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## From Defending Theism to Discerning Spirits: Reconceiving the Task of Christian Philosophy

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**Editor's note:** Dr. Neal DeRoo presented this paper at a joint meeting of the Society for Christian Philosophers and the Society for Continental Philosophy and Theology, held at Trinity College, June 2014. The topic of the meeting was "What is Christian Philosophy," celebrating the 30-year anniversary of the publication of Alvin Plantinga's landmark essay "Advice to Christian Philosophers."

# From Defending Theism to Discerning Spirits: Reconceiving the Task of Christian Philosophy

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by Neal DeRoo

In his "Advice to Christian Philosophers"<sup>1</sup> Alvin Plantinga lays out two pressing tasks for philosophy: systematizing, deepening, and clarifying Christian thought on key philosophical topics (16) and exploring how the result of such clarification bears on the rest of what we think and do (18). These tasks are necessary because philosophy provides "an arena for the articulation and interplay of commitments and allegiances fundamentally religious in nature; it is an expression of deep and fundamental perspectives, ways of viewing

ourselves and the world and God" (18). In this paper I will argue that philosophy is not only an arena in which these deep commitments play out and are systematically clarified but also a key method by which those commitments are brought to intellectual light in the first place. In this regard, philosophy is not just about examining and understanding theistic beliefs and their relation to our other thoughts and actions; rather, it is the means by which we discern the spirits of our time.

## Spirits of the Age?

If this recourse to *spirits* seems too mystical—or, perhaps even worse, too Hegelian—to be included in meaningful rational discourse, that is an issue you will have to take up with Prof. Plantinga himself. For it is he who uses this language to describe the urgency of the task of Christian philosophy: "Most of the so-called human sciences, much of the non-human sciences, most of non-scientific intellectual endeavor and even a good bit of allegedly Christian theology is *animated by a spirit* wholly foreign to that of Christian theism" (3; emphasis added). It is highly unlikely that we are to think of this animation by a spirit along the lines of supernatural possession, as if a distinct immaterial entity somehow occupies and controls the scientific enterprise. But if it's not Casper the un-friendly ghost, then what are we dealing with here?

Generally, we tend to speak of a *spirit* of the age

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as analogous to a certain cultural mood, a felt disposition that leads in certain directions and away from other directions. Hence, we can speak of the “spirit of 1968” as a certain felt disposition, widespread during the late 1960s, toward free love and away from power hierarchies and inter-personal violence. If we work with this definition of *spirit*, then a non-theistic spirit animating the scientific enterprise would mean that there is a certain felt disposition, widespread among participants in the scientific enterprise, that moves those participants away from theistic thoughts and conclusions.

And how would such a spirit become known and articulated? Plantinga does not elaborate this point, but he also claims that he doesn’t have to, since “it is familiar to you all” (3). This sense of familiarity is perhaps bred from the proximity of philosophers to the environs in which this spirit is wide-spread. Because the spirit is a felt disposition, it is plausible to assume that those who live and operate in the environs where that spirit is widely spread would themselves feel that spirit, either directly or via its effects. But precisely because it is a felt disposition, it is not clear how such a spirit could have an impact on the theoretical commitments and presuppositions of those it affects. Even more, if such a spirit is a *felt disposition*, how could we speak of it as animating theology (or any other theoretical discipline), which is clearly not capable of being the subject of feelings or of possessing dispositions?

### **A Spirit-ual Anthropology**

To better understand this notion of a spirit that animates the scientific enterprise, I think we need to clarify the philosophical anthropology with which we are operating. In doing so, I will take Professor Plantinga’s advice and offer a distinctly Christian anthropology that is fully committed to the belief that humanity has been created in the image of God (12). In this view we will come to see a slightly different account of *spirits* at work, one that will open up for us a new (or at least clarified) task for Christian philosophy.

This account of anthropology begins with the assumption of a radical distinction between Creator and creature, such that the latter can never be a miniaturized version of the former. As such,

humanity is not an image-bearer in the sense of exhibiting a similar property in a similar way to God.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, being an image-bearer of God is not a property of humanity at all but is rather its *essential* definition: humanity is image-bearing-ness itself and not merely a thing that happens, accidentally, to bear the image of God. That is to say, bearing God’s image to creation is not a part of human activity, but it is, in fact, the totality of it: everything that humanity does bears the imprint of the God who created it—or the image of something else functioning as if it were God.

An anthropology that seeks to systematize this understanding of humanity as image-bearers was sketched out by Herman Dooyeweerd and elaborated by some of his followers (notably James H. Olthuis<sup>3</sup>). Central to this anthropology is the notion of the *heart* as the spiritual center and integral whole of humankind, the center from which the entirety of human living flows. A key metaphor in understanding this notion of the heart is that of light shining through a prism: just as light is a solid beam of white light on one side of the prism but is refracted into the many colors of the rainbow on the other side of the prism, so too, the heart is like a prism through which the creative spirit of God shines and is refracted, in temporal (creaturely) life, as all the various types of creaturely inter-action. On one *side* of the heart is the unrefracted spirit of God, and on the other (temporal) side of the heart are the multiple aspects of human existence, which are nothing but the spirit of God refracted and expressed in particular temporal circumstances. The heart is therefore not a *part* of the human being, but it is rather the essential condition of humanity: we do not have a heart: we are heart-ed. As heart-ed creatures, we cannot help but reflect some type of spirit in all that we do, since it is our very natures to do so. All of human action is a refraction of the spirit flowing through our hearts.

On this anthropology, humanity is essentially spiritual, insofar as everything we do is a refraction of the spirit flowing through the human heart. This spirit is picked up from, and is expressed within, creation. Because the spirit is expressed through every human action, other creatures can pick up that spirit from human actions. Human action

functions as a transmitter that spreads that spirit to other creatures. As creatures ourselves, we humans also receive the spirit expressed in the work of other humans; because we are uniquely image-bearing creatures, all human action is driven and animated by a spirit of this type. Through all of our actions, then, humans not only express the spirit that is at work in their heart but also receive the spirit that is to be expressed. Other people's expressions of the spirit become the fodder for our own expressions of the spirit, and vice versa. The spirit is therefore

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an essentially communal endeavor, insofar as it is received and expressed in the interaction among human beings.

This communal spirit is therefore an affective force which may or may not be a distinct entity. As an affective force, it drives (or animates) a course of human action but is not expressed solely in one or another element of human living. Rather, the spiritual driving force is expressed in all the *colors of the rainbow*,<sup>4</sup> each of which is a distinct color that yet remains necessarily integrally connected to the other colors (since they are all expressions of one and the same beam of light). Any act of theoretical thought, then, is an action that betrays multiple modes of relating (logical, historical/formative, linguistic, social, etc.), each of which is expressive of the spirit that animates the community producing that scholarship. As such, no theoretical thought is spiritually neutral; instead, all theoretical thought is, by dint of being the product of human action, essentially expressive of a spiritual force that drives it.

### **Discerning the Spirit(s)**

This anthropology has the virtue (at least in this gathering) of lending credence to Professor Plantinga's claims that Christian philosophers need be no more apologetic of their own spiritual starting point than are philosophers whose work expresses a different spirit (humanist, materialist, etc.), as well as his claims that Christian philosophers are responsible first to the Christian community and only secondarily to the philosophical one. This anthropology also helps us understand more clearly what it might mean for a spirit to animate human actions and institutions (such as the scientific enterprise and/or the institution of academic theology). While its implications on this score might raise some questions about certain elements of the anthropology that Plantinga lays out in "Advice to Christian Philosophers," especially pertaining to voluntaristic free will and agent causation, here I will focus on what this anthropology tells us about the relation between animating spirits and human action and how it helps us re-think the task of Christian philosophy.

We have already established that this anthropology suggests that all human actions are expressive of a spirit that is at work in the human heart, the spiritual, integral core of human existence. This spirit is communal rather than individual—it is expressed in, and received from, human interaction with other creatures (especially other humans). As the spirit is communal, certain communities will have a consistent *spiritual* vision vis-à-vis other communities, insofar as different spirits are animating each.<sup>5</sup> While these different spirits will be expressed in different ways through concrete human actions, there is no guarantee that the spirits themselves are rationally or consciously known to the people within the communities they are animating. That is to say, because these spirits work directly on the heart, they work on a register that is pre-rational (and pre- everything else, too, for that matter) and so may work in a way that is totally unavowed to those expressing that spirit: While I cannot help but express the spirit at work in the heart, there is no guarantee that I realize I am doing so. And because these spirits are so integral to human living, their influence is massive, whether we realize this or not. And because

it is so massive, we might like the opportunity to think more carefully about the spirits animating us and our communities, both to determine what spirits drive us and whether we are all right with that spirit or not. What is required, then, is a way of distilling (or discerning) from human actions the spirit(s) that animate or propel those actions. Indeed, such a discerning of spirits is a primary *religious* and spiritual task, insofar as these spirits determine the religious and spiritual direction of a community.

I would like to argue here that philosophy has a unique role to play in this discerning process. Where each discipline is tasked with investigating a particular aspect of creation (or, rather, is tasked with investigating creation from the viewpoint of a particular aspect: biological, linguistic, psychological, etc.), philosophy is tasked with investigating the integrity of creation: how do the different aspects and different disciplines hang together? Philosophical conceptions of ontology, anthropology, and epistemology deal with these larger questions and so are in a unique position to determine the larger forces operating within and upon multiple disciplines, multiple aspects (though these conceptions themselves will bear the mark of the spirit that animates them). In addition, the self-reflective, wisdom-seeking elements of *philo-sophia*, as opposed to merely the more specialized, technical elements of academic philosophy, also move in the direction of articulating the spiritual forces that animate the human world. Something similar to this impulse seems to already be on Professor Plantinga's radar when he describes philosophy as an arena for the "articulation ... of commitments...fundamentally religious in nature" (18). What I am suggesting here is to take this definition of philosophy a step further, as that which pertains to the very driving forces of cultural life itself. Philosophy is not merely one arena, one discipline, among many in which these spiritual forces can be articulated (though it is certainly that, too), and its articulations are not limited merely to rational or theoretical claims, to *ideas*; rather, philosophy is a unique tool in the discernment, articulation, and elaboration of the spirits that animate human endeavors, be they the spirit of God or the spirits of the age. This particular philosophical task might

be one that is apparent only to Christian philosophers (though I don't think this is the case<sup>6</sup>), but Professor Plantinga would be the first to concede that that alone does not make it any less pressing a philosophical problem. As Christian philosophers, we need not let our conception of philosophy, its tasks and problems, be defined by the broader academy.

### A Final Suggestion

Before I proceed further, let me offer a word of caution: that I want to add *discerning the spirits of our age* as a task of Christian philosophy does not imply that I want to abandon the other tasks of (Christian) philosophy laid out by Professor Plantinga. There is still a need for philosophy to be academically rigorous; to systematize, deepen, and clarify Christian thought; and to explore how the result of such clarification bears on the rest of what we think and do (18). That is, even as it is tasked with discerning the spirits of the age, philosophy must remain a theoretical and academic venture. But the academic venture of philosophy must, ultimately, be in the service of the pursuit of the wisdom that requires a discerning of the spirits that animate us, whether that be the spirit of God ("The fear of the Lord is the beginning of Wisdom") or of something else. This is not to say that all Christian philosophers must be so-called *popularizers*, but merely that the results of Christian philosophizing ought to be helpful beyond merely academic borders.

In that light, I would like to offer an exploratory hypothesis, a tentative suggestion: Christian philosophy would benefit greatly from using the resources of phenomenology in its pursuit of its task. Phenomenology offers two distinct elements of methodology that make it a beneficial addition to the Christian philosophical toolbox: first, it elaborates the *life-world*, that is, the world of everyday human experience, by recourse to the promises already inherent in that life-world and so takes that world on its own terms while further clarifying, deepening, and understanding those terms; and second, it uses both synthesis and analyticity in service of integrality, which again points to its orientation to the world of everyday human experience. Both of these elements helpfully serve

the tasks of Christian philosophy—the discerning of the spirits of the age and the systematic clarification of those spirits and their influence on human thought and action.

The notion of phenomenology as a promissory discipline—the discipline concerned with the articulation and elaboration of promises—is an attempt to find the coherence among thinkers as diverse as Husserl and Marion, Heidegger and Dastur, and Merleau-Ponty and Jean-Francois Courtine. Its basic claim is that phenomenology investigates a matter (a *Sache* rather than a *Ding*) according to what that matter says about itself, implicitly or explicitly, and what the role that matter plays in our broader social (inter-personal) world says about it. A phenomenology of music, for example, is interested both in what music claims to be and to do (again, implicitly and explicitly) and what role music plays in human living (how it relates to other matters within and transcending the human subject). Matters are both self-given and externally constituted, and both of these elements must be examined if a matter is to be properly understood. In looking at what a matter says about itself, phenomenology seeks to determine what *promise* is being made within that matter by that matter itself; in looking at the role the matter plays in our broader social world, phenomenology seeks to determine how well the matter is living up to its own inherent promise. Crucial here is that phenomenology seeks to balance what is true of the matters themselves (so as to avoid extreme idealism, nominalism, and relativism) and what is contextually determined about the matters themselves (so as to avoid naïve realism, essentialism, and absolutism). This balance is key to properly understanding the relationship between the spirit and the actions that are expressions of that spirit.

Part and parcel of this balance is its constant recourse to the broader picture of the world of naïve, pre-theoretical experience—the life-world, the world in which we live. In service of this broader picture, phenomenology seeks to balance the analyticity necessary to understand the parts with the synthesis necessary to relate them to the whole. As phenomenology does both, analytic rigor is pre-

served in the service of a broader integrality that is not merely synthetic but spiritual. This notion of integrality is central to the heart-ed anthropology laid out here, and I think phenomenology offers a methodology that can respect that integrality without losing the necessity of analytic rigor, clarification, and articulation.

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Much too briefly, then, I suggest that phenomenology might be key to any attempt to achieve the discerning task of Christian philosophy. While phenomenology may not be alone in its promissory and integral methodology, I think we would be re-miss to ignore its literature and methodology as we pursue further what it means to be Christian philosophers in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

#### Endnotes

1. Accessed February 2014 from [http://www.calvin.edu/academic/philosophy/virtual\\_library/articles/plantinga\\_alvin/advice\\_to\\_christian\\_philosophers.pdf](http://www.calvin.edu/academic/philosophy/virtual_library/articles/plantinga_alvin/advice_to_christian_philosophers.pdf); pp. 1-19. In text citations are to this work, unless otherwise cited. The article was originally published in *Faith and Philosophy* 1:3 (1984), 253-271.
2. This idea seems to go against Plantinga's claims on page 12 of "Advice to Christian Philosophers."
3. The account presented here draws on Olthuis, "Be(com)ing: Humankind as Gift and Call," *Philosophia Reformata* 58 (1993), 153-72.
4. Dooyeweerd enumerates them as the mathematical, spatial, kinematic, physical, biological, sensitive, logical, historical (formative), lingual, social, economic, aesthetic, judicial, ethical, and the pistic (faith).
5. Or that a similar spirit is being animated differently, but pursuing this topic would take us too far afield for our purposes here.
6. See, for example, Husserl's *Crisis of the European Sciences*.