

who thought so differently (and [who] were so much more intellectually accomplished than I). On the other hand, I thought to myself, what really is so great about these people? Why should I believe *them*? . . . [W]hat, precisely, is the *substance* of their objections to Christianity? Or to theism? Do these objections really *have* much by way of substance? And if, as I strongly suspected, *not*, why should their taking the views they did be relevant to what *I* thought? The doubts (in that form anyway) didn't last long, but something like the bravado, I suppose, has remained.⁹

One of the events that dispelled the doubts Plantinga experienced at Harvard was a moment in which he experienced what he was convinced was the presence of God, something which he describes as a rare but important event in his spiritual walk. The other crucial event in this regard took place during a trip home, when he had the opportunity to attend some classes at Calvin College. Here he encountered something that held an even stronger attraction for him than the stimulating environment at Harvard – William Harry Jellema's philosophy classes. Harry Jellema was, in Plantinga's own words, "by all odds . . . the most gifted teacher of philosophy I have ever encountered."¹⁰ More than this, Jellema was "obviously in dead earnest about Christianity; he was also a magnificently thoughtful and reflective Christian."¹¹ Deeply affected by Jellema's teaching and his response to the modern philosophical critique of Christianity, Plantinga resolved after only two semesters at Harvard to return to Calvin, a decision he never regretted.

Under the direction of Jellema and Henry Stob, Plantinga and his classmates (who included Dewey Hoitenga and Nicholas Wolterstorff) spent much of their time on the history of philosophy, particularly Plato, Aristotle, Augustine, Aquinas, Descartes, Leibniz and Kant. In order to read some of these philosophers' works in the original languages, Plantinga also spent a significant amount of time studying French, German and Greek (having already learned Latin from his father while in high school). Apart from philosophy, Plantinga also majored in psychology (taking six courses from his father) and English literature.

In January 1954 Plantinga left Calvin for the University of Michigan, where he commenced his graduate studies. There he studied under William Alston, Richard Cartwright and William K. Frankena. Plantinga enjoyed his studies at Michigan, and the connection made there with Alston was to be one of the more important friendships that grew out of his philosophical career (Plantinga dedicated *Warranted Christian Belief* to Alston, with the words "Mentor, Model, Friend"). Moving on to graduate studies was not the only threshold crossed during this period of Plantinga's life. It was



while at Calvin, in 1953, that Plantinga had met Kathleen De Boer, then a Calvin senior. Plantinga describes himself as having been “captivated by her generous spirit and mischievous, elfin sense of humor.”¹² In 1955 they were married and in the intervening years have become proud parents to four children – Carl, Jane, William Harry and Ann. It was through Kathleen’s relatives that Plantinga was introduced to the pleasures of rock climbing and mountaineering, which became an enduring passion.

Shortly after her marriage to Alvin, Kathleen Plantinga endured the first of what is to date almost twenty relocations – this time to Yale. Despite enjoying Michigan, and there developing a strong interest in the philosophical challenges mounted against theism, Plantinga had felt that philosophy there was “too piecemeal and too remote from the big questions.”¹³ Yale seemed to offer a solution, and so the newlywed Plantingas made the move to New Haven. Though he was impressed by teachers like Paul Weiss and Brand Blanshard, Yale turned out to be something of a disappointment for Plantinga. He found the high level of generality in the courses on offer to be perplexing and frustrating: “The problem at Yale was that no one seemed prepared to show a neophyte philosopher how to go about the subject – what to *do*, how to think about a problem to some effect.”¹⁴

It was in the fall of 1957 that Plantinga had his first taste of teaching – focusing on the history of metaphysics and epistemology – which he describes as a harrowing experience, one familiar to many new academics:

I spent most of the summer preparing for my classes in the fall; when September rolled around I had perhaps forty or fifty pages of notes. I met my first class with great trepidation, which wasn’t eased by the preppy, sophisticated, almost world-weary attitude of these incoming freshmen. Fortified by my fifty pages of material, I launched or perhaps lunged into the course. At the end of the second day I discovered, to my horror, that I’d gone through half of my material; and by the end of the first week I’d squandered my entire summer’s horde. The semester stretched before me, bleak, frightening, nearly interminable. That’s when I discovered the value of the Socratic method of teaching.¹⁵

Plantinga’s lack of teaching experience was not something that in any way dampened the enthusiastic advances of George Nakhnikian of Detroit Wayne State University, who in that same year began tirelessly to pursue Plantinga for his department. Despite initial reservations Plantinga eventually gave in to Nakhnikian, and in the fall of 1958 the Philosophy Department at Wayne became Plantinga’s first faculty home. Looking back, Plantinga considers the move to be “one of the best decisions I ever made.”¹⁶

