

Interview with Cate Wallace on *Confronting Religious Denial of Science: Christian Humanism and the Moral Imagination*

1. *What is it with Darwin? Why are some Christians so opposed to evolution?*

Evolution is an issue because Darwin offered empirical evidence for what biblical scholars had been saying for the previous century and a half: Genesis is not an account of historical events. What had been a fierce in-house argument among Christians erupted onto the public stage when both biologists and geologists in effect laid out empirical evidence that sided with the new biblical scholarship. Darwin got caught in the cross-fire between Christians who accepted this new biblical scholarship and Christians who refused to accept it.

2. *Where did the science-religion conflict come from?*

The science-religion conflict came from acute Victorian anxiety at the loss of absolute authority. Beginning in 1776, monarchy gave way to democracy. At the metaphysical level, that loss of unquestionable central authority was quite disconcerting. Meanwhile, in the 1700s philosophers studying perception were arguing with increasing confidence that the mind shapes what the brain perceives. "Objective observation" became problematic too. That was disconcerting as well. And then biblical scholars started arguing that the gospels are not eye-witness accounts, and Moses

didn't write Genesis, and so forth. That was yet another loss of rock-solid objective authority. On all sides, then, a naive certainty was crumbling. One historian said that the Victorians suffered something like a collective nervous breakdown.

The 1870s were a pivotal decade. On all sides, there was an effort to reclaim unquestionable certainty. Among Christians, there are new claims about papal infallibility and biblical inerrancy. Among religious skeptics, there are equally radical claims that science has replaced religion. Science will answer every question, solve every problem, meet every need. Science will save us. Science is our new-and-improved source of unquestionable authority. What we see in the 1870s is a clash of fundamentalisms: absolutist religion *versus* absolutist science, or what philosophers of science now call "dogmatic scientism."

Sophisticated scientists rolled their eyes. Sophisticated Christians rolled their eyes. People who were both scientists *and* Christians were quite seriously miffed. But at the level of popular culture, the two versions of absolutism went at one another big time. We inherit that conflict.

3. *But isn't it true that science has replaced religion?*

No. That's not true at all. That's the mess we inherit from the Victorians. Science will never replace religion just as acoustics and audiology will never replace music. Science will only replace religion if both religion and science are fundamentally misunderstood.

"Science" is a set of methods for framing hypotheses and asking very precise, very narrow questions about a strictly defined, closely limited

set of phenomena. "Religion" is a world-view, encoded by a system of symbols, that involves meanings, motives, virtues, and the arts.

Christianity, specifically, is an historical tradition of human efforts to explore the inward experience of God, not the causality regularity of material reality. Christianity has tools for exploring the experience of God just as music has instruments for exploring the experience of sound. Science is glorious and fascinating, but it specifically excludes the subjectivity and interiority that the arts engage.

And religion, I contend, is best understood by analogy to the arts. It depends, it has always depended, upon poets and songwriters and storytellers and dramatists.

4. *Can science and religion co-exist?*

Science and religion *do* co-exist. And there are any number of major academic programs and scholarly societies devoted to studying that relationship. The problem here is radicals on both sides. They are still trying to discredit one another's hyperbolic claims to have Absolute Truth. And that's acutely confusing to many people, especially people who have never studied philosophy of science and philosophy of religion.

Here's the bottom line: many of us are perfectly comfortable having complex, polyvalent world-views. We are okay examining our own experience from multiple perspectives. Some people know a lot about both science and religion. We bring both to bear. But for other people, science is mostly irrelevant. What little they learned in high school they have long since forgotten. And for other people, religion is just as irrelevant. None of that worries me. The important difference here is not between religious

people and non-religious people, or between people who know a lot of science and people who don't. The big difference is between people who claim to have Absolute Unquestionable Truth and people who don't make such claims.

The absolutists want to dictate to everyone else. They want to exterminate religion as a pernicious virus, or else they want to keep science out of the schools because it's a pagan religion. I'm not an absolutist of either variety. I'm not rigid and I'm not literal-minded. And I'm writing for other people like me—for people who are comfortable with paradox and multiple perspectives. I'm writing for other people who also have some imagination and some willingness to think clearly and systematically about complex issues.

5. *But what about belief in miracles? Doesn't Christianity require beliefs that contradict a scientific understanding of the world around us?*

That's a great question, and in the book I address it at length. But briefly: the miracle narratives are not claims that Jesus had divine control over cell biology. That's biblical literalism. That's what you get if you think you can read the text as if these events happened yesterday and you could have photographed all of it on your cellphone. Biblical scholars today insist that the miracle stories did not contradict the laws of the biology or the medical beliefs of the day. That was not the point of these stories at all. The miracle stories were bold symbolic confrontations with the political status quo. They disrupted the interlocking social, economic, and religious systems justifying the brutal colonial exploitation of the Jewish people.

The Romans understood this symbolism at a glance: that's why Jesus got into such immediate trouble with colonial authorities. The equivalent of federal agents were trailing him from the outset. They understood the symbolism that today we need scholars to reconstruct for us.

Did the miracles "happen"? *I don't know.* I don't think we *can* know, because the ancient world had a remarkably different concept of illness and disease than we do. What matters to me is the accuracy of what the miracle stories say about the absolute compassion of God. Compassion is the key issue here. Nonviolence is key, especially the nonviolence of God. Jesus claimed that suffering is not divine punishment for sin, because God doesn't behave like that. What does it mean to imagine that God never smites anyone?

6. *What about prayer? Isn't prayer a request for God to intervene in reality? And isn't that incompatible with a scientific world view?*

God is not a vending machine. People who read the miracle narratives literally—as proof that God can reach down and repair a detached retina, or fix a severed spinal cord—those people certainly do pray for similar miraculous interventions in their own lives. I don't deny that. But that's a radical, naive, literal-minded position. It's at odds with thousands of years of Christian teachings about prayer that one should never pray for specific outcomes. Praying for outcomes assumes that God is a vending machine, or God is simply not paying attention to your problems but he will if you ask. Or at least he might if you ask, so you should ask.

Prayer is more properly understood by analogy to mindfulness meditation, which Christian tradition has defined for thousands of years as the highest, purest form of prayer. I define prayer as an introspective creative process. It seeks a change in self-awareness—principally, an enhanced awareness of the presence of the divine. Becoming more consciously aware of God's presence can lead to both spiritual growth and psychological growth. There's nothing magic about it. But it takes sustained practice, as anybody teaching secular mindfulness meditation will tell you.

7. *What's your own background in science?*

I was deeply influenced by a year-long honors seminar in the philosophy of science. We read both *The Origin of Species* and *The Descent of Man*. We also read a very daunting stack of classic, original-research reports on topics like the Krebs cycle, or why carbon rings form as they do, or how enzymes do what they do inside cells. I learned an incredible amount of embryology, because that was the professor's specialty. We had to understand the scientific facts of behind this or that bit of research, and so of course I would dutifully memorize every step in the Krebs cycle or whatever. I could draw every molecule; I could explain every single reaction. And then I'd go to class to discover that knowing all that was not the point, or it was only the barest beginning of the point. There was a bigger question.

The bigger question was "Where did this hypothesis come from?" That's a question about how creativity works. How was this experiment designed to test that hypothesis rigorously? There's another question about creativity. And then, watching the development of theories in biology and

geology across the 1700s and 1800s, what is the relationship between hypothesis-formation in a field and the kinds of technical observations and analysis available at the time? That's yet another question about creativity. Beginning in 1620 or so, there's a long and fascinating debate about what constitutes a valid hypothesis and why. An hypothesis is not a wild guess, and it's not a logical inference from facts. *What is it?*

I came away awed by scientific research as an immensely creative undertaking. It has all the same elegance and rigor I was studying in poetry classes on the other side of the campus quad. These experiments had all the same remarkable relationship between form and content and cultural context. That undergraduate course in the philosophy of science convinced me that I had to understand creativity. I had to understand creativity in some way that was wide enough to encompass both the sonnets of Shakespeare and Krebs's research into adenosine triphosphate in cell metabolism. That's how in grad school some years later, I found myself in yet another year-long seminar in which I read texts like Newton's preface to *Principia Mathematica*. If you want to understand theories of creativity in the 1600s, that preface is required reading.

At its best, I contend, religious faith is also an immensely complex creative activity. It's not mindless obedience to some set of unquestionable absolutes. Like scientific research, like writing poetry or composing music, religious faith requires imagination.

8. *What do you think secular humanists and Christian humanists have in common when it comes to the relationship between religion and science?*

Reasonable people understand that it's possible to be a sharp critical thinker without setting foot in a science lab, just as its possible to be morally responsible without setting foot in a church. For some of us, believers and non-believers alike, such things are self-evident. What is problematic, however—and again this is an attitude we share—is that there will always be people trying to co-opt culturally significant activities to serve their own narrow political purposes.

Both Christian humanists and secular humanists understand and respect the fact that different people have different ways of defining what is deeply meaningful in their own lives, and different sources of moral support for the best that is in them. However you achieve such things, it matters in life. We respect that about one another. For reasonable people, such respect is some combination of common courtesy and common sense. We honor the moral integrity of other people no matter what their metaphysical allegiance.

And so we are all, collectively, appalled by the current conflict between dogmatic scientism and fundamentalist Christianity. This is dangerous nonsense. We are very much agreed on that point. Flame-thrower rhetoric on all sides makes it far more difficult to solve problems that we will need both science and religion to solve successfully, like how to address climate change or how to diminish our unsustainable levels of consumption.