, Nathan, and Jeremy

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SERIES INTRODUCTION

Amid the rise and fall of nations and civilizations, the influence of a few great minds has been profound. Some of these remain relatively obscure even as their thought shapes our world; others have become household names. As we engage our cultural and social contexts as ambassadors and witnesses for Christ, we must identify and test against the Word those thinkers who have so singularly formed the present age.

The Great Thinkers series is designed to meet the need for critically assessing the seminal thoughts of these thinkers. Great Thinkers hosts a colorful roster of authors analyzing primary source material against a background of historical contextual issues, and providing rich theological assessment and response from a Reformed perspective.

Each author was invited to meet a threefold goal, so that each Great Thinkers volume is, first, *academically informed*. The brevity of Great Thinkers volumes sets a premium on each author's command of the subject matter and on the secondary discussions that have shaped each thinker's influence. Our authors identify the most influential features of their thinkers'

work and address them with precision and insight. Second, the series maintains a high standard of *biblical and theological faithfulness*. Each volume stands on an epistemic commitment to “the whole counsel of God” (Acts 20:27), and is thereby equipped for fruitful critical engagement. Finally, Great Thinkers texts are *accessible*, not burdened with jargon or unnecessarily difficult vocabulary. The goal is to inform and equip the reader as effectively as possible through clear writing, relevant analysis, and incisive, constructive critique. My hope is that this series will distinguish itself by striking with biblical faithfulness and the riches of the Reformed tradition at the central nerves of culture, cultural history, and intellectual heritage.

Bryce Craig, president of P&R Publishing, deserves hearty thanks for his initiative and encouragement in setting the series in motion and seeing it through. Many thanks as well to P&R’s director of academic development, John Hughes, who has assumed, with cool efficiency, nearly every role on the production side of each volume. The Rev. Mark Moser carried much of the burden in the initial design of the series, acquisitions, and editing of the first several volumes. And the expert participation of Amanda Martin, P&R’s editorial director, was essential at every turn. I have long admired P&R Publishing’s commitment, steadfast now for over eighty-five years, to publishing excellent books promoting biblical understanding and cultural awareness, especially in the area of Christian apologetics. Sincere thanks to P&R, to these fine brothers and sisters, and to several others not mentioned here for the opportunity to serve as editor of the Great Thinkers series.

Nathan D. Shannon
Seoul, Korea

FOREWORD

Alvin Plantinga has been the most influential Christian philosopher over the last half century. Prior to meeting him in 1987, I had only a dim notion of who he was and no idea how much he had already done to open the world of professional philosophy for sincere—even Reformed—followers of Jesus Christ. First as his student and fellow worshiper, and then as a teaching assistant and appreciative colleague, I have come to know Alvin Plantinga as a brother in Christ and a model of Christian philosophical boldness. Even though I have followed Plantinga’s career carefully and, through him, have come to know many of the Christian philosophers mentioned in this book (Nicholas Wolterstorff, William Alston, and Richard Swinburne, among others), Greg Welty has written a better introduction to Plantinga than I could have written. Although I find Plantinga easy to read (in part because I can hear his twinkle-in-the-eye Dutch voice), his arguments are often philosophically subtle. Welty explains these arguments with uncommon clarity. More than that, Welty systematizes Plantinga’s body of work more successfully than any other account I have seen. In this brief foreword, I hope to show that Alvin Plantinga is a sincere believer who knows Jesus

personally, that he is at the heart of the revival of Christians being taken seriously in the world of professional philosophy, and that his service to Christ's kingdom is most evident in the army of professional academics emboldened to overtly integrate their faith with their academic work, even in the midst of an academic world hostile to Christ's lordship.

Out of a desire to impress my pastor, I started reading Francis Schaeffer when I was in middle school and resolved to major in philosophy in college. At Covenant College, I took five courses with Gordon H. Clark; then I studied under John Frame and about Cornelius Van Til at Westminster Seminary in California. Before I started my PhD work at the University of Notre Dame, Schaeffer, Clark, Van Til, and Frame were what "Christian philosophy" meant to me. I still greatly value their insights and influence, but they were Christian philosophers called to speak to fellow Christians about the world of philosophy. At Notre Dame, I met Christians called to speak to fellow philosophers about Christian beliefs. Alvin Plantinga was the boldest of all these Christian philosophers. I took two graduate courses from Plantinga: "Ontological Issues" and "How to Be a Christian Philosopher." The title of the second course was exotic (and nonstandard), but it was descriptive. The course counted as epistemology, but the readings and discussion revolved around deciding whether a follower of Jesus should be an "Augustinian" or a "Thomist" in philosophical method. In chapter 7, Welty explains where Plantinga lands on this question, and it is on the side of boldness: unashamedly using what we know from Scripture to identify philosophical problems worth solving and to give us premises to use in solving those problems.

In the spring of 1990, Plantinga asked me to be his teaching assistant for a course he would teach at Calvin College one night a week. Every Wednesday for fifteen weeks, I would ride with him in his old van from South Bend, Indiana, to Grand Rapids, Michigan. We would talk philosophy during the two-and-a-half-hour drive,

arriving in time to join his father (Cornelius) and younger brother (Neal, not yet the president of Calvin Seminary) for dinner. The conversation was about ideas, almost always ideas close to what Alvin Plantinga calls “the great things of the gospel.” We would talk about philosophy and Christian doctrine all the way home after he taught his class. I graded the student exams and essays for the course. I doubt any of those students learned more than I did from the experience.

Alvin Plantinga and his wife sat in front of my wife and me in the worship services at the South Bend Christian Reformed Church for the five years I was studying at Notre Dame. I have been examining people for church membership for the last seven years as a ruling elder in a PCA church, and I teach through Jonathan Edwards’s *A Treatise concerning Religious Affections* at Reformed Theological Seminary. Based on Alvin Plantinga’s profession, life, and work, I am convinced that his faith in Christ is deep and genuine. He knows he is a sinner, whose only hope is the blood of Jesus Christ, and his aim is to serve Jesus with all his ability. Over the thirty-five years I have known him, he has grown in the fruit of the Spirit. He is a faithful husband and loving father; he is a man of prayer. When he writes about what faith feels like from the inside (that it is nothing like a leap in the dark), he is reporting his own experience. When he insists that he *knows* that Jesus rose on the third day because the Holy Spirit revealed it to his mind and sealed it to his heart on reading it in the Word of God, he is describing what happens to him as he reads Luke 24. Hearing anyone express their faith in this way is thrilling. What is distinctive about Plantinga’s profession is his audience: the world of professional philosophy.

By “the world of professional philosophy” I mean the community of people paid to teach and “do” philosophy: people with PhDs in philosophy, with full-time positions at colleges or universities, especially schools with graduate programs in philosophy. Plantinga’s

audience is this world. When he entered this world in the 1950s, it already had the characteristics of what Charles Taylor calls “secularism-3” in *A Secular Age*: it was obvious to everyone in that world that there is no spiritual reality and that only ignorant people take religion seriously. It would have been easy (and worldly-wise) for Plantinga to keep his Christian convictions to himself and focus his research on the questions that already seemed important to his peers and professors. He didn’t. Welty’s brief description of Plantinga’s education highlights his discovery, as a student, that the arguments against what he believed about God were weak. Exposing the weakness of anti-theistic arguments remained a lifelong passion for Plantinga. The audience he wanted to convince was the world of professional philosophers. Although I have not heard Plantinga refer to his work as a calling, it seems evident to me that he was called to defend the Christian faith to the world of professional philosophers.

In his closing chapter, Welty rightly asks why so much of Plantinga’s career has been spent defending (mere) theism. The question is apt, since Plantinga repeatedly exhorts Christian philosophers to defend the full range of Christian beliefs, and not merely the existence of God or the coherence of the idea of God. Welty correctly notes that Plantinga’s work in *Warranted Christian Belief* and “O Felix Culpa” defends specifically Christian beliefs, and that these are significant accomplishments. It seems likely, though, that Plantinga gives so much attention to defending theism because the world of professional philosophy struggles to get past objections to theism. His primary audience is that world, so their questions set the agenda for his work. He wants other Christian philosophers to use their philosophical training to serve other communities, and especially to serve the church. I keep up with about two dozen of Plantinga’s former graduate students at Notre Dame. We all have the experience of being encouraged in our work for the church by Alvin Plantinga.

The impact that Plantinga has had on the tiny world of professional philosophy over the last fifty years is admitted by everyone in that world. In 1991, I carried his briefcase (literally) when he defended his *Warrant and Proper Function* at an “author meets critics” session at a meeting of the American Philosophical Society. (“Author meets critics” sessions are by invitation only and are, in practice, the highest honor that the APA extends. Only the most influential philosophers in the world each year are invited, and three “critics” prepare essays that they read during the first part of the session. The rest of the time is spent by the author responding to the critics and then taking questions from the floor.) The room was packed. Nearly thirty of the philosophers present in the room had authored views that Plantinga had rejected in *Warrant: The Current Debate*, the book that preceded *Warrant and Proper Function*. This was their first opportunity to take him on in public. The importance of his work was recognized by all, and before long the focus of the discussion was whether one could embrace his model of warrant (as proper function) without also acknowledging the existence of a Designer of our cognitive equipment. In a room full of people dismissive of Christian beliefs about God, Plantinga took this question seriously. He allowed that one could try to believe in design without a Designer, but he said that it would be hard to do so. He had no trouble believing in *and worshipping* the Designer, and he suggested that they would find epistemology less frustrating if they did, too.

Commending belief in a Designer is not evangelism. When the audience consists of over one hundred anti-theist philosophers, though, it isn’t chopped liver. No altar call was issued, but the audience’s inability to find holes in either Plantinga’s model of warrant or the epistemological advantages of having a divine Designer in the model made it hard for his critics to dismiss Christian convictions. Maybe just as important was the effect that Plantinga’s boldness had on the Christian philosophers in

the room (and those they told about the event). It is possible to read Plantinga's entire corpus and conclude that while he is clearly very good at what philosophers do, he doesn't do much that goes beyond what can be found in Edwards or Bavinck. From a theologically Reformed perspective—as Welty deftly discusses in chapter 8—Plantinga's work sometimes strays from Reformed convictions. Plantinga is not Berkhof, but it is not his aim to be Berkhof. It is to be a Christian defending and commending Christian belief to other philosophers. Plantinga is very, very good at this task.

What makes Plantinga a thinker worthy of including in a series with Hume, Marx, Derrida, and others is the (now) hundreds of Christian academics who have been inspired by his exhortations and example to use their talents, training, and time to serve the church and to deploy what they know from Scripture in their work. Plantinga worked with a handful of brave believers to form the Society of Christian Philosophers in 1978. It is now the largest philosophical society in the world. Even though Plantinga never offers a complete theory of apologetics (and never takes systematic positions on the possibility of neutral common ground, the role of presuppositions, or the use of evidences), nearly all of his work *does* apologetics: he gives reasons for the hope he has in Christ, answers objections to Christian belief, exposes the futility of non-Christian belief systems, and comforts believers who doubt. The Christians who studied philosophy under him, heard him at conferences, or read his books typically were emboldened to speak more openly about their faith and to focus their work on problems that would meet needs outside merely academic discussions. Beyond the narrow world of professional philosophy, Plantinga's approach to Christian scholarship in general now figures prominently in the philosophy of education statements at numerous Christian colleges and universities. Plantinga's "Christian philosophical method," which Welty explains so well in chapter 7, is easily generalized to all

academic disciplines. I know this because for the last fifteen years I have been the coordinator of faculty development at Covenant College. I have used Plantinga's approach to Christian scholarship as a guide to the integration of Reformed Christianity with all the disciplines at Covenant. Christian scholars with PhDs in psychology, English literature, education, and biology (to name only a few) have deepened and extended the role of their faith in their work, working off of Plantinga's approach.

Plantinga is a "great thinker" because of his impact. I cannot end this foreword, though, without emphasizing what a fine job Greg Welty has done in this volume. His writing is clear, carefully organized, and philosophically precise. His summaries of Plantinga's arguments show a serious command of both Plantinga's texts and the issues involved. Welty is concise without being pedantic. He uses direct quotations from Plantinga's works in a way that allows Plantinga to speak for himself. His critique of Plantinga in chapter 8 asks the questions most likely to be of interest or concern to thoughtful Reformed readers, and his analysis is charitable, even when it is expressing misgivings. This volume is a reliable guide to Plantinga's work. I will be making it required reading for my undergraduate philosophy students.

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PREFACE

This book draws upon nearly twenty years of teaching Alvin Plantinga's philosophy in the seminary classroom at the master's and doctoral levels. While he is only one of many philosophers to whom I expose my students, I think he is one of the "greats," not only in religious philosophy, but also in philosophy more generally (for reasons you will soon discover). My goal in teaching philosophy is to make the subject accessible, while helping students do four things: cultivate intellectual skills that are useful for Christian life and ministry, acquire intellectual insight into the relationship between one's theological conclusions and philosophical precommitments, encounter the rich heritage of Christian contributions to philosophy, and begin preparing a Christian defense against the wide range of criticisms that have become influential in our day. Philosophy is a hard subject, but it is also an extremely useful subject; evangelicals only hurt themselves and others when they pretend otherwise on either count.

I first heard of Plantinga in 1991 as a philosophy major at UCLA, when my history of philosophy professor, Art Flemming, happened to make an offhand comment during office hours. He

commented that “the Reformed epistemologists like Plantinga were doing good work.” “Who is that?” I wondered, and a follow-up in the campus library led me to *Faith and Rationality* (1983), edited by Plantinga and Nicholas Wolterstorff. I was stunned by the rich series of reflections in this book (as well as in Wolterstorff’s *Reason within the Bounds of Religion*). I had been a Christian for five years, since my conversion in high school, but I had never heard of these thinkers. Then in 1992, as a student in Robert Adams’s Introduction to Philosophy of Religion course at UCLA, there were brief references in his lectures to Plantinga’s material on the ontological argument. Adams himself was a major contributor to the contemporary revival of this medieval argument for the existence of God, but through him I became acquainted with Plantinga’s contributions as well.

Later, as a student at Westminster Seminary (California), I was introduced to John Frame’s comparison of Plantinga and Cornelius Van Til, largely through “Appendix I: The New Reformed Epistemology,” in Frame’s *The Doctrine of the Knowledge of God* (the main text for his Christian Mind course). In his Modern Apologetics course, Frame also assigned Geivett and Sweetman’s *Contemporary Perspectives on Religious Epistemology*, which included a whole section on Reformed epistemology. My interest in Plantinga’s contributions was thereby sustained, though he certainly wasn’t central to the Westminster curriculum.

It was during my MPhil and DPhil years at Oxford that my awareness of Plantinga’s work became deeper, more comprehensive, and even life-changing. I had hitherto been dazzled by Plantinga’s gift for seemingly defeating his opponents with one hand tied behind his back: he presented an author’s position more strongly than the author himself had presented it, only to demolish it anyway. And his whole presentation was seasoned with a zany sense of humor, so what’s not to like? I was happy to have such a spokesman for the Christian faith in “my” corner. But

my supervisor, Richard Swinburne, seemed to be on the opposite side of Plantinga in many philosophical debates, and, in my naïveté, this was bewildering to me. Swinburne was an internalist in epistemology, but Plantinga was an externalist. He thought that probabilistic, cumulative-case natural theology worked, but Plantinga had severe doubts. He thought that God's ignorance of the future was vast, but Plantinga defended a traditional view of divine omniscience. He thought that recent, "skeptical theist" approaches to the problem of evil were useless, but Plantinga thought they were profoundly insightful. He didn't think that God existed in all possible worlds, but Plantinga did. He thought that Molinism didn't work, but Plantinga accepted, developed, and applied Molinist claims. (If these concepts strike you as strange and unfamiliar, then you're in the right place. The rest of this book will explain these terms.)

Here were arguably the two most influential Christian philosophers of the second half of the twentieth century; how could they be split down the middle like this? And then it dawned on me: I had been instinctively accepting many of Plantinga's positions, taking them for granted, perhaps because he (like me) was an American, and by the late 1990s he had become quite famous in American philosophy-of-religion circles. I simply gave him the benefit of the doubt on a first reading and didn't ask too many questions. He seemed convincing! But the Brits were having none of it. Nothing about Plantinga was taken for granted; you had to fight for every inch of territory. I encountered countless British philosophy students (and some dons) who didn't care how many people thought Plantinga was a good philosopher. What was the *argument*? Was it any good? Why should we take his starting points as ours? Allegedly, he had his head in the Platonic clouds—advocating "possible worlds" and "creaturely essences"—while the sensible British were doing more down-to-earth "ordinary language philosophy."

This conflict was very good for me. It taught me to be, well, a philosopher—not only to be aware of multiple views held by equally capable individuals, but also to consider deeply who had the better argument, and to be less superficial in figuring this out. It's natural to be attracted to, and to want to find, thinkers who reinforce our current beliefs, but that is not enough. All sides should be heard and considered thoughtfully, insofar as we are able to do so. Our conversation partners—people made in the image of God whom we want to both influence and learn from—deserve at least that. Swinburne assigned Plantinga's works for several of my tutorial essays, alongside lots of other works, and though I did end up taking Plantinga's side several times, I had to defend that in oral argument. This led to a more valuable and enduring appreciation of his contributions, for many of his positions (though not all!) stood the test, as far as I could tell. That appreciation informed my dissertation, has informed my teaching career since then, and informs this book. Perhaps in starting the journey of carefully examining Plantinga's work and that of others, you also will be led to be a philosopher!

The chapters to come will introduce you to Plantinga's thought on faith and reason, the problem of evil, arguments for the existence of God, the divine attributes, religion and science, and Christian philosophical method. I apologize in advance for not covering his considerable and substantive work in metaphysics and in philosophy of mind. For a short book, I had to make compromises, and these latter two areas didn't seem as relevant to the focus of the book. Believe me, this felt like cutting off my own arm, since my dissertation substantively draws upon many of Plantinga's insights into possible worlds metaphysics.

In closing, I'd like to thank James Anderson (at RTS Charlotte) and Daniel Hill (at the University of Liverpool) for reading through an earlier version of this manuscript and offering some clarifying comments.

ABBREVIATIONS

Works by Plantinga

AdvCP	“Advice to Christian Philosophers”
AEAAN	“An Evolutionary Argument against Naturalism”
ANat	“Against Naturalism”
AugCP	“Augustinian Christian Philosophy”
AW	“Afterword”
AWalls	“Ad Walls”
CLPL	“A Christian Life Partly Lived”
CPE20C	“Christian Philosophy at the End of the 20th Century”
DGHAN	<i>Does God Have a Nature?</i>
EAAN	“The Evolutionary Argument against Naturalism”
EPAE	“Epistemic Probability and Evil”
GAFE	“God, arguments for the existence of”
GFE	<i>God, Freedom, and Evil</i>
GOM	<i>God and Other Minds</i>
IBIGR	“Is Belief in God Rational?”
KCB	<i>Knowledge and Christian Belief</i>

LCO	“Law, Cause, and Occasionalism”
MICP	“Method in Christian Philosophy: A Reply”
NatT	“Natural Theology”
NN	<i>The Nature of Necessity</i>
OCS	“On Christian Scholarship”
ORTCA	“On Rejecting the Theory of Common Ancestry: A Reply to Hasker”
OWO	“On Ockham’s Way Out”
PAFE	“The Probabilistic Argument from Evil”
PFNT	“The Prospects for Natural Theology”
RBG	“Reason and Belief in God”
SOFC	“Supralapsarianism, or ‘O Felix Culpa’”
SP	“Self-Profile”
SS	“The Sceptics’ Strategy”
TDOSTA	“Two Dozen (or so) Theistic Arguments”
TFWD	“The Free Will Defense”
TOCA	“Truth, Omniscience, and Cantorian Arguments: An Exchange”
WCB	<i>Warranted Christian Belief</i>
WCD	<i>Warrant: The Current Debate</i>
WPF	<i>Warrant and Proper Function</i>
WTCRL	<i>Where the Conflict Really Lies</i>

1

WHY ANOTHER BOOK ON PLANTINGA?

Is Plantinga One of the Greats?

The Great Thinkers series includes volumes on luminaries of unquestioned and unrivalled influence: Thomas Aquinas, Francis Bacon, David Hume, Immanuel Kant, G. W. F. Hegel, Karl Marx, Jacques Derrida, and Richard Dawkins. Why include a volume on late twentieth-century (and early twenty-first-century) Christian philosopher Alvin Plantinga? Does he have a right to join this grand gathering?

If we were to ask Plantinga himself, he might say, “Maybe not!” In his own words, his is “a Christian life partly lived.” As of this writing, he has not yet completed his task on earth. Besides,

my spiritual life and its history isn’t striking or of general interest: no dramatic conversions, no spiritual heroism, no internal life of great depth and power, not much spiritual sophistication or subtlety, little grasp of the various depths and nuances and shading and peculiar unexplored corners of the spiritual life.

It is very much an ordinary meat-and-potatoes kind of life.
(CLPL, 45)¹

But thankfully, this isn't a series on great lives, but rather on great *thinkers*. Dispassionate observers of history know that only time will tell whether Plantinga should be classed with any of these "greats." But for the time being, it is obvious that he is a prime candidate to be so labeled by future generations. There is good reason to think he *will* be categorized with other twentieth-century intellectual writers of great religious influence, such as Bertrand Russell, Ludwig Wittgenstein, C. S. Lewis, Karl Barth, Cornelius Van Til, and Richard Swinburne, who through their careful arguments and power of expression molded the thought of many in their generation and beyond.

In short, a volume like this is needed because of the quantity and quality of Plantinga's philosophical work on behalf of Christian theism and because of the influence he continues to have to this day.

Plantinga's Significance

Measured Quantitatively

Plantinga's significance can be measured quantitatively in at least two ways: his amount of writing and the number of different topics addressed. On average, Plantinga has published three peer-reviewed articles every year for nearly six decades and written or edited fourteen books during that time. This astonishing pace of written work has generated an even greater amount of further philosophical discussion by others. Between 1985 and 2021, at least twenty-two substantive and scholarly books were published

1. All references to Plantinga's work use the abbreviations found on the previous "Abbreviations" page. Full bibliographic information for every work cited can be found under "References" at the end of the book.

about Plantinga's philosophy, and there are hundreds of articles and doctoral dissertations arguing about his work. To give just three examples: the author of *Thomas Aquinas* in this series did his doctoral dissertation at Westminster Theological Seminary on the apologetical implications of Plantinga's epistemology, the author of *David Hume* did his doctoral dissertation at the University of Edinburgh applying Plantinga's epistemology to paradoxical theological beliefs, and my own dissertation at Oxford developed an argument for the existence of God from an unpublished but widely circulated lecture by Plantinga. And that's just staying close to home by surveying P&R writers within this series!

In addition to the sheer quantity of his writing, the topics Plantinga has addressed range over a majority of the subdisciplines of philosophy: metaphysics, epistemology, philosophy of religion, philosophical theology, natural theology, philosophy of science, and philosophy of mind. Not only is such a cross-disciplinary capability rare, but some of these writings are among the most widely anthologized and reprinted pieces on the philosophy of religion in the past forty years, including "The Free Will Defense," "The Reformed Objection to Natural Theology," and "On Ockham's Way Out." Uncommon indeed is a book of readings in religious philosophy published nowadays without including something Plantinga wrote. For better or for worse, his work has become canonical.

Measured Qualitatively

Even more importantly, Plantinga's significance can be measured qualitatively against that of other Christian philosophers. First, while writing in a largely secular and even anti-theist milieu of professional philosophy, Plantinga has utilized and developed distinctively Christian sources. He has done so as a means of addressing important philosophical questions that have been debated for millennia. This includes drawing upon Augustine on free will theodicy, Boethius on philosophy of language, Anselm

on the ontological argument for God's existence, Aquinas on the natural knowledge of God, Ockham on the nature of foreknowledge, Luther on the nature of faith, Calvin on the *sensus divinitatis* and on the Holy Spirit's production of Christian faith, Molina on free will and providence, Jonathan Edwards on religious affections, perception of God, and religious belief, and Herman Bavinck on properly basic belief in God. (True to his Dutch Reformed heritage, there is also appeal to the Belgic Confession on trust in Scripture being produced by the Holy Spirit and to the Heidelberg Catechism on the nature of faith.)

While we can question whether Christian orthodoxy is compatible with *every* theme that Plantinga utilizes from Augustine, Boethius, Anselm, Aquinas, Ockham, Luther, Calvin, Molina, Edwards, and Bavinck, there is no debate that these are all distinctively Christian theologians. For a philosopher to come to prominence in the 1960s and continue dialoguing with a wide array of his peers to the present day by regularly and robustly drawing upon insights from the full range of the Christian tradition is rare indeed.

Second, it is hard to overestimate Plantinga's influence on contemporary discussion and philosophical practice. Prior to Plantinga, sightings of past Christian thinkers were relatively rare in philosophy journals (outside of specifically Roman Catholic scholarship). Now they are commonplace, particularly in philosophy of religion, but increasingly in epistemology, metaphysics, and even philosophy of science. By no means is this cultural transition in Anglo-American philosophy the result of Plantinga's work alone. (The contributions of Richard Swinburne, Robert and Marilyn Adams, William Alston, Nicholas Wolterstorff, and Paul Helm come to mind.) But without Plantinga's pioneering work, this change would have been significantly less likely.

Third, Plantinga's work is self-consciously characterized by a bold methodological stance. With a doggedness that sometimes

irritates his detractors, he insists that there is nothing inappropriate, unseemly, or embarrassing for a Christian philosopher to simply start with and then use Christian assumptions in his academic work, despite the widespread rejection of these assumptions by the majority of modern thinkers. One does not need lengthy prolegomena that argue for the right to bring one's religious convictions to the table. Rather, one simply announces that this is the starting point and proceeds accordingly. Fairly early in his career, in the inaugural issue of the now flourishing philosophy journal *Faith and Philosophy*, Plantinga published a clarion call for more Christian philosophers to do this (an essay to which we will return in chapter 7). Plantinga's steadfast refusal to do philosophy in a "religiously neutral" way is due to his Dutch Reformed upbringing, as we will now see.

Plantinga's Personal Background

Upbringing

In 1985 Plantinga published a 95-page intellectual autobiography called "Self-Profile" (SP) for a volume dedicated to his academic contributions. The first third of this contains quite a bit of information about his upbringing, academic training, and teaching career. In 1993 he revised and somewhat expanded this material in "A Christian Life Partly Lived" (CLPL).

Plantinga was born in 1932 to Cornelius and Lettie Plantinga in Ann Arbor, Michigan. His father and mother both traced their ancestry to the Netherlands. His grandparents on both sides were raised in churches of "the *Gereformeerde Kerken*, dedicated to the practice of historic Calvinism" (SP, 4). Alvin Plantinga strongly agrees with the view of these churches "that education is essentially religious; there is such a thing as *secular* education but no such thing as an education that is both reasonably full-orbed and *religiously neutral*" (SP, 4). He favorably mentions "the leadership of the great theologian and statesman Abraham Kuyper (premier

of the Netherlands from 1901 to 1905)” and his role in establishing “a Calvinist University in Amsterdam: the Free University” (SP, 4).

Plantinga recalls that in his childhood church, “many had read their Kuyper and Bavinck, and a few were considerably better at theology than some of the ministers in charge of the church” (SP, 6). After marrying Lettie while a student at Calvin College, Plantinga’s father became a graduate student in philosophy at the University of Michigan, then got his PhD in philosophy at Duke University, and then taught at Huron College, a Presbyterian college in South Dakota. Because his father later moved on to teach at Jamestown College, Plantinga’s formative junior and senior high school years were spent in North Dakota. He decided at the age of fourteen that he wanted to become a philosopher, partly because of his father’s life and teaching. His influence was firmly embedded in a larger church context:

We attended the Presbyterian church in Jamestown; but I heard about as many sermons from my father as from the minister of the church we belonged to. He often preached in churches in nearby villages that were without a minister, and I often accompanied him. I went to church, Sunday school, a weekly catechism class my father organized, and weekly “Young People’s” meetings. I also remember a series of mid-week Lenten services that were deeply moving and were for me a source of spiritual awakening. (CLPL, 49)

Education (1953–58)

BA from Calvin College (1953). Plantinga started his college studies at Jamestown College (where his father taught), but after just one term he transferred to Calvin College in Grand Rapids, Michigan, because his father had become a psychology professor there. He then spent a semester at Harvard University—on a scholarship he applied for “just for the fun of it”—but returned

to Calvin permanently after attending some classes there taught by William Harry Jellema, “the most gifted teacher of philosophy I have ever encountered” (SP, 9). Nicholas Wolterstorff, who would also go on to become an influential Christian philosopher, was one of Plantinga’s classmates at Calvin, and they both took Jellema’s courses.² Plantinga received his BA from Calvin College in 1953. He had three majors (philosophy, psychology, and English literature), and took six courses in psychology from his father.

Plantinga shares a deep conviction that was instilled in him by his education at Calvin:

Christianity is indeed profoundly relevant to the whole of the intellectual life including the various sciences. . . . Serious intellectual work and religious allegiance, I believe, are inevitably intertwined. There is no such thing as religiously neutral intellectual endeavor—or rather there is no such thing as serious, substantial and relatively complete intellectual endeavor that is religiously neutral. (SP, 13)

Plantinga’s teachers at Calvin, including Jellema, thought that “the history of philosophy was at bottom an arena in which conflicting religious visions compete for human allegiance. Philosophy, as they saw it, was a matter of the greatest moment; for what it involved is both a struggle for men’s souls and a fundamental expression of basic religious perspectives” (SP, 13).

After we survey Plantinga’s contributions to philosophy in the next five chapters, we will see in chapter seven that the foundation Plantinga received at Calvin exerted an incalculable influence over his intellectual outlook and methodology, despite that outlook being immediately put to the test by a secular

2. About thirty years earlier, the famous Christian apologist Cornelius Van Til had also taken Jellema’s classes. Van Til graduated from Calvin College in 1922.

graduate school environment largely inhospitable to orthodox Christianity. Plantinga describes the magnitude of his decision to stay as an undergraduate at Calvin after flirting with Harvard:

I found Jellema deeply impressive—so impressive that I decided then and there to leave Harvard, return to Calvin and study philosophy with him. That was as important a decision, and as good a decision, as I’ve ever made. Calvin College has been for me an enormously powerful spiritual influence and in some ways the center and focus of my intellectual life. Had I not returned to Calvin from Harvard, I doubt (humanly speaking, anyway) that I would have remained a Christian at all; certainly Christianity or theism would not have been the focal point of my adult intellectual life. (CLPL, 53)

Calvin College bequeathed an equally momentous blessing: it was there that Plantinga met Kathleen De Boer, a fellow Calvin undergrad, whom he would marry in 1955 while pursuing his graduate studies. “Her family, like mine, was of Dutch Christian Reformed immigrant stock” (SP, 14). They have four children—Carl, Jane, William Harry, and Ann—who

are for us a source of enormous joy and satisfaction. . . . I also loved (and love) the children with a passion, and did spend a lot of time caring for them; and I immensely enjoyed playing, talking, arguing, wrestling, singing, hiking and just being with them. Our dinnertimes were often a kind of rich but wacky discussion of ideas ranging over theology, philosophy, psychology, physics, mathematics, literature and what dumb thing someone’s teacher had said today. (Since all of our children took courses from me at Calvin, the teacher in question was sometimes me.) (CLPL, 59, 278 fn. 8)

Plantinga's "life-long love affair with mountains" also started during this period, when he traveled to the West Coast for the first time in 1954 to visit his fiancée's hometown in Washington. "Splendidly beautiful, mysterious, awe-inspiring, tinged with peril and more than a hint of malevolent menace—I had never seen anything to compare with them" (SP, 14). Mountaineering and rock-climbing have been an important part of Plantinga's life ever since, and his favorite climbs repeatedly appear as illustrations in his philosophical writing. They also trigger his *sensus divinitatis* ("sense of the divine"), a topic we will explore in the next chapter.

MA from the University of Michigan (1955). After finishing at Calvin, Plantinga started graduate work in philosophy at the University of Michigan in January 1954, studying under William P. Alston, Richard Cartwright, and William K. Frankena (SP, 16). (Nelson Pike, who would write a seminal article on the human free will / divine foreknowledge dilemma, and pen an important early book on divine timelessness, was a fellow student with Plantinga in Alston's courses.)

Plantinga received his MA in philosophy from Michigan in 1955. There he was exposed to anti-theist arguments in a hostile environment, and he consequently

developed a lasting interest in the sorts of attacks mounted against traditional theism—the claim that it was incompatible with the existence of evil, the Freudian claim that it arose out of wish fulfillment, the positivistic claim that talk about God was literally meaningless, the Bultmannian claim that traditional belief in God was an outmoded relic of a pre-scientific age, and the like. All but the first of these, I thought, were totally question begging if taken as arguments against theism. (SP, 18)

The fact that Plantinga found these arguments so weak did not keep him from writing quite a bit about them in his future work,

probably because he saw it as important to get the word out that they *were* weak, despite their popularity.

Plantinga found his teachers clear and thoughtful, and his “time at Michigan was pleasant and instructive.” But “I yearned for something more; philosophy there, it seemed to me, was too piecemeal and too remote from the big questions. I missed the insight and illumination conveyed by Jellema’s lectures. The fare at Michigan, I thought, was a bit too sere [i.e., dry or withered] and minute” (SP, 19).

PhD from Yale University (1958). According to a Michigan professor whom Plantinga consulted, at Yale University “philosophy was done in the grand style of the German idealists” (SP, 19). So Plantinga left to pursue his PhD studies there in 1955, rather than continuing at Michigan after his MA. But while Yale was much bigger and more diverse in terms of students and faculty, Plantinga’s “main complaint [was] that there was scarcely any opportunity to learn how to do what philosophers do. . . . No one seemed prepared to show a neophyte philosopher how to go about the subject—what to *do*, how to think about a problem to some effect. Fundamentally, it was that high level of generality that was at fault” (SP, 20).

In addition, Plantinga was greatly bothered by the “attitude of irony and distance” (SP, 21) towards philosophy among many Yale students and some faculty. This mindset encouraged merely becoming conversant with the extant answers to philosophical questions, rather than discerning the truth. Whereas Plantinga felt that philosophy at Michigan failed to aim at the big questions, at Yale it failed to seek the right answers. Both contrasted sharply with the expectations for philosophical discourse generated at Calvin when he was an undergraduate. This concern was not alleviated in his final year at Yale, even though he was teaching in its Directed Studies program. He now had “a job at Yale and reasonable prospects for permanence,” but his frustrations over

“metaphysics in the Grand Style, at least as practiced at Yale” (SP, 22), led him to accept Wayne State University’s vigorous efforts to recruit him as a professor.

Teaching Career (1958–2010)

Wayne State University (1958–63). While the beginning of Plantinga’s teaching career was technically that final year at Yale, in fall 1958 he was hired to teach philosophy full time at Wayne State University in Detroit. “It was one of the best decisions I ever made . . . perhaps the best thing that has happened to me” (SP, 22). His colleagues included Hector Castañeda, Edmund Gettier, Richard Cartwright, and Keith Lehrer, with whom Plantinga developed extraordinary camaraderie. Their

philosophy department was less a philosophy department than a loosely organized but extremely intense discussion society. . . . We discussed philosophy constantly, occasionally taking a bit of time to teach our classes. . . . What impressed me most about my new colleagues was that they seemed to have a way of *doing* philosophy. There wasn’t nearly as much talk *about* philosophy—what various philosophers or philosophical traditions said—and a lot more attempts actually to figure things out. (SP, 23)

Their joint efforts at collective philosophical criticism gave Plantinga five years of invaluable practical training, which he would apply with great success in his future years, having finally received a vision of how to *do* philosophy:

I remain enormously grateful for those days at Wayne and I continue to have the most profound respect for the members of that early group. It was from them and in company with them that I learned how philosophy ought to be approached;

it was in company with them that I learned the importance of genuine clarity and rigor in the subject, and something of how to achieve them. (SP, 28)

Calvin College (1963–82). Despite his wonderfully “stimulating and educational” experience at Wayne State, Plantinga accepted an offer to start teaching at Calvin College in fall 1963, replacing his retiring and much-admired undergraduate mentor, Harry Jellema. Plantinga’s decision to leave for Calvin involved “considerable agony.” Nevertheless, it was

eminently sensible. I had been an enthusiastic Christian since childhood and an enthusiastic Reformed Christian since college days. I endorsed the Calvinist contention that neither scholarship nor education is religiously neutral; I therefore believed it important that there be Christian colleges and universities. I wanted to contribute to that enterprise and Calvin seemed an excellent place to do so. (SP, 30)

In particular, Plantinga wanted to work on

the connection between the Christian faith and philosophy (as well as the other disciplines) and the question how best to be a Christian in philosophy. Calvin was the best place I knew to work on these questions; nowhere else, so far as I knew, were they as central a focus of interest and nowhere else were they pursued with the same persistent tenacity. I therefore went to Calvin. (SP, 30)

Over the next nineteen years, Plantinga found the vibrant Christian philosophical community he sought. Two things characterized his years as a professor at Calvin. “First, in the philosophy department there has been just the sort of communal effort at

Christian scholarship I was hoping to find” (SP, 30–31). A faculty colloquium met “nearly every Tuesday for the last eighteen years . . . to discuss and criticize each other’s work” (SP, 31). Plantinga wrote or edited seven books and wrote forty-seven articles during the Calvin years, and much of this material was discussed with fellow faculty members. Second, another “attractive feature of academic life at Calvin—as, perhaps, at any medium sized college—is the opportunity to make friends in other disciplines” (SP, 32). These included significant friendships with scientists, historians, and mathematicians, as he brushed up on topics that intersected with his own research interests.

University of Notre Dame (1982—2010). It seems inconceivable that after nineteen years at Calvin College, Plantinga would willingly leave that fruitful and spiritually rewarding intellectual environment. But when he briefly visited other institutions during the Calvin years, he discerned that he was most successful as a teacher when instructing graduate students, and “Calvin has no graduate students.” In addition, there was beginning to emerge at the University of Notre Dame the largest “concentration of orthodox or conservative Protestant graduate students in philosophy . . . in the United States.” Leaving Calvin for Notre Dame would enable him “to take part in the building of a graduate department of philosophy that is both first rate and Christian.” And so that is what he did in 1982, despite finding “the prospect of leaving Calvin disturbing and in fact genuinely painful” (SP, 33).

Plantinga has not written a lot of material about his twenty-eight years teaching philosophy to graduate students at the University of Notre Dame. Sharing in church community, hearing good preaching, and participating in Sunday school continued to be quite important to him personally (CLPL, 67–68). Perhaps what impressed him most during this period was the great difficulty in making real progress on the question of how to be a Christian philosopher, rather than just being a Christian who does

philosophy. It is one thing to *want* to be a Christian philosopher, and to want to be successful at it. It is quite another to figure out what that entails. The heart of his answer, which he continued to work on quite deeply and systematically during the Notre Dame years, is that “following Augustine (and Abraham Kuyper, Herman Dooyeweerd, Harry Jellema and many others), I believe that there is indeed a conflict, a battle between the *civitas Dei*, the city of God, and *civitas mundi*, the city of the world” (CLPL, 77).

And Christian philosophers must enter that battle, quite explicitly and self-consciously, “*primarily or first of all* as members of the Christian community, and only secondarily as members of, say, the philosophical community at large, or the contemporary academic community. Our first responsibility is to the Lord and to the Christian community, not first of all to the philosophical community at large” (CLPL, 78).

We will return to this challenging question, and Plantinga’s attempt to answer it, in our look at his methodology in chapter 7.

For Whom Has This Book Been Written?

Perhaps learning about Plantinga’s Christian upbringing and education, his teaching career, and his significance and influence in the philosophical world, has whetted your appetite for discovering his distinctive philosophical ideas and arguments. If so, read on; that is the rest of the book. But given the readership at which the Great Thinkers series is aimed, here are three further reasons to be interested in this book.

First, you may have heard of Plantinga and his importance, particularly with respect to the problem of evil and the rationality of belief in God, but you can’t understand what he is saying or why it is important. This book is geared to help you out, providing accessible summaries of Plantinga’s key moves (the “what”) and relating his arguments to a larger cultural context (the “why”).

Second, you may have heard that Plantinga is a Calvinist philosopher of some sort, but you don't know what is Calvinistic about him, if anything. Again, this book is intended to help, by highlighting several key doctrines in Reformed systematic theology and several themes in the Reformed tradition of defending the faith, and then explaining to what extent Plantinga adheres to or abandons them.

Third, you may know that Christian pastors, theologians, and other thinkers you trust dispute among themselves whether Plantinga's contributions are a help or a hindrance to the church and its task of reaching the world with the gospel. This book may help you out here, but not in a way that is all or nothing. I take a somewhat eclectic approach in separating the wheat from the chaff, taking what I see as good, and explaining why I leave the rest—all the while encouraging readers to think for themselves on these matters. Hopefully you can gain confidence that it doesn't take a specialist to see the big picture here.

Speaking personally for a moment, I first encountered Plantinga's work as a philosophy undergraduate at UCLA and continued to reflect on it during my years at Westminster Seminary in California and beyond. I've taught a wide range of his monographs and articles for the last twenty years in the seminary classroom among a dozen different classes on a two-year cycle. (Don't worry; I've taught work from other philosophers too!) There are other books devoted to Plantinga's work, but these tend to be devoid of *theological* evaluation (at least from a conservative, evangelical, or Reformed perspective). Likewise, there are Reformed works that cover apologetics, but they do not typically focus on Plantinga's contributions to apologetics and philosophy, despite his immense influence on a global scale. This book focuses on Plantinga and tries to combine philosophical accuracy with theological evaluation, while remaining accessible. As you continue, I hope to deliver on all these fronts!

Over the next five chapters, we will survey Plantinga's ideas on faith and reason, the problem of evil, arguments for God, the divine attributes, and the relationship between religion and science. We'll close by reflecting on his philosophical method and evaluating his relation to the Reformed heritage.