

Interview with Cate Wallace, *Confronting Religious Absolutism: Christian Humanism and the Moral Imagination*

1. *You don't believe that the Bible is literally true and that it's completely correct in everything it says. But you say you're a Christian. How does that work? Don't all Christians believe in the Bible? Isn't that part of what it means to be a Christian?*

Oh, I do believe in the Bible. I think the Bible is the masterpiece of the Western moral imagination. That's why it's such a catastrophe to read the Bible literally. No one in the ancient world would have dreamed of reading it literally. In the ancient world, the literal meaning of a text was its least important level of meaning. To be intellectually serious, to be morally serious, a text had to have many other levels of meaning. These were far more important. The literal level was not to be taken seriously. I quote a whole array of major theologians from the second and third century warning against reading the Bible literally. Biblical literalism is a Victorian invention. It dates from the 1880s.

2. *What about papal infallibility? Hasn't the pope always dictated to Catholics what they have to believe? Not using birth control, not having women priests, all of that?*

Most Catholics do not believe in papal infallibility, just as most Protestants do not believe in that the Bible is literally accurate in everything it says. According to research data from the Pew Forum, Catholics are more likely than other Christians to say that there's more than one valid way to interpret the truths of their faith.

And that has always been true. Fifty years ago, my mother shrugged off the dictates of our local cardinal, saying, "That man thinks he is the church." The cardinals and the Vatican are not the church. "The church" is another name for a mystical unity embracing all believers. The people are the church, not the pope. *That's* classic Christianity, not papal infallibility.

Papal infallibility was the invention of one particularly weird, extraordinarily reactionary Victorian pope. Just for starts, he opposed science, biblical scholarship, democracy, and freedom of religion. And his claims have created a legacy of terrible problems for the Catholic church. Gary Wills explains those problems years ago in his book *Papal Sin*.

3. *So you don't believe in religious authority at all?*

I didn't say that. I said I don't believe in *absolute* religious authority. I don't believe in religious dictatorship. God is not an autocrat on high proclaiming "believe or be damned." How we understand religious authority has huge implications for how we think about God, so we need to be careful here. We need to be precise.

Let me offer an analogy. The arts convince, they do not command. The arts persuade, they do not proclaim "believe or be damned." The lyric voice—the poet's voice, the voice of the song-writer—knows how to say *This is true* without insisting *Don't question what I say*.

The arts are incredibly powerful culturally. The first thing dictators do is crack down on novelists, playwrights, song-writers. Why? Because the arts understand how to speak the truth persuasively and in a non-dogmatic way. When we hear the truth spoken persuasively, we turn around and listen. We pay attention.

Christianity has a deep truth to tell. And stories are the most enduring form humanity has ever invented for preserving and sharing the complex insight. Christianity offers remarkably complex insight into the human condition, wisdom that fundamentalism is slowly destroying.

4. *Stories and poems are powerful, sure. But they're not true. Are you saying Christianity isn't true, that it's just a bunch of stories? That's what atheists say: it's all a bunch of stories. Is that what you're saying?*

Saying "just a bunch of stories" like saying "just a bunch of electrons" and thereby dismissing quantum physics.

Here's the heart of the matter: the New Atheists and the Christian fundamentalists share a primitive, philosophically indefensible definition of "truth," which is that for something to be true you have to be able to weigh or measure it or take a picture with your cellphone. In philosophical terms, that mistake is called "physicalism." If physicalism is true, then quantum mathematics is an illusion, and without quantum mathematics we would not have computers.

I think biblical stories, properly understood offer remarkably valuable insight into the human condition. But Christianity isn't just a set of theories about the human condition. Christianity is a set of practices and attitudes that can help any of us to *become* more humane and to *become* more compassionate and more at peace with who we are.

None of that depends upon creation happening in six days, or the historicity of Noah's Flood, or whether the walls of Jericho came tumbling down when Joshua blew his horn. Those stories have a whole lot more to tell us than what biblical literalists could ever imagine.

5. If Christian humanism is as old and as famous as you say it is, how come we don't hear about it? The public image of Christianity is dominated by biblical literalists in a dither over Darwin and Catholic bishops insisting that all sex should be unprotected sex. What you are saying here is interesting, but are there Christians who really think like this? Why don't we hear from them?

Well, you are hearing from us now, yes?

But seriously, that's why I wrote this book and the others like it. The Pew Forum and Public Religion Research Institute both document the diversity of Christian beliefs and attitudes. Christianity is a much bigger conversation than non-Christians might realize.

Here's the problem: ever since the 1930s, the Religious Right has had phenomenal financial support from hard-Right libertarian business interests interested in draping their radical positions in religious rhetoric. In *One Nation Under God*, Princeton history professor Kevin Kruse documents how all that got started in the 1930s. Rice

University sociologist William Martin picks up the story in the 1950s in *With God on Our Side*. The Religious Right has had some very impressive public-relations muscle on their side, and a lot of very well-funded organizations to get their message out. And we've seen where that kind of radical politics had gotten us.

An immense cultural heritage is very much at risk. You don't have to become Christian to object to how the Religious Right has co-opted Christianity for narrow political purposes. Neither do you have to become Buddhist to object to the Chinese government trying to name the next Dalai Lama, or the Taliban blowing up statues of the Buddha.

I'm not saying to anybody "Come to Jesus." I'm saying "Come to your senses. Christian fundamentalism is genuinely dangerous—and it has vanishingly little to do with the historical Jesus of Nazareth. "

6. *What do secular humanists and Christian humanists have in common? You call for co-operation between the two groups. Is there a basis for that?*

There certainly is a basis for that. That's what I'm writing to explain. Christian humanists and secular humanists share a commitment to *the humane* as a moral standard. All people everywhere have a right to be treated humanely. Second, secular humanists and Christian humanists share a commitment to critical thinking, to rigorous research, and to the honest use of language. These values go back in their modern form to the fourteenth century.

Furthermore, plenty of people in other religious traditions also share these values. There are Muslim humanists, Hindu humanists, Buddhist humanists, Jewish humanists, and so forth. Together we have a lot to contribute. Together we are an immense constituency. Together we can argue that policies must be based on honest facts, clear critical thinking, and reasonable compromise among competing goods.

That would be a change for the better.