

Alvin Plantinga On Christian Scholarship

Alvin Plantinga is considered by many to be the most important Christian philosopher of our time. And I hope here to add a word or two that might help one further understand this mythic figure. First, Plantinga is to be credited for approaching Christian scholarship with an integrity that has seldom been seen in the academies of our day. The arguments he puts forth to encourage Christian scholars in these dark days are most impressive and extremely helpful for the struggling student who is surrounded by an intense league of non-believers at secular universities.

“...Even if Christianity is on the move, it has taken only a few brief steps; and it is marching through largely alien territory. For the intellectual culture of our day is for the most part profoundly non-theistic and hence non-Christian- more than that, it is anti-theistic. Most of the so-called human sciences, much of the non-human sciences, most of non-scientific intellectual endeavor and even a good bit of allegedly Christian theology is animated by a spirit wholly foreign to that of Christian theism.”ⁱ

In the last hundred and fifty years much of the attack raised against Christianity has intentionally been savage and militant.ⁱⁱ Plantinga is to be respected for attempting to put Christian scholarship on the course it needs to be, indeed where it should have always been. *“First, Christian philosophers and Christian intellectuals generally must display more autonomy-more independence of the rest of philosophical world. Second, Christian philosophers must display more integrity-integrity in the sense of integral wholeness, or oneness, or unity, being all of one piece. Perhaps 'integrality' would be the better word here. And necessary to these two is a third: Christian courage, or boldness, or strength, or perhaps Christian self-confidence. We Christian philosophers must display more faith, more trust in the Lord; we must put on the whole armor of God.”ⁱⁱⁱ*

It is not so much that Plantinga is bringing something new by way of argumentation, but that he understands his position and the universities so thoroughly that he is able to communicate exactly what he wishes to say so that his audience understands him. In short, he is gifted with influence and clarity. Now, I will not deny that there are problems with ‘Reformed Epistemology’^{iv}, but my purpose is not to attack and cripple Plantinga’s philosophy (and I am not so certain that such a task would be easy). This paper hopes to show the positive gains that have been made through Plantinga’s apologetic.

Certainly, we live in an age where dark scholarship dominates the field of Philosophy, science, Psychology and ethics, not to mention almost every other discipline including theology. As Machen has properly pointed out in his address regarding Christian Scholarship: *“There was a time when the raising of the question as to the importance of Christian scholarship might have seemed to be ridiculous; there was a time when a man who does so much talking as a minister or a Sunday School teacher ought to do, in the propagation of the Faith to which he adheres, would have regarded it as a matter of course that he ought to know something about the subject of which he undertakes to talk.”^v*

However, in these days we might well conclude that the raising of the very topic of Christian scholarship is misunderstood and considered irrelevant. What one might consider so amazing about the work and approach of Alvin Plantinga is that he has sped up the process of reclaiming Christian ground within our culture. Now, let it be noted before I precede any further; that I am a Scripturalist and have been brought to this conclusion through much study and contemplation. I consider the work of Gordon Clark regarding epistemology to be consistent and authoritative. I take scripture as my epistemic foundation. That being said, I will proceed.

It might first be noted, that the very same conclusions Plantinga has reached could be drawn from Gordon Clark's system of apologetics or Van til's presuppositionalism. Of course, Clark is a presuppositionalist with a better foundation of epistemology, scripture. The reason Plantinga has been so very successful and his argument of "warrant" so heeded is because he has said better (to a broader, bigger audience) what Van til and Clark said regarding scholarship most their lives.

Why all this hype and popularity for Plantinga? First, Plantinga is willing to refute arguments he says we should simply ignore (perhaps using the word 'ignore' is going a little too far). Secondly, his style of communication is current, up to date and clear; Vantil on the other hand is confusing and unsure in his apologetic. Of course, the same cannot be said about Clark; for he was consistent with what he said and he said what he wanted to say so that his audience could understand it.

But the reason Clark has not had the impact Plantinga has had on the masses is that Plantinga resides in the limelight of Christian Scholarship, his method and books are pleasing to the Christian and non-Christian population as a whole. Plantinga does not deal with as many orthodox issues; rather his has been a canvas of highly technical arguments set in place to justify belief in God as "properly basic".^{vi}

About Clark and Van til; we might say, that their methods were much more aggressive than Plantinga's will (most likely) ever be. However, Plantinga has laid a solid foundation for Christian scholarship to thrive and blossom as true Christian scholarship in the future and the 21st Century. How has he accomplished this task we might ask? Simply by telling the Christian to take into account all the information and then proceed without shame or intimidation from the atmosphere of the secular universities and naturalistic academies. He has done this by reminding Christian philosophers and scholars that they have their own pressing questions, their own pressing needs that they are to serve the Church not the university.

"... The Christian philosopher has his own topics and projects to think about; and when he thinks about the topics of current concern in the broader philosophical world, he will think about them in his own way, which may be a different way. He may have to reject certain currently fashionable assumptions about the philosophic enterprise-he may have to reject widely accepted assumptions as to what are the proper starting points and procedures for philosophical endeavor. And-and this is crucially important-the Christian philosopher has a perfect right to the point of view and prephilosophical assumptions he brings to philosophic work; the fact that these are not widely shared outside the Christian or theistic community is interesting but fundamentally irrelevant."^{vii}

If a Christian will be a scholar or philosopher he should not do so from the perspective of the university or the naturalistic ideologies of this day, rather a Christian scholar is to be Christian in all his ways. Plantinga puts great stress and emphasis on the fact that the Christian community as a whole needs a culturally aware and critical

approach to scholarship. Being culturally aware is something that the Church has struggled with since the age of reason^{viii} and Darwinian science, roughly 1650 and on. Plantinga's emphasis on being culturally critical is again, a step in the right direction.

"...Contemporary scholarship is an arena in which a fundamentally religious conflict is being played out: the struggle is between a theistic perspective, on the one hand, and perennial naturalism and creative anti-realism (along with the relativism and anti-commitment it spawns) on the other. These last dominate contemporary scholarship; furthermore they are deeply opposed to the Christian perspective. What the Christian and theistic community needs, therefore, is first, Christian cultural criticism, and second, Christian scholarship."^{ix}

It would appear that Plantinga's hidden motive or agenda is to regain lost ground by encouraging Christians to be Christian even if as Christians we cannot answer agnostic philosophy directly. If the ideologies of this day can assume proper warrant without warrant then indeed so may the Christian. *"...The Christian philosophical community has a right to its perspectives; it is under no obligation first to show that this perspective is plausible with respect to what is taken for granted by all philosophers, or most philosophers, or the leading philosophers of our day."*^x

Releasing students from the barbaric pressures of the secular universities is a good step in the right direction. Because Plantinga has dealt at length with the warrant and method of various popular thinkers and scientists he is considered authoritative and students feel comfortable in the presence of his ideas. And so, we might conclude, that people listen when he talks.

Plantinga is not blown off or merely passed over as another swanky side kick trying to make up answers as he goes, rather what men find in Plantinga is devotion and integrity. He attempts to stand up for the theistic worldview of life and meaning in the midst of aggressive cultural-naturalism and antagonistic-agnosticism. Though I am not a Plantingan I certainly agree with his conclusion and approach to Christian scholarship in these dark days.

"In sum, we who are Christians and propose to be philosophers must not rest content with being philosophers who happen, incidentally, to be Christians; we must strive to be Christian philosophers. We must therefore pursue our projects with integrity, independence, and Christian boldness."^{xi}

B. K. Campbell

ⁱ Essay by Alvin Plantinga "Advice to Christian Philosophers"

ⁱⁱ See Robert Morey "The New Atheism And Erosion of Freedom", Bethany House Publishers

ⁱⁱⁱ Plantinga *ibid*

^{iv} An approach to questions about knowledge and belief inspired by the work of Avlin Planting, Nicholas Wolterstoff and William Alston. Araham Kuyper has inspired a good number of apologetists that have brought forth different theories of apologetics. Kuyper's approach to scholarship has played a role in the formation of Reformed Epistemology. The argument of the Reformed Epistemologists is that belief in God is 'properly basic'. That is, does not have to be based on evidence. Plantinga's emphasis is on human faculties and their proper function in their intended environment.

^v Gresham Machen, 'Importance of Christian Scholarship', *addresses given at meetings of the Bible League in Caxton Hall, Westminster, London on June 17, 1932.*

^{vi} Alvin Plantinga "Warranted Christian Belief", Oxford Press

^{vii} Plantinga *ibid*

^{viii} Will Durant "The Story of Civilization, The Age of Reason Begins", Vol. vii

^{ix} Plantinga, Essay on "Christian scholarship in the 21st Century"

^x *ibid*

^{xi} *ibid*