

Interview with Cate Wallace, *Confronting Religious Denial of Gay Marriage: Christian Humanism and the Moral Imagination*

1. *Why did you write this book?*

I wanted secular humanists, non-Christians, and ex-Christians to know that there is a strong Christian case to be made in support of gay marriage. That matters because ninety percent of Millennials think that Christianity itself is anti-gay. It's not surprising, then, that at least half of them now say they have no religious affiliation at all. For this generation, "Christianity" is defined by what it stands for as a *brand* in the larger world. I set out to reclaim the brand.

2. *In the book you talk a lot about attitudes toward sex in the ancient world. What was the most surprising thing you found in your research?*

Roman tradition had spectacular sexual anxieties. They thought orgasm dissipated a man's "vital heat," and so if he had sex too often he would become soft and effeminate. And if a man's "vital heat" was at too low a level when he did have sex, he risked siring a daughter. That's why the Stoics, for instance, taught that sex was for baby-making, period. When pagans converted to Christianity in significant numbers, they brought these beliefs with them. As a result, complete sexual renunciation became a sign of "heroic virtue." For a small but influential minority, sexual renunciation took the place of kosher regulations in defining the community. Plato and Zeno would have been pleased; Jesus would have been baffled. When sex is morally acceptable only for getting pregnant, *lots* of us are in trouble, not just gay couples.

3. *What do you see as the biggest obstacles to Christian acceptance of gay marriage?*

It's important to realize that many Christians do honor and bless gay marriages. But for those who don't, there are two major obstacles. The first is Bible verses taken out of context. The second is thinking that these verses, distorted and taken out of context like this, nonetheless overrule what contemporary science has to say about sexual orientation. But Christian humanism restores scripture to its cultural context. We

pay attention to rigorous modern biblical scholarship. And we also pay attention to scientific and medical research. We are reality-oriented across the board, just as we are oriented to God and to the best of theological tradition. For us, belief and brains are not at odds with one another at all. The question for everybody else in the culture, then, is whether pro-gay Christians honestly represent what Christian tradition has to say for itself. That's an historical question. And I'm a cultural historian. I'm arguing on an objective basis for the "brand identity" of Christianity. That identity has been distorted by hard-right radicals for their own narrow political purposes.

4. *What the strongest pro-gay-marriage Christian argument?*

How about "love your neighbor as yourself"? Jesus went out of his way to include people his society treated as outcasts. Radical inclusivity was a key feature of the early Jesus movement. But beyond that, I think the strongest argument is what shows up when we restore biblical prohibition to their original cultural context. We discover that neither Paul nor Leviticus were talking about gay marriage in the first place.

5. *What do you think secular humanists, secular political progressives, and Christian humanists have in common on the question of gay marriage?*

We have major values in common, and that's tremendously important. All three groups insist that every person has the right to be treated *humanely*. That is, *compassion* belongs at the center of morality. Beyond that, we have in common a great respect for clear language, critical thinking, and honest use of the facts. These two core values—compassion and rigorous analytical thinking—go back to the very first Christian humanists in Italy in the 1300s. Later these values were secularized, of course. But they were first combined in this distinctive way by Christian scholars. And when you apply these values to the question of gay marriage, the conclusion is obvious: these are marriages like any other.

6. *Gay marriages are now legal nationally. Doesn't that mean that gay marriage as an issue is going to disappear?*

The Supreme Court ruling in favor of a national right to marry won't be the end of the issue, just as the great Civil Rights Act of 1964 was not the end of racism. Legal progress is of course wonderful and it's a huge relief for many families. But the struggle won't be over until hearts have changed, not just laws. And so I think Christian leadership on this issue will be vital. Christian moral theology has a powerful conceptual language for arguing that gay marriages are *holy*. They are sacred, just as sacred as any other marriage. That's a contribution that Christians are uniquely situated to offer to the culture at large. You don't have to be a Christian yourself to be intrigued by the logic behind that claim, just as you don't have to be Buddhist to follow the logic of their thought-provoking arguments about the nature of suffering.

7. *What would the Religious Right say about your argument?*

They will say I'm not Christian at all, which is nonsense. Christianity is far larger and far more diverse intellectually than they want to admit. They will also say that I'm "non-biblical," which means I don't read the Bible as they do. I claim the right to read the Bible for myself, using the best scholarly methods. But here's the key point: certain strands within Christian tradition have been exploited terribly and manipulated politically to serve a hard-right agenda that is antithetical to everything Jesus stood for. That's why so many major evangelical leaders of a younger generation are standing up and saying *enough of this already*. Hating gay people and hating immigrants and denying evolution and supporting torture are not "biblical values." And trying to imposing narrow and irrational religious beliefs upon the nation as a whole is not "religious freedom."