

# Commonweal

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## Saving Faith

The Renewed Stature of Christian Philosophizing

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**Nathan Schneider**

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When was the last time you saw dozens of people lining up for a philosopher's autograph? That's what happened in the sprawling basement of a Marietta, Georgia, megachurch after Alvin Plantinga spoke there during a 2010 "Apologetics Conference." And most of the attendees weren't even philosophy students. They were teenagers, housewives, mothers and fathers—all excited about philosophy.

To an audience of about fifteen hundred, Plantinga had just delivered an abridged version of the argument in his book *Where the Conflict Really Lies* (Oxford University Press), which would be published the following year. The gist of the argument is a startling *tu quoque* aimed at so-called New Atheists like Richard Dawkins and Christopher Hitchens—or anyone who posits that evolutionary science threatens religious belief. It is *they*, Plantinga argues, who have a problem with science, not believers in God. Without divine guidance, evolution provides no assurance that the beliefs of an evolved brain are reliable, especially when it comes to questions about the nature of the universe. Therefore, Plantinga asks, why should atheists trust their own beliefs? His sweeping case against the reasonableness of atheism comes at the end of a sequence of careful arguments, presented with a mix of numbered propositions, symbolic logic, and jokes. Actually, the more technical Plantinga becomes, the funnier his prose gets.

Much of his talk seemed to go over the heads of the audience. Afterward, several attendees struggled to explain Plantinga's argument to one another. Still, they bought armloads of Plantinga's works in the makeshift bookstore, and happily lined up to have them signed.

For his part, Plantinga didn't appear entirely comfortable with all the attention. But, the truth is, he brought it on himself.

In the late 1970s, Plantinga and his former teacher William Alston helped to found the Society of Christian Philosophers (SCP), a sub-group of the American Philosophical Association. The SCP had lofty ambitions. It set out to restore the stature of expressly Christian philosophizing within the often antireligious philosophical establishment. Plantinga had already led the charge, publishing a series of papers and books that stood up for religious belief using cutting-edge techniques that philosophers had recently developed in modal logic and epistemology. At least among analytic philosophers of religion, Plantinga's impact was enormous. A field once dominated by a handful of atheists has given way to a critical mass of articulate, rigorous theists.

Over the years, the SCP called on its members to "serve the Christian community," as Plantinga put it in his 1984 essay, "Advice to Christian Philosophers." SCP members have answered that call through public lectures, debates with prominent atheists, and semi-accessible books like *Where the Conflict Really Lies*.

William Lane Craig, whose church hosted the conference, benefited mightily from Plantinga's academic revolution. In the 1970s, when Craig was looking to write a dissertation on the cosmological argument for the existence of God, U.S. philosophy departments were so hostile to religious subjects that he had

to study at the University of Birmingham in England. But in the years after Craig published *The Kalam Cosmological Argument* in 1979, Plantinga and others had carved out enough respectability for theism that a book like Craig's could go on to become the most-discussed philosophy of religion book of its time.

A second doctorate and many scholarly papers later, Craig acquired a position of some stature in the SCP. Thanks in part to years of debate-team experience during high school and college, he was also fast developing a reputation for invincibility in public debates against atheists. His skill as a debater is now so formidable that New Atheist author Sam Harris called him "the one Christian apologist who seems to have put the fear of God into many of my fellow atheists."

Plantinga and Craig, however, haven't always seen eye to eye. The founders of the SCP opened the society to "anyone interested in philosophy who considers himself or herself a Christian." But when Mormons began to gain influence in the organization, it unsettled Craig. The Church of Latter Day Saints espouses "a crass form of polytheism," he told me. Rather than continue to fight them in the SCP, he decided it was time to start anew.

So he poured his energy into the Evangelical Philosophical Society—what had been a smaller, less dynamic organization founded in 1977. Serving as president between 1996 and 2005, Craig led the EPS toward a level of public outreach practically unheard of for an academic association. It has organized events everywhere from Oxford's Sheldonian Theatre to congressional office buildings. The Apologetics Conference in Marietta, Georgia, is a case in point; every year, during the hours when the EPS's regular academic conference isn't in session, its leading lights hop a bus from the convention center to a suburban church, where they speak before hundreds of laypeople. The talks are recorded, published, and sold—all in order to teach rank-and-file evangelicals that their faith is reasonable, and to help them argue in favor of it using the best that Christian philosophy has to offer.

When I sat in on William Lane Craig's two-week master's-level course at Biola University on the southern edge of Los Angeles County, I saw the fruits of these efforts. Many of the students—all young men, except for one middle-aged mother—told me a similar story: as teenagers raised in evangelical churches, they began to question their faith. They turned to parents or pastors for help, but mostly they were advised to pray harder, to believe more strongly. But then they came across a book by Craig or J. P. Moreland (who also teaches at Biola). There, they discovered arguments for God and for revelation that were infused with interpretations of modern science. Their questions were answered. A few even started their own apologetics ministries. Craig was not just their teacher; he had saved their faith.

Alvin Plantinga, though himself a Protestant in the Dutch Reformed tradition, taught at Notre Dame for much of his career. Notre Dame's early investment in Plantinga and the Christian-philosophy renaissance he launched, however, has not made philosophy matter among today's Catholics to the degree that it does to Plantinga's co-religionists. Among the communities reached by him and Craig, one senses a palpable excitement about what philosophy can do. This is partly because these thinkers have approached their discipline like a mission.

Much of the EPS's activity is organized out of Biola's Christian Apologetics Program, housed in an office in a drab strip mall a few blocks from the main campus. Inside, recordings of lectures and debates are available for purchase, along with copies of the society's journal, *Philosophia Christi*. "We're always thinking about how to do things that grab attention," said Craig Hazen, the program's director. He and his staff set up high-profile events, such as Craig's 2009 debate with Christopher Hitchens, and then promote them over the internet through social media. But as much as they're out to oppose atheists, they also continually warn fellow evangelicals against their own tendency toward what Hazen calls "blind-leaping."

"The idea that we're blind-leaping into faith is reinforced by evangelical churches all the time," he told me. "And we would make the case in our program that really that's not very biblical. It's supposed to be a rational faith." At the Apologetics Conference in Marietta, the audience was repeatedly reminded that there are good reasons to believe, and that they shouldn't let anyone get away with saying

otherwise; it is everyone's responsibility to study up and be prepared to defend the faith with sturdy reasons.

Hazen assured the crowd, "You don't have to be an Alvin Planting to make a nuisance of yourself for Jesus in the public square."

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