

Interview with Cate Wallace about *Confronting Religious Judgmentalism: Christian Humanism and the Moral Imagination*

1. Why are Christians so convinced that everybody but them is going to hell?

I can explain that. Fundamentalist Christians define God as a cosmic judge who condemns all of humanity for our innate sinfulness. That's wrong and it's dangerous. It encourages scapegoating. But it comes from the medieval emperor Charlemagne, not from Jesus of Nazareth.

Jesus said that God is compassion. God smites nobody; God cherishes everybody. What Jesus said got lost, or nearly lost, during the thousand years of theocracy in the West. Scholars have spent centuries reconstructing who Jesus was and what he really said. Which was not that everybody except Christians goes to hell.

But a violent God certainly is politically useful: that kind of theology justifies all kinds of repressive behavior. We saw that in the emperor Charlemagne, who was really brutal; we see it today in the Religious Right.

2. Many people say that Christians believe we should be ashamed of ourselves, we are personally inadequate, all of us are terrible sinners. But those beliefs are emotionally pathological. They are spiritually destructive. What can you say about that?

I agree. It's destructive and dangerous to think of ourselves as terrible sinners condemned by God. I want nothing to do with that God or with that kind of Christianity. Nothing at all. I think that kind of religiosity has done terrible damage to a lot of people.

But I'm not that kind of Christian. I'm a Christian humanist, and so are plenty of other reasonable people whether or not they use the label "Christian humanist." The very first Christian humanist scholars in the 1300s reclaimed the idea that we are made in the indelible image of God. Nothing that we do or fail to do can damage the image of God in us. The historical Jesus called us to nonviolence, radical hospitality, and inclusivity—not condemning everybody else.

3. In the book you offer an analysis of the Adam and Eve story in Genesis. You say that their eating the forbidden fruit was not the "Original Sin" according to which all of humanity ever afterwards is guilty. Disobeying God wasn't sinful? Say something about that.

That was the single most exciting bit of research I did for this book. It blew me away. That story has been very powerfully misinterpreted. It's not about disobedience. It's about shame and the origins of shame.

Here's the point of the story. Adam and Eve believe the snake who says they are blind, ignorant chumps deceived by a malicious and dishonest God. We all know that snake, that inner voice insisting that we are blind fools, that we are terrible people, that we are inadequate and failures and all of that nonsense. We all know that voice. And so the point of the story is what happens when we fall for the temptation to feel inadequate—to feel ashamed of who we are as human beings.

But we are not defective simply because we are not gods. Thinking that somehow we should be *perfect* is a set-up for feeling defective and deficient and inadequate forever after. It's a set-up for shame.

Here's the moral issue that the Bible is getting at: we misbehave—sometimes violently—from a need to compensate for intolerable feelings or perceptions that we are unwanted, inadequate, contemptible, fraudulent, or inferior to others. Those fears are the "original" problem within the human condition. That's the snake in the grass. If you can follow the wordplay in the original Hebrew, the Bible talks about that problem all the time.

The Christian humanists were the first people in a thousand years to study the Bible in all these original languages. They reclaimed what everybody in the ancient world understood in a heartbeat: these stories in Genesis are moral teachings in the form of a story. They are not historical accounts of anything.

4. At one point you tell a charming little story about one day when you were ten and you realized that you disagreed with the teaching that "I am a sinner" is the first step toward religious faith. How else is your argument rooted in your own experience?

I did reject early on this idea there's anything spiritually useful in self-hatred and self-loathing. That's not what Jesus taught, just for starts. The first step toward faith is recognizing that we are loved.

Another important fact about me is that I came of age in the 1960s. The Sixties were not just drugs, sex, and rock-n-roll. The Sixties were also assassinations, riots, pointless wars, police violence, and racially-motivated murder. I tell some stories about that too, about my experience with blood on the street and smoke in the sky. And so I went off to college in 1968

needing to figure out how anyone knows what's right and what's wrong. I figured somebody somewhere had to know, and if I kept reading I'd find them. So I kept reading.

And after 9/11, I realized that the Religious Right was not just wrong but genuinely dangerous. It was time for me to speak up on the basis of all that reading. We need to confront fundamentalism before it's too late. An immense cultural heritage has been co-opted.

5. You tell a story about snapping at your teenaged son one morning when he said that the difference between right and wrong is just an opinion. What's wrong with that idea? Don't we all have to decide for ourselves what's right?

When I was writing the book I asked my son if he remembered that morning. I hoped he had forgotten, but he remembered it as clearly as I did. I was embarrassed all over again.

Here's the problem: "just an opinion" makes morality sound like nothing more than a matter of taste, like putting cream in your coffee or not putting cream in your coffee. Morality is much more than an opinion. And here's the underlying issue: can we have good moral judgment without being judgmental? Can we talk about morality in reasonable ways, without becoming moralistic and damning everybody who disagrees? I think we can. I think we have to. We face huge moral issues at the moment: climate change, income and tax inequality, racial injustice. I think the key to good moral judgment on difficult issues is understanding what conscience is and how it works.

5. *You argue that conscience is best understood as a creative process. Explain what you mean by that. How is conscience different from "personal opinion"?*

That's a great question. Conscience differs from mere opinion because it is grounded in a careful analysis of all the relevant facts. But not just the facts. Conscience is also grounded in honest introspection. Are we are choosing on the basis of the best that is in us, the clearest virtues, the deepest compassions, and so forth? We are looking for a pattern, a convergence, between the facts and the moral good.

The more we listen to the "still, small voice" of conscience, easier it gets to hear that voice. It's never easy. But acting "in good conscience" is liberating. It's an antidote to endlessly second-guessing ourselves at three in the morning.

6. *If Christian humanism is as old and as famous as you say it is, how come we never hear about it? Why does all this fundamentalist ranting and judgmentalism dominate the public image of Christianity?*

Well, now you are hearing about it, yes? We have always been here. We are much older than they are. But we have not had a clear name for ourselves other than "not *that* kind of Christian." I reached back to reclaim "Christian humanism" as a name for us. Christian humanism was a major intellectual movement in the Renaissance and late Middle Ages.

Moderate, reasonable, open-minded Christians are angry that our religion has been hijacked. We want our religion back. We want our God back. But we are up against big public-relations budgets, high-wattage media outlets, and major contributions from Right-wing radical libertarians

trying to drape their positions in religious rhetoric as a way to get votes. As a result of all that, "Christian" has come to mean "ignorant bigot." And so Christians are finally getting organized to reclaim what "Christian" really means.

7. What do secular humanists and Christian humanists have in common?

Christian humanists and secular humanists share an important set of values. We believe in *the humane* as a moral standard. We believe in scholarship, critical thinking, and reasonable inquiry as intellectual standards. We hold these beliefs for different reasons, but that's okay. I don't necessarily care *why* you agree with me on a particular issue. But if we agree on humane values and intellectual standards, and if we respect one another as human beings and recognize the common ground we share, then we can work together toward common goals.

And if we do so, we outnumber hard-Right radicals. We outnumber them by far. We need to speak up, we need to find one another, and we need to work together. We can do so *in good conscience*.

We must do so. We live in dangerous times. Critical thinking and common decency are invaluable. They are the only path forward from here.