

INTRODUCTION TO SPECIAL ISSUE

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Discussions about the relationship between science and religion have never been absent from the public arena, but they seem to have made something of a comeback in the past decade or two. It is hard to say what accounts for such large-scale developments in society. Perhaps it has something to do with the fact that it has become increasingly clear that the secularization thesis, i.e., the claim that the modernization and rationalization of societies goes hand in hand with the gradual disappearance of religion, must be put to rest at the graveyard of disconfirmed sociological predictions. Religion is here to stay, it now appears. Thoroughly secularized societies like those we find in Western Europe may be exceptional rather than exemplary.

Another factor that may well have been conducive to the continued debate about science and religion is the activity of the Intelligent Design (ID) movement. Proponents of ID claim that careful observation of some large-scale features of our universe, our planet, or life on earth provides good — scientific — evidence for the existence of an intelligent designer. While their arguments are considered to be highly controversial by scientists and philosophers alike, they have attracted a good deal of attention, especially in the United States where the efforts of the ID movement are bound up with broader ‘culture wars’ between conservative and progressive forces in society.

Finally, there are the self-styled ‘new atheists’, for instance Richard Dawkins, Daniel Dennett, Sam Harris, the late Christopher Hitchens, and their lesser-known followers, who have been very active in promoting forms of scientific secularism. Although it would seem, I regret to say, that their aggressive anti-religiosity is outstripped only by their uninformedness about religion, they too have been quite influential, particularly in advertising the idea that there is an irresolvable conflict between science and religion in which science has the upper hand.

But no matter what the correct explanation is of the renewed attention for science and religion, it has resulted in a novel need for philosophical reflection on the relationship between science and religion. Such reflection is important for internal-philosophical reasons, as well as for external reasons. As to the former, the relation between science and religion raises numerous philosophical questions: What are the proper ‘domains’ of science and religion, what are they about? Is there overlap in their respective substances, methods, and practices and — if so — is there conflict or harmony where they overlap? More specifically: Are creation and evolution in tension? Does the apparent fine-tuning of the universe support theism? Do the findings of biology, cognitive science, and neuroscience contradict religiously inspired anthropologies? Does our historical knowledge of the Bible undermine claims about its authority? Surely, such questions aren’t new, but because they are on the agenda again

there is a task for Christian philosophers to evaluate traditional answers in the light of new scientific developments and to come up with novel answers where old ones don't suffice anymore.

The latter, external reasons for thinking about science and religion are just as important. Ever since the late nineteenth century, an influential narrative about an inevitable conflict between science and religion has held sway over Western culture. Even though this narrative has been shown to be thoroughly misguided on multiple accounts — as an historical description, as a sociological development, and as a systematic-philosophical account — its popular appeal remains strong. And this is something the vocal new atheists happily attempt to reinforce and profit from. Because of this, it is important that Christian philosophers not only write academic articles and books, but also reach out to broader publics to present their views about science and religion in an accessible manner.

In view of all this, the publication of Alvin Plantinga's book *Where the Conflict Really Lies: Science, Religion, and Naturalism* (2011) is of no small significance. Not only has Plantinga made key contributions to metaphysics and epistemology, he is also one of the leading figures in the philosophy of religion in the English-speaking world of the latter half of the 20th century. His influence is not easily overestimated. It is probably fair to say that his seminal work in the 60s and 70s has helped to resuscitate the philosophy of religion to its current status as a respectable and blossoming philosophical subdiscipline. When someone of his stature presents his considered views on science and religion, he is sure to get a hearing.

In *Where the Conflict Really Lies*, Plantinga lays out his views in clear, philosophically rigorous, yet accessible, and in fact often stimulating and even outright funny prose. He argues for the provocative threefold conclusion that there is only alleged and superficial conflict between science and theistic religion, deep concord between science and Christianity, and deep conflict between science and naturalism. This conclusion, readers will notice, is diametrically opposed to the conflict model that new atheists and many popular media continue to recycle.

I will not attempt to summarize the book here, as it is easily available (later this year, a Dutch translation will be published) and an attempt to summarize such a rich and densely argued book would surely fail to do justice to it.

Let me say some things about the purpose and contents of this special issue, which is devoted entirely to Plantinga's book. The issue contains five papers that engage in critical-constructive dialogue with various themes from *Where the Conflict Really Lies*. Some papers are primarily constructive and take up claims and arguments from the book to explore ways in which they might be developed further. Others are more critical and raise objections to points that Plantinga makes. All five papers are written by philosophers at European universities who have an interest in issues pertaining to science and religion. However, the authors come from very different philosophical and religious

backgrounds and all bring their own perspectives to bear on Plantinga's work. Personally, I am very happy with the result. I think the authors' different backgrounds and approaches have led to a rich and varied palette of responses.

I am also very excited that Alvin Plantinga agreed to write a response to all the papers in the issue. Not only because this will help readers to form their opinion about the strength of the arguments on both sides, but also because this remedies an omission that was, in my opinion, long overdue, to wit a publication by Plantinga in this journal. Although, as far as I know, Plantinga has written one short paper on Dooyeweerd, this was published in the *Reformed Journal* and not in *Philosophia Reformata* (see Plantinga 1958).

Regular readers of the journal will perhaps be struck by the fact that there is no response to Plantinga's work from a specifically reformational-philosophical perspective. Let me make two remarks to put this in perspective. First, as the new editor-in-chief, Gerrit Glas, made clear in his editorial, this issue marks the beginning of a new phase in the history of the journal. One element of this new phase is a broadened conception of the journal's mission. We aim to provide a platform for discussion of various strands of Christian philosophy and philosophical reflection in relation to the Christian faith — reformational philosophy being one such tradition. This issue gives an example of what this might look like: philosophers who aren't familiar with reformational philosophy respond to work from a philosopher who is part of the tradition of reformed thinking.

This brings me to my second remark. Although Alvin Plantinga's philosophical methods and views are obviously very different from those of characteristically reformational philosophers in the tradition of Dooyeweerd's and Vollenhoven's philosophies, there is a case to be made that his work does pick up on a number of prominent themes from historical reformed thinking as exemplified in the work of John Calvin, Abraham Kuyper, and Herman Bavinck. To mention but two indications of this, the epistemological views originally espoused by Plantinga and Nicholas Wolterstorff have come to be known as *reformed* epistemology and Plantinga's (1984) famous 'Advice to Christian Philosophers' embraces Kuyperian ideas about the relevance of religion and worldview for doing philosophy. Interaction between these two branches of reformational/reformed philosophy has been rather limited, although certainly not absent. By devoting this issue to a discussion of Plantinga's book, we hope to stimulate further fruitful discussion.

Finally, here is a preview of coming attractions. Ignacio Silva draws a comparison between Thomas Aquinas and Alvin Plantinga with respect to their views on special divine action. He argues that although there are important similarities, significant differences emerge as well; differences, moreover, that he thinks make Aquinas's views less vulnerable to certain objections. In particular, he argues that Plantinga's proposal for locating divine action at the quantum level runs the risk of making God a "cause among causes", i.e., too much like a

natural cause. By distinguishing sharply between primary and secondary causation, Aquinas avoids this risk.

Esther Kroeker explores the relations between Thomas Reid and Alvin Plantinga. It is no secret that Plantinga has great admiration for the work of this Scottish philosopher, but Kroeker exposes the deep resemblances in their respective views in a systematic and insightful manner. Particularly, she shows how both Reid and Plantinga see deep concord between science and theism, argue that it is perfectly rational to trust our natural cognitive faculties without having some sort of proof of their reliability first, think that we can reliably form design beliefs about parts of the natural world, and defend the objectiveness of morality and the possibility of moral knowledge.

In my own contribution, I examine Plantinga's proposal for recasting design *arguments* as design *discourses*. Since he thinks design arguments aren't very forceful, he suggests that we should think of the conclusions of design arguments, i.e., beliefs that an intelligent agent designed some aspect or part of the natural world, as *basic* beliefs, i.e., beliefs that aren't the result of an explicit inference but that are formed directly in response to appropriate stimuli in our environment. According to Plantinga, it is quite possible that design beliefs thus formed enjoy plenty of positive epistemic status; they might even constitute knowledge. Contemporary cognitive science confirms that humans indeed have an innate tendency to form design beliefs about the natural world. This might be taken to show that such beliefs lack positive epistemic status, because they are formed unreliably. I investigate how best to make sense of this charge and argue that, even though it is ultimately unsuccessful, it does show that design discourse has limited reach.

Daniel von Wachter is critical about Plantinga's pessimistic evaluation of the force of design arguments. He defends design arguments such as those proposed by Michael Behe, arguing that they can give rise to strongly justified design beliefs. At any rate, Von Wachter argues, reconstructing design arguments as design discourses isn't an improvement, since it is implausible that design beliefs formed in the basic way have more positive epistemic status. Along the way, he also discusses Plantinga's understanding of what divine intervention is and objects to Plantinga's model for understanding divine action as occurring through quantum collapses.

Elizabeth Burns's paper may well be the most critical in this collection. She argues that there is a very real and irresolvable conflict between classical theism and the amounts and qualities of evil that we find in our world. Although the problem of evil is of course not the main focus of *Where the Conflict Really Lies*, Plantinga does hint briefly at his preferred responses to it. Burns takes on these responses and discusses the free will defense, Plantinga's *Felix Culpa* theodicy, and skeptical theism, taking into account some of Plantinga's other work on these topics. She develops a passionate case that none of the responses are acceptable. Finally, she explores whether a position that is known as 'religious naturalism' might be a better response to the problem of evil and suggests that it is.

In his response, Plantinga clarifies some misunderstandings and addresses a lot of the critical points that have been raised, offering further defenses of the arguments and claims in *Where the Conflict Really Lies*.

References

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