



Profile

Alvin Plantinga

by Bruce Buursma

When Alvin Plantinga arose to accept the 2017 Templeton Prize for “progress in religion,” he couldn’t resist a wry observation.

“I don’t know if I’ve made much progress in religion,” the 85-year-old philosopher said in his best deadpan baritone. “I started out as a member of the Christian Reformed Church, and I’m still Christian Reformed.”

Plantinga, who spent his career as a Christian philosopher in long and productive teaching stints at his alma mater, Calvin College in Grand Rapids, Mich., and at the University of Notre

Dame in South Bend, Ind., joins the roster of such distinguished and diverse Templeton Prize laureates as Mother Teresa, Archbishop Desmond Tutu, Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks, Jean Vanier, and the Dalai Lama.

“Sometimes ideas come along that revolutionize the way we think,” said Heather Templeton Dill, president of the John Templeton Foundation. “Alvin Plantinga recognized that not only did religious belief not conflict with serious philosophical work, but that it could make crucial contributions to addressing perennial problems in philosophy.”

Plantinga’s lifework has been to argue that theism, and specifically Christian

belief, is not irrational—a boldly contrarian perspective in his field that prompted *TIME* magazine to describe him as “America’s leading orthodox Protestant philosopher of God.”

Born in Ann Arbor, Mich., while his Frisian immigrant father Cornelius Plantinga Sr. was in graduate school at the University of Michigan, Alvin grew up in a heady home environment steeped in the writings of Plato and the tenets of Kuyperian Calvinism.

“We read Plato together when I was 13 or 14 years old, and my father and I talked philosophy quite a bit,” he recalled during an interview at his Grand Rapids home. “I found all the questions that philosophers ask and answer to be captivating and deeply interesting. They seemed to be the right things to think about as I was growing up.”

Young Alvin was deemed ready for college by the age of 16, spending his first semester at Jamestown (N.D.) College, where his father was on faculty, before heading to Calvin for a semester. He spent his sophomore year on scholarship at Harvard but made a fateful visit to see his parents at spring break in Grand Rapids, where he sat in on three of Professor William Harry Jellema’s classes at Calvin.

“My father had joined the Calvin faculty by then, and I was so impressed with Jellema’s classes that I wanted to come back to Calvin,” he said. “Jellema was the finest professor of philosophy I ever encountered. He was very charismatic in the classroom and had such a complete control of the subject he was discussing.”

It was during his second tour at Calvin that Plantinga decided on a career in philosophy, but not before briefly flirting with the notion of serving the church in pastoral ministry.

“For a while I toyed with pre-sem, but after I tried that out for a bit I quickly decided that was not going to work,” Plantinga said. “The church is very

fortunate I decided against it, although I have always been seriously interested in church—first the Presbyterian church we attended in North Dakota and then the Christian Reformed Church once I got to Calvin and ever since. It's been very important in my life."

"He's one of the smartest people so many of us have ever met, but also one of the humblest and kindest."

A longtime member of Church of the Servant, Plantinga also was an active member of the Church of the Savior Christian Reformed congregation in South Bend during his time at the University of Notre Dame. "I really appreciate the CRC," he said. "On the whole, the CRC has hewed to its course much better than a lot of churches."

Plantinga's pioneering work in philosophy was honed during his days on the Calvin faculty, serving in a department that also included Nicholas Wolterstorff and Richard Mouw, among others.

"It was wonderful—a true community of Christian philosophers actively engaged in advancing the cause of Christian philosophy," Wolterstorff said of those days on the Calvin campus in the 1960s and 70s.

Added Mouw: "There are many of us who see (Plantinga) as having had a formative influence in our lives—he has been a kind and encouraging mentor to us, modeling a blend of intellectual brilliance, genuine humility, and a marvelous sense of humor."

Plantinga's reputation was extended farther in 1982 when he left Calvin for an appointment at the University of Notre Dame. He mentored more than a generation of students and scholars there before returning once again to Grand Rapids almost eight years ago to lecture both at Calvin College and Calvin Theological Seminary.

His younger brother, Cornelius Plantinga Jr., was Calvin Seminary's president at the time.

"Al is my oldest brother," he began, "and was also my professor in three philosophy courses at Calvin College. He has been an inspiration to so many of us. His work possesses the utmost rigor, clarity, wit, and authority, shattering secular assumptions and boldly defending the rationality of belief in God. He's one of the smartest people so many of us have ever met, but also one of the humblest and kindest. For personal traits, that's quite a combo."

Alvin met his wife, Kathleen, during their days at Calvin; together they have raised four children. Their two sons, Carl Plantinga and William Harry Plantinga, are professors at Calvin College, and their two daughters are in Christian ministry—Jane Plantinga Pauw is pastor of Ranier Beach Presbyterian Church in Seattle, Wash., and Ann Plantinga Kapteyn has worked in international settings for Wycliffe Bible Translators.

"My father has always been the classic example of the absent-minded professor," said son Carl, "but he's always tackled the problems that were thought to be the most intractable. He likes accomplishing a goal, and the task had to be difficult for him to be interested. For my father to achieve what he did, he had to work very hard. For us kids, that meant we didn't always get the attention we might have wanted, but he was always so upbeat and kind and affectionate that it more than made up for what we perceived as lack of time with him."


Carl also noted his father's longtime avocation of rock climbing and mountaineering, a summer passion that burned for many years until recently.

"My father was always impressed with the grandeur and sublimity of the mountains, which relates to his faith—his awe at God's nature and enormity."

His days of scaling grand peaks may be over, but the Templeton Prize represents a new and unexpected mountaintop experience for Plantinga.

"It's a great honor for him," said Carl. "Retirement has been a difficult transition, but this award has brought a spring back to his step."

For his part, Plantinga confessed genuine surprise that the Templeton Prize jurors "would chose any philosopher" for the award.

"Still, even if I don't deserve it, I'm not going to give it back," he added. "Naturally, I'm pleased. It's very flattering, and I hope it would encourage young philosophers to be forthright Christian philosophers—to be encouraged and strengthened in their interest in Christian philosophy." 



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