



ETHICS IN CONVERSATION

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A Conversation with Shawn Langley



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Can you tell us a bit about your academic background and why you decided to do a British PhD under Craig Bartholomew's supervision through Trinity College Bristol/Aberdeen University?

Those who know Craig will likely

not be surprised to hear there is an interdisciplinary tinge to my academic background and interests, which played a big part in leading us to work together. In general, the focus of my studies has been trying to understand how our religious beliefs are woven into the wider fabric of our lives and what role they play in our interpretations of the world around us. My earliest engagement with this, at least in an academic context, came during my undergraduate days in the United States, where I focused on the language and history of China. This allowed me to undertake some of my studies at a Chinese university, and it was at this time that I began more intentionally

to consider the various ways our beliefs define the perspectives we take on everything from what we eat to whom we worship.

It was also during this time that I started developing a serious interest in research and thinking through ways I might pursue some of these ideas in greater detail. This, combined with an awakened enthusiasm for understanding my own spiritual context as an American Southern Baptist, led me next to pursue seminary training. While in seminary the courses most exciting to me were those on biblical interpretation and Christian philosophy, but, rather than finally alighting neatly on one or the other (as I had anticipated), I found myself wondering how the two might be connected. As I approached the end of seminary, it was clear that my

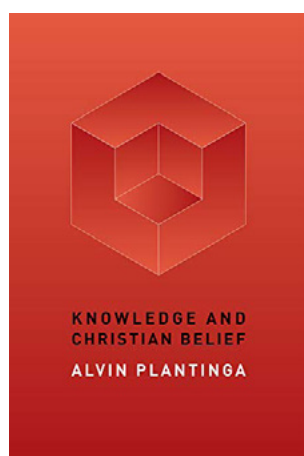


desire for scholarship had only grown; interestingly, the thinker who had shaped my theology most during this period was Cornelius Van Til, neither American nor Southern Baptist, so I began to consider the possibility of a research project engaging his thought.

Without getting too far into the next question, I reached out to Craig to discuss writing on Van Til's epistemology. He was incredibly encouraging of the idea in those early stages, especially in helping me see the potential of comparing Van Til with Alvin Plantinga. My reasons for wanting to work with Craig were many, and our friendship has been more of a blessing than I ever could have predicted. At the time, it wasn't exactly clear what form the final project would take, but I knew I needed the help of someone who could easily navigate the nuances of Dutch Calvinist theology, the history of philosophy, the intricacies of twentieth-century epistemology, and the implications of all these for biblical interpretation. Craig, of course, was just such a guide. (I'll come back to my interest in the British PhD process below.)

What was your PhD about?

The primary question I investigated was how a comparison of Van Til and Plantinga might inform contemporary discussions on epistemology, especially within theological contexts. This way of framing the problem was motivated by a few different factors, including the state of scholarship surrounding Van Til's thought as well as the amount of potential congruity between their systems. On the whole, I found current engagement with Van Til's thought rather confusing. There has been a tendency over the past several decades to use Van Til as a sort of antitype for positions ranging from Thomism to Barthianism to Christian monotheism itself. The source of confusion for me was the sheer frequency of interaction with Van Til in some theological circles, combined with a virtual absence of any mention of the actual epistemic claims informing the work



being used for those interactions. As I read Van Til, it seemed his primary claims were epistemological in nature, while his secondary claims were essentially derivatives of those formulations; yet, as I read his critics of various sorts, there were no traces of any such epistemic priority, either in their

characterizations or their contentions. Given that I had found Van Til's approach to the questions of Christian knowledge quite sophisticated and helpful, along with the fact that this approach was receiving little attention, a desire was kindled to examine this problem more closely.

Similarly, the more I read Alvin Plantinga, the more overlap with Van Til I sensed in his epistemology. This was unsurprising given the amount of overlap in other aspects of their lives, from their shared Dutch Calvinist heritage to their shared philosophical training under W. H. Jellema at Calvin College. Once again, however, I struggled to reconcile the discussions of Van Til and Plantinga themselves with discussions of their work within the wider theological and epistemological communities. Outside a handful of scholars (in particular John Frame and James Anderson), there was either no interest in bringing Van Til and Plantinga into dialogue, or, if there was, it was for the express purpose of showing why one was far more deserving of attention than the other. Thus, my aim was to evaluate Van Til's epistemology, with Plantinga's work functioning as both the rubric and the goal of that evaluation.



Alvin Plantinga

What conclusions did you come to?

There are three main conclusions that came out of the project. The first was the extent to which Van Til relies on the British Idealists for his epistemological formulations and what the implications of this are for how we interpret his thought. That Van Til was well versed in British Idealism has long been acknowledged, but its precise place has been the source of no little controversy. For example, some argue he was basically an unadulterated idealist, with nothing distinctively Christian at all inherent to his philosophy, while some argue his engagement with British Idealism had no meaningful influence on his conception of knowledge whatsoever. My discussion engaged both of these extremes and concluded each drastically oversimplifies Van Til's relationship to the British Idealists. Most significantly, it became clear that disagreement surrounding Van Til and idealism was not merely an isolated theoretical dispute, but had been central to the entire reception of his thought. Without getting too far afield, I examined whether the lack of interaction with Van Til's epistemological formulations might have been due to there being no consensus on what those formulations even were, and whether this lack of consensus itself was due to a misunderstanding of the role played by British Idealism in his wider system.

Approaching the problem from this perspective is what

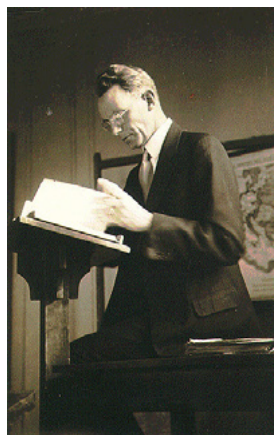
ultimately informed the second and third conclusions as well. The second was that interaction with Van Til (especially of the antitype variety) was largely missing the mark for the simple reason that the idealist concepts in his epistemology were either ignored or misunderstood. For example, some have dismissed Van Til's arguments through recourse to a form of realist epistemology; however, it was the unintelligibility of such epistemologies that informed Van Til's reasoning in the first place. This, of course, is not primarily a matter of the relative merit of realist epistemologies; it's a matter of how arguments premised on realist epistemologies are not relevantly directed at those premised on an idealist conception of truth in which realist claims amount to logical impossibilities. Related to this, my last conclusion was that treatments of Van Til and Plantinga were often bestrewn with these same difficulties. By not engaging the epistemological categories at work in Van Til's thought adequately, some comparisons were guilty of overplaying their distinctions and underselling their congruity. In contrast to this, I attempted to outline an approach that might cultivate more agreement than has previously been presumed.

Are you planning to publish it?

That is the hope! Craig and I are currently discussing a few options, and I am really excited by the possibility of making it accessible to a wider audience. As I alluded to earlier, Van Til scholarship has unfortunately existed within a rather narrowly-defined realm of discourse. My desire would be to contribute in some measure to a renewed interest in Van Til as a thinker in his own right, rather than as the pure polemicist he is (sometimes justifiably, sometimes not) taken to be.

What are you doing now and what are your plans for further writing?

I am currently teaching at a local community college, which has been an extremely valuable source of experience and development. It is such an encouragement to see the life-changing effects that education can bring about for a single student. As for future writing, my biggest focus will be to continue looking at the relationship between theology and philosophy, examining fresh possibilities for how they



Cornelius van Til

might be applied to questions of biblical interpretation. Another area I want to pursue further is the relevance of continental philosophy, particularly absolute idealism, for contemporary epistemology. Many in the last century issued a wholesale rejection of thinkers like the British Idealists, but recent scholarship has contended that this was a bit of an overreaction. Lastly, I hope to engage more with the renewed interest in comparative philosophy, especially those seeking to relate modern analytic thought to times and places very much removed from such arguments. There are rich histories and traditions quite different from our own that hold vast promise in our struggle with the issues of today.

In what ways was the PhD process formative?

So many come to mind, but I will mention two in particular. One of the most formative aspects was the way scholarship became for me a spiritual exercise, and this is one of the gifts from Craig for which I am most grateful. Far from the stale transactions of one self-interested mind to another, Christian scholarship at its best is ultimately meant to be a service to others for the sake of Christ. In attempting to follow this model, I gained a much deeper appreciation for the discipline and humility needed to undertake my responsibilities as a scholar.

Another truly formative part of the process was the growth I experienced as a writer. This was one of the most important factors in choosing to pursue a research programme in Britain. Concentrating almost exclusively on writing allowed me to focus, not only on well-developed ideas, but on communicating as clearly and carefully and charitably as I could. Similarly, the academic communities at Trinity College Bristol and Aberdeen, and especially the annual research conferences, provided ample opportunity to be encouraged and challenged as a writer. One of the many lessons I learned on this score is to avoid unnecessary overstatement, but it would be hard to exaggerate the significance this had for me.

Would you recommend it to others?

Wholeheartedly, yes. It doesn't take much searching to find countless horror stories about the PhD process, yet this was easily one of the most rewarding (and enjoyable!) experiences of my life. My only advice would be: do not take the question of supervision lightly. Find someone who embodies the type of scholar you would like to become, in character (especially in character), in excellence, and in interest. After that, just take it one paragraph at a time.