

INTERFAITH INSIGHT

# 'THE LEADING PHILOSOPHER OF GOD'

GR resident who brought religion back into intellectual life honored with Templeton Prize



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I remember that first day of class like it was yesterday. I had enrolled in Notre Dame's doctorate program in philosophy to learn from Alvin Plantinga. The first time I saw him, he strode into the classroom, pulled out a chair, set his feet on the seat and his bottom on the back, rolled up his sleeves and started lecturing in his deep, resonant voice. As the semester went on, we started taking bets on when he might pitch backward off his precarious position. But he never did.

Most of us first-year students, however, weren't so lucky. Plantinga had such a big reputation as a philosopher that advanced graduate students and even a few professors were taking his class. Plantinga was already world-famous for his work in the philosophy of religion, metaphysics, epistemology and logic. His high-level conversations with those professors both exhilarated and intimidated us beginners. Perched on the precipice of understanding, we often found ourselves teetering over the edge.

Sensing our desperation, Plantinga would shush the professors and then pick up our pieces and put us back together. With patience and good humor, he'd start again, this time at the beginning, and slowly bring us along to greater understanding.

I took every course Plantinga taught over the next five years, and he directed my dissertation. My first book, "Return to Reason," has become affectionately known as "Plantinga for Dummies." I could not have had a better dissertation director. He also took me rock climbing and cross-country skiing and invited me, and other graduate students, to his home for holiday meals. He was not only my academic adviser, he was a good and generous friend.

#### DRAMATIC INFLUENCE

Last week it was announced that Alvin Plantinga, a Calvin College alumnus and professor emeritus, will receive the Templeton Prize, which "honors a living person who has made an exceptional contribution to affirming life's spiritual dimension, whether through insight, discovery, or practical works." Plantinga joins the ranks of Templeton winners that include the Dalai Lama, Desmond Tutu, Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn and Mother Teresa.

To grasp his influence, consider this: In the 1950s, there was not a single published defense of religious belief by a prominent philosopher. By the 1990s, there were hundreds of books and articles, from Yale



Templeton Prize winner Alvin Plantinga delivers the keynote address at the 2014 Grand Dialogue on Science and Religion at Grand Valley State University. Submitted by Kaufman Interfaith Institute



to UCLA and from Oxford to Heidelberg, defending and developing the spiritual dimension. The difference between 1950 and 1990 is, quite simply, Alvin Plantinga.

Little wonder, then, that in 1980, Time magazine reported on the resurgence of religious philosophy. It spoke of a "kind of tough-minded intellectualism" and dubbed Alvin Plantinga "the leading philosopher of God."

While Plantinga's free-will defense answered the problem of evil, he humbly concedes that he does not know God's reason for allowing evil. And he is aware that this not-knowing can compound, say, the devastating loss of one's young child. And so, uncharacteristic of the professional philosopher, he offers pastoral advice: "Resist the urge to speak about things you don't know. Sit alongside the one who suffers and share their suffering."

In addition to his towering intellect and influential writings, Plantinga's persona — he is bold, charming, humorous and generous — has inspired thousands of philosophers and theologians around the world.

Plantinga's influence has extended well beyond our borders. His works have been translated into Dutch, Russian, Spanish,

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Polish, Italian, Romanian, Chinese, Japanese, Arabic, German, Farsi, Swedish, Urdu, Hebrew, Turkish and Korean. He has given more than 250 public lectures around the world.

Plantinga's deeply religious approach to intellectual inquiry has inspired Jewish and Muslim thinkers as well. Hilary Putnam, a prominent Jewish philosopher at Harvard University, for example, has, partly through the personal and intellectual influence of Plantinga, begun to self-consciously reflect upon the discipline of philosophy through the lenses of his own tradition.

#### HONORED AT LOCAL EVENT

So it is fitting that we will honor Plantinga at the May 13 Grand Dialogue on Science and Religion at Grand Valley State University, at which he previously was a keynote speaker.

This year's Grand Dialogue is being held in conjunction with the Templeton-funded project, "Abrahamic Reflections on Science and Religion," involving distinguished Muslim, Christian and Jewish scholars from around the world (with the support of the Fetzer Institute).

This year's dialogue is a decidedly inter-

faith exploration, including breakout sessions on Islam and providence, interfaith perspectives on God and evolution, Islam and violence, ventures of Adam in the Quran, and God and randomness.

In the 1960s, Time magazine's cover proclaimed, "God is dead." In 1980, Time magazine lauded Alvin Plantinga for his vigorous intellectual defense of God. The 2017 Grand Dialogue on Science and Religion — with its remarkably rich diversity of topics and speakers — owes a debt of gratitude to Plantinga. Please join us on May 13 to thank him and to enjoy the extended fruits of his lifetime of labor.

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#### If you go

**What:** Grand Dialogue in Science and Religion annual conference

**When:** Saturday, May 13

**Where:** Cook-DeVos Center for Health Sciences, 301 Michigan St. NE, Grand Rapids

**Online:** Information and free registration at [GrandDialogue.org](http://GrandDialogue.org)