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# Philosopher Sticks Up for God

By JENNIFER SCHUESSLER

There are no atheists in foxholes, the old saying goes. Back in the 1950s, when the philosopher Alvin Plantinga was getting his start, there were scarcely more religious believers in academic philosophy departments.

Growing up among Dutch Calvinist immigrants in the Midwest, Mr. Plantinga was used to intense theological debate. But when he arrived at Harvard as an undergraduate, he was startled to find equal intensity marshaled in favor of the argument that God didn't exist, when classmates and teachers found the question worth arguing about.

Had he not transferred to Calvin College, the Christian Reformed liberal arts college in Grand Rapids, Mich., where his father taught psychology, Mr. Plantinga wrote in a 1993 essay, he doubted that he "would have remained a Christian at all; certainly Christianity or theism would not have been the focal point of my adult intellectual life."

But he did return, and the larger world of philosophy has been quite different as a result. From Calvin, and later from the University of Notre Dame, Mr. Plantinga has led a movement of unapologetically Christian philosophers who, if they haven't succeeded in persuading their still overwhelmingly unbelieving colleagues, have at least made theism philosophically respectable.

"There are vastly more Christian philosophers and vastly more visible or assertive Christian philosophy now than when I left graduate school," Mr. Plantinga said in a recent telephone interview from his home in Grand Rapids, adding, with characteristic modesty, "I have no idea how it happened."

Mr. Plantinga retired from full-time teaching last year, with more than a dozen books and a past presidency of the American Philosophical Association to his name. But he's hardly resting on those laurels. Having made philosophy safe for theism, he's now turning to a harder task: making theism safe for science.

For too long, Mr. Plantinga contends in a new book, theists have been on the defensive, merely rebutting the charge that their beliefs are irrational. It's time for believers in the old-fashioned creator God of the Bible to go on the offensive, he argues, and he has some sports metaphors at

the ready. (Not for nothing did he spend two decades at Notre Dame.)

In “Where the Conflict Really Lies: Science, Religion and Naturalism,” published last week by Oxford University Press, he unleashes a blitz of densely reasoned argument against “the touchdown twins of current academic atheism,” the zoologist [Richard Dawkins](#) and the philosopher [Daniel C. Dennett](#), spiced up with some trash talk of his own.

Mr. Dawkins? “Dancing on the lunatic fringe,” Mr. Plantinga declares. Mr. Dennett? A reverse fundamentalist who proceeds by “inane ridicule and burlesque” rather than by careful philosophical argument.

On the telephone Mr. Plantinga was milder in tone but no less direct. “It seems to me that many naturalists, people who are super-atheists, try to co-opt science and say it supports naturalism,” he said. “I think it’s a complete mistake and ought to be pointed out.”

The so-called New Atheists may claim the mantle of reason, not to mention a much wider audience, thanks to best sellers like Mr. Dawkins’s fire-breathing polemic, “[The God Delusion](#).” But while Mr. Plantinga may favor the highly abstruse style of analytic philosophy, to him the truth of the matter is crystal clear.

Theism, with its vision of an orderly universe superintended by a God who created rational-minded creatures in his own image, “is vastly more hospitable to science than naturalism,” with its random process of natural selection, he writes. “Indeed, it is theism, not naturalism, that deserves to be called ‘the scientific worldview.’ ”

Mr. Plantinga readily admits that he has no proof that God exists. But he also thinks that doesn’t matter. Belief in God, he argues, is what philosophers call a basic belief: It is no more in need of proof than the belief that the past exists, or that other people have minds, or that one plus one equals two.

“You really can’t sensibly claim theistic belief is irrational without showing it isn’t true,” Mr. Plantinga said. And that, he argues, is simply beyond what science can do.

Mr. Plantinga says he accepts the scientific theory of evolution, as all Christians should. Mr. Dennett and his fellow atheists, he argues, are the ones who are misreading Darwin. Their belief that evolution rules out the existence of God — including a God who purposely created human beings through a process of guided evolution — is not a scientific claim, he writes, but “a metaphysical or theological addition.”

These are fighting words to scientific atheists, but Mr. Plantinga’s game of turnabout doesn’t stop there. He argues that atheism and even agnosticism themselves are irrational.

“I think there is such a thing as a *sensus divinitatis*, and in some people it doesn't work properly,” he said, referring to the innate sense of the divine that Calvin believed all human beings possess. “So if you think of rationality as normal cognitive function, yes, there is something irrational about that kind of stance.”

Longtime readers of Mr. Plantinga, who was raised as a Presbyterian and who embraced the Calvinism of the Christian Reformed Church as a young man, are used to such invocations of theological concepts. And even philosophers who reject his theism say his arguments for the basic rationality of belief, laid out in books like “Warranted Christian Belief” and “God and Other Minds,” constitute an important contribution that every student of epistemology would be expected to know.

But Mr. Plantinga's steadfast defense of the biochemist and intelligent-design advocate Michael Behe, the subject of a long chapter in the new book, is apparently another matter.

“I think deep down inside he really isn't a friend of science,” Michael Ruse, a philosopher of science at Florida State University, said of Mr. Plantinga. “I'm not objecting to him wanting to defend theism. But I think he gets his victory at the level of gelding or significantly altering modern science in unacceptable ways.”

Mr. Dennett was even harsher, calling Mr. Plantinga “Exhibit A of how religious beliefs can damage or hinder or disable a philosopher,” not to mention a poor student of biology. Evolution is a random, unguided process, he said, and Mr. Plantinga's effort to leave room for divine intervention is simply wishful thinking.

“It's just become more and more transparent that he's an apologist more than a serious, straight-ahead philosopher,” Mr. Dennett said.

When Mr. Plantinga and Mr. Dennett (who said he has not read Mr. Plantinga's new book) faced off over these questions before a standing-room-only crowd at a 2009 meeting of the American Philosophical Association, the event prompted ardent online debate over who had landed better punches, or simply been more condescending. (A transcript of the proceedings was published last year as “Science and Religion: Are They Compatible?”)

Mr. Plantinga, who recalled the event as “polite but not cordial,” allowed that he didn't think much of Mr. Dennett's line of reasoning. “He didn't want to argue,” Mr. Plantinga said. “It was more like he wanted to make assertions and tell stories.”

Mr. Plantinga and Mr. Dennett do agree about one thing: Religion and science can't just call a truce and retreat back into what the paleontologist Stephen Jay Gould called “non-overlapping magisteria,” with science laying claim to the empirical world, while leaving questions of ultimate

meaning to religion. Religion, like science, makes claims about the truth, Mr. Plantinga insists, and theists need to stick up for the reasonableness of those claims, especially if they are philosophers.

“To call a philosopher irrational, those are fighting words,” he said. “Being rational is a philosopher’s aim. It’s taken pretty seriously.”



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