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Fact Sheet – Alvin Carl Plantinga

November 15, 1932: Alvin Carl Plantinga born in Ann Arbor, Michigan, the first of four sons of Cornelius A. Plantinga (d. 1994) and Lettie G. Bossenbroek (d. 2007). His father, a first-generation immigrant from the province of Friesland in the Netherlands, was then a graduate student in philosophy at the University of Michigan. His mother, a second-generation Dutch American whose family arrived in America and settled in Wisconsin in the mid-nineteenth century, was the main homemaker and caregiver. Both parents come from strong backgrounds in Calvinism, also known as the Reformed tradition, a Protestant branch established in the mid-sixteenth century. After his father receives a Ph.D. in philosophy from Duke University, the family lives in Huron, Michigan and then in Jamestown, North Dakota, where Cornelius Plantinga teaches philosophy, psychology, Latin and Greek at Jamestown College.

1930s-1940s: His childhood is steeped in the teachings and practice of historic Calvinism through Sunday school, two Sunday services (often in Dutch), church meetings, periodic sermons throughout the week, and summer camp. By age 10 or 11, he writes later, he understood and contemplated the so-called “five points of Calvinism” enshrined in the TULIP acronym: Total depravity, Unconditional election, Limited atonement, Irresistible grace, and the Perseverance of the saints. His curiosity about “Total depravity” – that every important area of life is distorted and compromised by sin – fuels his lifelong inquiry on how to comprehend the existence of evil in a world where God is omnipotent and omniscient. Even at this early age, he and classmates engage in discussions on human freedom, determinism, divine foreknowledge and predestination.

Over the course of their lifetimes, two of his brothers would also go on to academic careers. Leon (b. 1935) is emeritus professor of musicology at Yale University. Terrell, known as Terry (b. 1943) was a CBS News producer and bureau chief. Cornelius, Jr. “Neal” (b. 1946) is a theologian and was president of Calvin Theological Seminary from 2002 to 2011.

1949: At 16, after two years at Jamestown High School, he follows his father’s advice and enrolls at Jamestown College. A few months later he moves with his family to Grand Rapids, Michigan, and his father begins teaching at Calvin College, the Christian Reformed liberal arts institution, where he also enrolls.

1950: On a whim, at 17 he applies for a scholarship to Harvard and is accepted. There, for the first time in his life, he encounters serious non-Christian thought and debate, and an enormous and vigorous variety of intellectual and spiritual opinion. He stays for two semesters. On a cold, gloomy evening walking across campus he has a close-to-rapturous experience of being in the presence of God. The event gives him the fortitude to continue the pursuit of his faith amid contrary opinions that he can now accept as purely academic exercises.

During spring break between Harvard semesters, he visits his family in Grand Rapids and by chance attends a few classes at Calvin taught by philosopher William Harry Jellema, the founder of the college’s philosophy department in 1921.

1951: Specifically aiming to study philosophy with Professor Jellema, he returns to Calvin College. He later credits Jellema’s teachings with sustaining him in the Christian faith through times of doubt and uncertainty about his religious path and for helping set the trajectory of his adult intellectual life. Without it, he has written, he doubts 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.”

1953: Meets Kathleen DeBoer, a senior at Calvin and his future wife. Born and raised in northwest Washington State, she, like him, comes from a strong Dutch Christian Reformed background.

1954: Graduates from Calvin with a degree in philosophy. Begins graduate studies at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor.

1955: Marries Kathleen DeBoer. They will have four children: Carl (b. 1957), professor of film and media studies at Calvin College; Jane (b. 1959), pastor of Rainier Beach Presbyterian Church in Seattle; Harry (b. 1961), professor in the department of computer studies at Calvin College; and Ann (b. 1968), a bible translator in Yaounde, Cameroon.

Receives a Master's degree in philosophy from the University of Michigan, studying under William Alston, William Frankena, and Richard Cartwright. Begins doctoral studies at Yale University.

1957: Appointed instructor in the philosophy department at Yale University.

1958: Earns a Ph.D. in philosophy at Yale. Appointed professor of philosophy at Wayne State University in Detroit, at the time one of the nation's leading departments of analytic philosophy, the predominant 20th-century tradition based on logic and precision. Again, he often finds himself as a lone voice in an academic environment of well-versed and sophisticated anti-theists.

1963: Upon the retirement of his mentor, William Harry Jellema, and seeking the intellectual and nurturing stimulation that first invigorated him as an undergraduate, returns to Calvin College as professor of philosophy. Over the next 19 years at Calvin, he also teaches at, among others, Harvard, Oxford, the University of California, Los Angeles, the University of Illinois, and the Center for Advanced Study in the Behavioral Sciences in Palo Alto, California.

1960s-1970s: During this period Plantinga's work centers on a defense of the rationality of religious belief (in the book *God and Other Minds*), general metaphysics and philosophy of religion (in *The Nature of Necessity*), and the long-standing conundrum of the existence of evil in a world where God is omnipotent (in *The Nature of Necessity* and *God, Freedom, and Evil*).

In *God and Other Minds* he considers a variety of arguments for the existence of God. However, he concludes that belief in the existence of God is rational on the same grounds that belief in other human minds is rational. While we observe the *behaviors* of other people, our belief that they have minds (including beliefs, desires, etc.) is rational even though it cannot be inferred from those behaviors (how would we know they are not automata?). Likewise, a religious believer's encounters with the divine license the belief in a divine mind even though such a mind cannot be strictly inferred from the experiences. This book and *The Nature of Necessity* mark the beginning of Plantinga's efforts to put theistic belief back on the philosophical agenda.

In addition to this positive defense of theistic belief, Plantinga also aims to undermine the most widely cited argument against theistic belief, the so-called argument from evil, in *God, Freedom, and Evil*. The argument from evil aims to show that the existence of God and the existence of evil are logically incompatible. In brief, Plantinga responds to the argument by showing that in a world with free creatures, God might not be able, by definition, to determine the behavior of those creatures. If the behavior of free creatures is in the control of those creatures, it may be impossible (even for an omnipotent God) to create a world where all those creatures will always freely choose to do good. As a result, we cannot infer, as the argument from evil claims to, that a world created by God will not contain evil.

1964: *Faith and Philosophy: Philosophical studies in religion and ethics* published.

1967: *God and Other Minds: A Study of the Rational Justification of Belief in God* published.

1972: Awarded a Guggenheim Fellowship in Philosophy. His brother Leon receives a Guggenheim Fellowship in Music Research that same year.

1974: *The Nature of Necessity* published. *God, Freedom, and Evil* published.

1975-76: Visiting Fellow at Balliol College, University of Oxford.

1970s-1980s: Plantinga's work turns more strongly to philosophical theology, philosophical articulation of the nature of God, and what comes to be known as "Reformed Epistemology," the notion that religious belief can be rational without appeal to evidence or argument. He also begins to encourage other Christian philosophers to integrate their religious commitments into their scholarship, at a time when academic philosophers generally rejected religiously informed philosophy.

1980: In an article titled "Modernizing the Case for God," *Time* magazine in its April 5th issue describes Plantinga as "America's leading orthodox Protestant philosopher of God."

Does God Have a Nature published.

1981-82: Serves as president of the American Philosophical Association, Western Division.

1982: In order to work with graduate students, leaves Calvin College and is appointed John A. O'Brien Professor of Philosophy at the University of Notre Dame. Also appointed director of the Center for Philosophy of Religion at Notre Dame, which becomes the hub of work in the field, attracting scores of graduate students whose goal is to be supervised by Plantinga.

Delivers the Presidential Lecture of the American Philosophical Association on the philosophical position known as metaphysical anti-realism, a view according to which no truth is objective because all truths are dependent on the minds that believe them. In a novel twist, Plantinga argues that all truths are dependent (on a divine mind) and, turning the argument on its head, for that reason are objective.

Receives honorary degree from Glasgow University.

1980s-1990s: At Notre Dame his work returns to matters of theistic belief first covered in *God and Other Minds*, and larger questions of knowledge and rational belief, beginning with his article "Reason and Belief in God" published in 1984. He argues against the "the Classical Foundationalist account of knowledge," according to which beliefs are justified if and only if they can be justified by a chain of reasoning terminating in various types of self-evident beliefs. He maintains that while rational belief must indeed be grounded in foundational beliefs, as the Foundationalist contends, the set of foundational beliefs, what Plantinga calls "properly basic beliefs," are much broader than Classical Foundationalists allowed. These properly basic beliefs include, for example, belief in the existence of God. This however raised a puzzle which occupies Plantinga for the next two decades: how can we determine which beliefs count as "properly basic" (in other words, why is belief in God included, while belief in, say, the Great Pumpkin, is excluded?) He explores these and many other ideas in his 1987-88 Gifford Lectures and in his three-volume "Warrant Trilogy," published by Oxford University Press.

1983-86: Serves as president of the Society of Christian Philosophers, which he helped co-found in 1978.

1984: "Advice to Christian Philosophers" is the lead article in the inaugural issue of the journal *Faith and Philosophy*, published by the Society of Christian Philosophers. Plantinga calls upon Christian philosophers to let their religious beliefs set the agenda for academic philosophy, alongside the intellectual needs of their religious communities, a radical departure from accepted practice at the time. He urges colleagues to continue engagement with the broad philosophical community but also to explore philosophical problems through a theistic lens, and pursue academically rigorous work on the details of a theistic or specifically Christian philosophical vision. The paper is widely discussed, sharply debated, inspires many responses, articles and books, and influences a generation of religious philosophers and, in turn, their students. It is widely acknowledged as his single most influential article.

Edits *Faith and Rationality: Reason and Belief in God*, with Nicholas Wolterstorff.

1986: Receives honorary degree from Calvin College.

1987-88: Delivers the Gifford Lectures at the University of Aberdeen, the Payton Lectures at Fuller Theological Seminary, the Norton Lectures at the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, and the Wilde Lectures at the University of Oxford.

1993: *Warrant: The Current Debate* and *Warrant and Proper Function*, both based on his 1987-88 Gifford Lectures, become the first two volumes published of the “Warrant Trilogy.”

1994: Visits China to inaugurate a series of conferences at Peking University organized by the Society of Christian Philosophers and various Chinese universities. As his international reputation grows, Plantinga is sought out widely for international speaking engagements.

Receives honorary degree from North Park College.

1995: Receives honorary degree from the Free University of Amsterdam.

1996: Receives honorary degree from Brigham Young University.

1999: Receives honorary degree from Valparaiso University.

2000: *Warranted Christian Belief*, the third and final volume in the series based on his 1987-88 Gifford Lectures, published. The “Warrant Trilogy” will become widely acknowledged as his magnum opus.

2002: Retires as director of the Center for Philosophy of Religion at Notre Dame.

2003: *Essays in the Metaphysics of Modality* published.

2000s-2010s: Plantinga’s publications since 2000 largely focus on the relationship – and compatibility – of scientific and religious belief. His positions draw upon his “Evolutionary argument against naturalism (EAAN),” originally formulated in the 1993 book *Warrant and Proper Function* and restated in the 2008 book, *Knowledge of God*. In a surprising contrast to the common claim that evolution is incompatible with theism, the EAAN argues that evolution is incompatible with *naturalism*. In standard evolutionary theory, traits of organisms are selected for because they facilitate survival and reproduction. Plantinga shows that belief forming capacities can be perfectly adaptive even when the beliefs that they generate are false. As a result, if the only explanation for the formation of our belief forming capacities are random trait variation and natural selection, then it is unlikely that belief forming capacities are truth conducive (since there are many more ways to have false-but-adaptive beliefs than there are true beliefs). But it is incoherent to affirm that one’s beliefs are most likely false. As a result, it is incoherent to affirm evolution and naturalism and thus one must surrender one of these beliefs.

In his 2011 book, *Where the Conflict Really Lies: Science, Religion, and Naturalism*, based on his 2005 Gifford Lectures, he challenges the militant atheism and materialism that he finds in the sciences. He critiques the narratives of atheists such as philosopher Daniel Dennett and biologist Richard Dawkins, labeling their work as “poor philosophy masquerading as science.” He argues that the real conflict is not between science and religion but between theism and naturalism – theism supports science while naturalism actually undermines it.

2005: Delivers the Gifford Lectures at the University of St. Andrew’s on “Science and Religion: Conflict or Concord.”

2006: The Center for Philosophy of Religion at Notre Dame renames its Distinguished Scholar Fellowship as the Alvin Plantinga Fellowship.

2008: Returns to China for an event launching the Chinese translation of his book, *Warranted Christian Belief*.

Knowledge of God (with Michael Tooley) published.

2010: Retires from his position at the University of Notre Dame and returns to Calvin College.

Science and Religion published, an expansion of a lively and contentious debate with atheist philosopher Daniel C. Dennett held at a 2009 American Philosophical Association conference.

2011: *Where the Conflict Really Lies: Science, Religion, and Naturalism*, based on his 2005 Gifford Lectures, "Science and Religion: Conflict or Concord," published. The *New York Review of Books* publishes a surprisingly positive review by noted philosopher – and atheist – Thomas Nagel.

2012: Awarded the Nicholas Rescher Prize for contributions to systematic philosophy from the University of Pittsburgh.

2015: *Knowledge and Christian Belief*, a more accessible version of his 2000 book, *Warranted Christian Belief*, published.

2017: Awarded the Templeton Prize.

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