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September 16, 2012: A Philosopher Defends Religion

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Title: A Philosopher Defends Religion

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9/16/2012—Alvin Plantinga has written a very important book on belief and nonbelief, entitled *Where the Conflict Really Lies: Science, Religion, and Naturalism*. Naturalism is the term that Plantinga uses for nonbelief—the belief that this world is all there is. His book is reviewed by nonbeliever Thomas Nagel in the most recent *New York Review of Books*. What is important for my fellow nonbelievers to note is that this brilliant philosopher and expert on the theory of knowledge is a believer and he thinks the evidence generally favors his view and that naturalism, not religion, has the difficult position to defend. I cannot do better than Nagel. Here is his opening: One of the things atheists tend to believe is that modern science is on their side, whereas theism is in conflict with science: that, for example, belief in miracles is inconsistent with the scientific conception of natural law; faith as a basis of belief is inconsistent with the scientific conception of knowledge; belief that God created man in his own image is inconsistent with scientific explanations provided by the theory of evolution. In his absorbing new book, *Where the Conflict Really Lies*, Alvin Plantinga, a distinguished analytic philosopher known for his contributions to metaphysics and theory of knowledge as well as to the philosophy of religion, turns this alleged opposition on its head. His overall claim is that “there is superficial conflict but deep concord between science and theistic religion, but superficial concord and deep conflict between science and naturalism.” By naturalism he means the view that the world describable by the natural sciences is all that exists, and that there is no such person as God, or anything like God.

Plantinga’s book is a more recent reflection on the old insight that what we think of as the scientific tradition took root in the Christian West, out of an interrelated set of beliefs that God made an orderly world that it pleased Him for humans to learn to understand. The scientific tradition is much more consistent in its fundamental aspect with that belief than it is with the nihilism that says that the world is a meaningless accident. To put this another way, if evolution is an unguided process, why assume that the structures that evolved are capable of reliably reporting on the world and on meaning? We might have had to identify a bear, but our ancestors never had to decide whether girl babies should be killed or slavery condemned. Nothing in evolution per se suggests a good answer. I’m not a believer, but this book shows how great religion can be and how problematic nonbelief can be—two very useful and helpful lessons.