Conflict or Concord? A Review Article[1]

K. Scott Oliphint

Westminster Theological Seminary, P.O. Box 27009, Philadelphia, PA 19118, USA
communications@wts.edu

Where the Conflict Really Lies: Science, Religion, and Naturalism. By Alvin Plantinga. New York: Oxford University Press, 2011. ISBN 978-0-19-981209-7. xvi + 359 pp. £17.99.

As with most everything that Alvin Plantinga has written, this book offers a rare combination of philosophical insight, technical depth and humor that is virtually non-existent in books of this kind. For that reason alone, this book is worth reading.

The book is taken from Plantinga's Gifford Lectures, which were given in 2005 at the University of St Andrews. His 'overall claim' in the book, as he puts it, is this: *there is superficial conflict but deep concord between science and theistic religion, but superficial concord and deep conflict between science and naturalism* (p. ix). The rest of the book expands on each of these. It is divided into four parts, including, 'Alleged Conflict', 'Superficial Conflict', 'Concord', and 'Deep Conflict'. His aim, given this structure, is to diffuse the alleged conflict, to affirm (some kind of) superficial conflict, to show how theistic belief and science are concordant, and then to lay out the deep conflict that inheres between science and naturalism.

ALLEGED CONFLICT

First, the 'alleged conflict' (chs. 1-4). The first two chapters of the book are a two part discussion of 'Evolution and Christian Belief'. In the first chapter, Plantinga gives us a brief survey of Darwinism, and then takes a look at Richard Dawkins' work, *The Blind Watchmaker*. Plantinga thinks Dawkins' arguments for Darwinism are weak. 'Dawkins claims that he will show that the entire living world came to be without design; what he actually argues is only that this is possible and we don't know that it is astronomically improbable; for all we know it's not astronomically improbable. But mere possibility claims are not impressive' (p. 25). In the end, says Plantinga, 'Dawkins gives us no reason whatever to think that current biological science is in conflict with Christian belief' (p. 30).

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In the second chapter, and second part of 'Evolution and Christian Belief', Plantinga deals with Daniel Dennett, in part concluding that Dennett's foray into religious epistemology is disappointing, at best. Dennett simply assumes that theistic belief is 'childish' or 'irrational'. And why does he think such a thing? '[H]e assumes that rational belief in God would require broadly scientific evidence and proposes or rather just assumes that there isn't any other source of warrant or rationality for belief in God...' (p. 42). In his arguments, located primarily in *Darwin's Dangerous Idea*, Dennett seems unaware of defenses offered that there can be sources of knowledge in addition to reason. For example, William Alston argues that epistemological requirements often imposed on religious belief are not imposed on other sources of belief. There seems to be, in Dennett, an epistemological double standard when it comes to religious belief. So, for example, we could ask whether we can show by rational intuition that memory beliefs, or perceptual beliefs are reliable? Alston's answer is 'No'. Plantinga continues, 'Nor can we give a decent, noncircular rational argument that reason itself is indeed reliable; in trying to give such an argument, we would of course be *presupposing* that reason is reliable' (p. 48). In other words, when it comes to basic and fundamental sources or modes of knowing, the only way adequately to affirm and argue for them is by presupposing them in the argument. 'Naturally,' says Plantinga, 'these defenses might be mistaken; but to show that they are requires more than a silly story and an airy wave of the hand' (p. 46). In concluding these first two chapters, Plantinga makes clear just exactly what he *is* arguing, and what he is *not*. He is arguing that evolutionary theory is *not* incompatible with Christian belief, rather, 'what is incompatible with [Christian belief] is the idea that evolution, natural selection, is *unguided*. But that idea isn't part of evolutionary theory as such; it's instead a metaphysical or theological addition' (pp. 62-3).

Chapters 3 and 4 discuss the issue of divine action in relation to (ch. 3) 'the Old Picture' (Newton, LaPlace) and (ch. 4) 'the New Picture' (Quantum Mechanics). Continuing his discussion of an 'alleged conflict', Plantinga wants to address a supposed conflict between the belief that God acts in the world and (some) scientific theories. In chapter 3, Plantinga notes the views of Langdon Gilkey, John Macquarrie, and Rudolph Bultmann that deny God's actions in the world due to such actions being in some way incompatible with science. Plantinga's argument here is that the Newtonian picture, with a Laplacean codicil, is alone sufficient to give credence to the Gilkey, Macquarrie, and Bultman complaint. The Laplacean codicil to Newton includes the fact that the universe is causally closed. 'This Laplacean picture, clearly enough, is the one guiding the thought of Bultmann, Macquarrie, Gikey, et al. There is interesting irony,

here, in the fact that these theologians, in the name of being scientific and up to date... urge on us an understanding of classical science that goes well beyond what classical science actually propounds (and... they also urge on us a picture of the world that is scientifically out of date by many decades)' (p. 90). So, the 'Old Picture' of science is no threat to a belief in divine action in the world.

In a discussion of the possibility of miracles relative to the 'New Picture' of Quantum Mechanics, Plantinga argues, in chapter 4, that there are no real difficulties. The supposed conflict appears when some consider the 'intervention' aspect of divine action in the world. After a fascinating and enlightening discussion on notions of intervention and different versions of Quantum Mechanics, Plantinga rightly assesses the warrant of Christian belief relative to that of science:

> [I]f Christian belief is true, the warrant for belief in special divine action doesn't come from quantum mechanics or current science or indeed any science at all; these beliefs have their own independent source of warrant. That means that in case of conflict between Christian belief and current science, it isn't automatically current science that has more warrant or positive epistemic status; perhaps the warrant enjoyed by Christian belief is greater than that enjoyed by the conflicting scientific belief. (p. 120)

He then concludes:

> What we should think of special divine action, therefore, doesn't depend on QM or versions thereof, or on current science more generally. Indeed, what we should think of current science can quite properly depend, in part, on theology. For example, science has not spoken with a single voice about the question whether the universe has a beginning: first the idea was that it did, but then the steady state theory triumphed, but then big bang cosmology achieved ascendancy, but now there are straws in the wind suggesting a reversion to the thought that the universe is without a beginning.… But where Christian or theistic belief and current science can fit nicely together... so much the better; and if one of the current versions of QM fits better with such belief than the others, that's a perfectly proper reason to accept that version. (p. 121)

SUPERFICIAL CONFLICT

Having looked at the 'Alleged Conflict' between science and Christian belief in Part I, Part II (which includes chapters 5 and 6) deals with 'Superficial Conflict'. In this section, Plantinga wants to deal with areas of science 'where the appearance of conflict [between science and Chris-

tian belief] is matched by reality' (p. 130). Specifically, he is interested in looking at (1) evolutionary psychology and (2) scientific scripture scholarship (historical biblical criticism). Plantinga believes that evolutionary psychology is gaining in prominence and prestige currently. Highlighting its conflict with religion, Plantinga states: 'A recent high (or maybe low) point is a book in which a new understanding of *religion* is proposed. At a certain stage in our evolutionary history, so the claim goes, we human beings made the transition from being prey to being predators. Naturally that occasioned great joy, and religion arose as a celebration of that happy moment! Granted, that sounds a little far-fetched: wouldn't we have needed the consolations of religion even more when we were still prey?' (p. 133).

In a brief discussion about the place of music in our supposed evolutionary development, Plantinga notes arguments that contend that the importance of music is linked to activities such as 'walking and marching and other rhythmical activities' (p. 132). But, asks Plantinga,

> Is an activity important only if it has played a prominent role in our evolution, enabling our ancestors to survive and reproduce? What about physics, mathematics, and philosophy, and evolutionary biology itself: do (did) they have evolutionary significance? After all, it is only the occasional assistant professor of mathematics or logic that needs to be able to prove Gödel's theorem in order to survive and reproduce. Indeed, given the nerdness factor, undue interest in such things would have been counterproductive in the Pleistocene. What prehistoric woman would be interested in some guy who prefers thinking about set theory to hunting? (p. 133)

(In case the reader misses the humour here, Plantinga repeats this in ch. 9, p. 287).

Plantinga concludes chapter 5 with a question that hints toward the power of the disagreement between science and religion. Do the conflicts presented present the Christian or theist with *defeaters* for the theistic beliefs themselves? That question he takes up in chapter 6.

In this chapter of the 'Superficial Conflict' section, Plantinga dubs scientific theories that are incompatible with Christian belief 'Simonean science' in honor of Herbert Simon (p. 164). After certain definitions, discussions and explanations, the bulk of the chapter is asking the question whether Simonean science is a defeater for Christian belief (pp. 174ff.). Plantinga answers this question, in part, by showing the relevance of one's evidence base to one's beliefs, and by discussing the 'so-called problem of faith and reason' (p. 178). The rest of Plantinga's discussion is calculated to show how one's evidence base, including the relationship of the deliver-

ances of reason to the deliverances of faith, allow for nothing more than a superficial conflict between science and Christian belief.

OF CONFLICT AND CONCORD

Part III, 'Concord,' consists of chapters 7-9. In chapter 7, Plantinga considers cosmological fine-tuning arguments for the conclusion that our world has been designed. After much discussion, his conclusion is modest 'the FTA [fine-tuning argument] offers some slight support for theism... but only mild support' (p. 224).

In chapter 8, 'Design Discourse', Plantinga moves the discussion from a notion of arguments to the notion of 'discourses':

> Behe's design discourses do not constitute irrefragable arguments for theism, or even for the proposition that the structures he considers have in fact been designed. Taken not as arguments but as design discourses they fare better. They present us with epistemic situations in which the rational response is design belief—design belief for which there aren't strong defeaters. The proper conclusion to be drawn, I think, is that Behe's design discourses do support theism, although it isn't easy to say how much support they offer. I realize this is a wet noodle conclusion: can't I say something more definite and exciting? (p. 264)

This discussion, it seems to me, is quite helpful in that it changes the debate from notions of strict and demonstrative *proofs*, to the more biblically sound context of persuasion (though Plantinga does not use those terms). He argues, for example, that Paley, et al., present something like *perceptions* on the basis of which we find ourselves forming basic beliefs about design, etc.

The final chapter in Part III, 'Deep Concord: Christian Theism and the Deep Roots of Science,' is, as the chapter title makes obvious, the climax of this 'Concord' section. In this chapter, Plantinga waxes theological. A few of the subtitles give away the crux of his theological discussion: 'Science and the Divine Image,' 'Reliability and Regularity,' 'Law,' (including 'Law and Constancy' and 'Law and Necessity'). Plantinga does a fine job in these sections of showing the bankruptcy of naturalism to account for central aspects of the scientific enterprise. In a section on the relationship of mathematics to science and theism, Plantinga looks at the efficacy and accessibility of mathematics, as well as its nature and its abstract objects. On its efficacy, Plantinga says, 'That mathematics of this sort should be applicable to the world is indeed astounding. It is also properly thought of as unreasonable, in the sense that from a naturalistic perspective it would be wholly unreasonable to expect this sort of mathematics to be useful in

describing our world. It makes eminently good sense from the perspective of theism, however' (p. 285). Plantinga goes on to show how scientific induction, the preference for simplicity of theory and contingency all cohere with theism and cannot be reasonably sustained by naturalistic theories of science.

In his last and final section, 'Deep Conflict,' (ch. 10) Plantinga argues that there is deep conflict between science and evolutionary naturalism. Here, he says,

> My quarrel is certainly not with the scientific theory of evolution. Nor is it an argument for the conclusion that unguided evolution could not produce creatures with reliable belief-producing faculties; I very much doubt that it could, but that it *couldn't* is neither a premise nor the conclusion of my argument. Still further, my argument will not be for the conclusion that naturalism is false, although of course I believe that it is. What I *will* argue is that naturalism in in conflict with evolution, a main pillar of contemporary science. (p. 310)

Readers of Plantinga will be reminded in this chapter of much that he has written before concerning the probability that our cognitive faculties are reliable, given naturalism and evolution, i.e., P(R/N&E).

In the end, as we would expect, Plantinga concludes: 'Given that naturalism is at least a quasi-religion, there is indeed a science/religion conflict, all right, but it is not between science and theistic religion: it is between science and naturalism. That's where the conflict really lies' (p. 350).

PERSPECTIVES ON PLANTINGA

As I said in the beginning, like almost everything Plantinga writes, this book is well worth reading. As far as I know, there is nothing like it in terms of its penchant to dismantle naturalism and an unguided view of evolution. There is, however, an Achilles heel to the entire discussion that, while in no way muting the significant strengths of Plantinga's argument, nevertheless renders the overall premise of his discussion moot with respect to historic Christianity. For a book of such depth, breadth, wit and acumen, this is most unfortunate.

The moot factor enters in when we recognize the central, crucial, biblical significance of God's special creation of Adam (and, from him, Eve). This significance is *not*, we should note, simply *that* Adam was created in history; Plantinga's notion of guided evolution could affirm that. But it is also significant for Christians (biblically, theologically and historically) to affirm *how* Adam was created. The matter is not simply that there was

a man in history named Adam, who was designated the covenant head of the human race. Rather, with respect to biblical and theological orthodox teaching, Christians must affirm (and have historically affirmed) that Adam was *the first* man, created specially by God *from* the dust and with *expired* life (i.e., life given, because *breathed out*, by God to him). There was no living thing, no other 'one', nor some 'thing', (apart from the dust) that preceded Adam's special creation.

This truth—of the reality of Adam *in history* as the *first man*—is not simply an argument about 'origins', it is rather, as Paul makes clear (e.g., Romans 5:12-21), an argument about the nature of creation, of man, of death, of eternal punishment and of redemption in Christ. Once we begin to tamper with the 'first man in history' of Adam, we begin, by entailment, to tamper with central truths of the gospel itself.

So, unfortunately, given the orthodox necessity of affirming Adam as the first man in history, the overriding notion in this book of 'where the conflict really lies' is not advanced in this discussion (though many topics in the book *do* advance the discussion), but the conflict itself reverts back to that between evolutionary theories and Christianity. In the context of the four parts of this book, then, we can affirm much that Plantinga affirms, and his discussions—particularly with respect to his deconstruction of much that passes for 'science'—is quite useful. Even his discussion of the 'deep conflict' between science and naturalism is on point. In a book that seeks to dismantle a number of scientific tenets, however, it is disappointing that there is no sustained scrutiny of the view of evolution itself, which view remains, despite the cultural narrative, decidedly absent any hard evidence.

What is needed, therefore, in these discussions, is more exegesis, more (historically orthodox) theology, along with the dismantling of naturalism *and* of evolution, whether (supposedly) guided or not. If (since) this is true, the conflict really lies between historic Christianity and evolutionary science (guided or unguided); there remains, therefore, a 'deep conflict' between evolutionary science and Christianity. The only way to appease that conflict is either to concede to science what it itself has not been able (nor will it be able) to show, i.e., that man has come (guided or not) from non-man, or to accept the biblical teaching on man's origin (and the biblical/theological truths entailed by that origin). The notion that man has evolved from non-man, evidentially and otherwise, is, even from a scientific standpoint, eminently unreasonable, and thus singularly *un*scientific.