

BOOK REVIEW

*Where the Conflict Really Lies: Science, Religion, and Naturalism.* By Alvin Plantigna. New York: Oxford University Press, 2011. 376 pp. \$27.95. ISBN 978-0-19-981209-7.

*There is superficial conflict but deep concord between science and theistic religion,  
but superficial concord and deep conflict between science and naturalism.*

Alvin Plantigna

Alvin Plantigna, recently retired as the John A. O'Brien Professor of Philosophy at the University of Notre Dame, takes on the ambitious task of refereeing the seemingly endless conflict between religion and science, and does so in concrete and intellectually precise terms. In the process, he holds contestants in this apparently irresolvable struggle to the highest standards of their respective disciplines, standards to which those contestants are too often unable to hold themselves.

Plantigna's principal argument – outlined and summarized in the sentence above – is presented in four sections, each containing history, analysis and deep reflection. Plantigna applies daunting intellectual rigor to his topics while at the same time displaying disarming elegance in his approach and naturalness in his conclusions. This book belongs on the shelf, and more importantly in the mind, of anyone who wishes to engage in proper and fruitful discussion on this topic.

In his preface, Plantigna observes that while atheists declare “there is deep and irreconcilable conflict between theistic religion...and science,” they are often joined by “Christians who believe that reason and modern science are the enemies of Christian belief.” (xi) Plantigna quickly disproves any notion that all scientists are atheists, or that all atheists regard their views as proven by science. He shows that those scientists who argue most loudly against religion often do so as self-appointed members of modern society's “new priestly class.” (xii)

He reminds us that certain (nominal) Christians argue the loudest against certain sciences, most especially biological evolution, but actually represent only a small minority of mainstream Christian thinkers. Plantigna demonstrates how this “conflict” is often waged using only the most superficial forms of scientific and religious methods and how it is frequently waged without the collaborative and cooperative processes that are the hallmarks of both scientific and religious intellectual discourse when each is practiced to perfection.

Part I is entitled “Alleged Conflict” and reveals that the alleged conflict between science and religion is actually a conflict between particular *interpretations* of both science and religion, interpretations that differ significantly

from the mainstream and authoritative traditions of both science and religion. For example, Genesis is offered by some as an argument against evolution, but only by those who first presuppose: 1) that Genesis *must* be interpreted in literal terms, and 2) that *their* literal interpretation is definitive. Likewise, some atheists argue that evolution shows that there is no room for God in the operation of the universe, but *only by first presupposing* that nature contains all the means necessary for its own existence and ongoing operation.

Many readers of this journal will enjoy the thorough roasting given to the arguments made by Richard Dawkins and Daniel Dennett, who Plantigna correctly holds to account not for their views against religion, but for their poor application of the scientific method in reaching their conclusions. Be aware that Plantigna holds all contestants to high intellectual and logical standards and more than one reader may find their sacred cow roasted on that same fire.

The most intellectually demanding part of the discussion, however, centers on the history of how philosophers have viewed the question of divine action in the world. Plantigna draws a thread from the time of Paley and the "God as watchmaker" view of the heavens through to the modern day, where God's operation in the world is seen through the lens of quantum physics.

Part II is entitled "Superficial Conflict" and is devoted to the history of the psychology of evolutionary thought which he contrasts against the emergence of historical biblical criticism. Where the discussion excels, however, is in the analysis of what Plantigna terms "defeaters." In addition to analyzing the content of various arguments and counter-arguments, he dissects the quality of the counter-arguments as logical propositions. He describes one type of counter-argument as a "rebutting defeater," which is an argument that undoes the initial argument. The "rebutting defeater" is then contrasted to the "undercutting defeater" that merely erodes the confidence one may correctly have in their initial belief, but which cannot properly be said to rebut the belief altogether. Through a ruthless dissection of various, and flawed, logical arguments often rolled out in this conflict, Plantigna shows that conflict is typically far more superficial than presented and certainly less definitive, at least in logical terms, than many contestants assert.

Part III – "Concord" – develops this thought further and demonstrates how there is actually deep agreement between religion and science, and agreement precisely in those areas where conflict is traditionally presented as most irresolvable. This is the philosophical heart of Plantigna's work and he demonstrates this concord in three ways. First, he takes the reader on a tour through the body of scientific thought on how the universe is "fine-tuned" just to the extent needed for life to exist. Second, he takes the reader through some of the more complex scientific arguments against religion and shows that *as science*

they do not meet their own standards in proving their argument. This is an especially important point for Christian believers, who are often treated by scientists as being unqualified to judge science. This leads to his third and most important point, specifically that the core of scientific knowledge in use today is actually the product of Christian thought and action to an extent that many people – and certainly many if not most scientists – are unwilling to acknowledge.

By this point in our history, and by the end of this book, the reader is looking for resolution. But a “knockout blow” is not coming, and indeed such a blow cannot be landed in any argument where contestants remain faithful to the correct appreciation of what can be known by either science or religion. Plantigna constantly reminds the reader that the genuine goal must be to discover what can be known through science *and* religion. That said, Part IV – “Deep Conflict” offers as close to a knockout blow as one is likely to find in this type of discussion.

Plantigna makes clear that what is marketed as “science” is actually a worldview best called “naturalism,” a worldview that first presupposes that the universe and everything in it arose spontaneously and proceeds without the need for any external intervention. By any standard of logical argument, however, presuppositions cannot later be presented as a proof, yet this is exactly what the proponents of naturalism typically claim: that science “proves” the non-existence of God. Plantigna shows that, by a rigorous application of the scientific method, a universe composed as ours is and containing all that we know to be in it, is so fantastically unlikely as to make naturalism’s main arguments all but anti-scientific. This is the deep conflict Plantigna demonstrates, and in doing so he takes a well-needed step toward putting the study of religion back into its proper relation to the study of science.

For those looking for a definitive resolution to a supposed conflict between science and religion, this book will disappoint. For those who are looking for confirmation that reasonable, and indeed scientific people, can be also be people of faith, this book will surpass expectations. The reader must work hard to follow Plantigna’s arguments, and perhaps even harder to let go of certain personal presuppositions. Being willing to make such an effort, however, is a requirement for both scientists and Christians.

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