Interview with Cate Wallace about *Confronting a Controlling God: Christian Humanism and the Moral Imagination*

1. *If I'm not Christian, why should I care about how Christians define God?*

Fundamentalism mis-represents the nature of God. That matters even for nonbelievers because for more than a thousand years Christianity was the established religion of the West. As a result, Christian images and Christian symbolism permeate our moral thinking. You don't need a degree in marketing to know how powerful images and symbolism can be. When fundamentalism defines God as all-controlling, that offers moral legitimacy to an autocratic *political* effort by a minority to claim that they are above the law. And not only above the law—they are also not answerable to honest, fact-based, intellectually rigorous arguments by other people. They have Truth and so they don't need evidence from the reality-based community.

2. *You talk in the first chapter about major political collaboration between the Religious Right and Right-wing secular libertarians. That has never made sense to me. Regulate bedrooms but don't regulate banks? How does that work?*

Politics has always made for strange bedfellows. Here's how that works. The extremist secular Right is opposed to any government regulation that might interfere with profits by taxing wealth appropriately, by forcing companies to be environmentally sensitive, or by creating a level

playing-field between responsible businesses and ruthless ones. The Religious Right has always been opposed to government regulations too. But the regulations they oppose are those that extend civil rights to anyone other than white male Protestants.

The Religious Right in its current form got started by opposing racial desegregation and civil rights for black people. In no time flat they also opposed civil rights for women, for non-Christian kids in public schools, and for gay people. When the Religious Right and the libertarian secular Right got together, they started using religious rhetoric to get people opposed to civil rights to vote for candidates who would cut taxes on the most wealthy, defund regulatory agencies, and slash spending on social programs like food stamps, infrastructure, public education, healthcare, and public transportation. That's how the alliance works: together, they organized political support for candidates opposed to "government regulations" across the board. What this alliance is opposed to, in the last analysis, is democratic government of the people, by the people, and for the people. They want *control* for themselves.

The religious side of this alliance is rooted in claims about a God who is radically controlling at the cosmic level. This radically authoritarian God provides remarkably powerful cultural support for human abuse of socioeconomic power and privilege. That's the dangerous co-opting of Christianity that I oppose. I set out here to deconstruct it from within Christianity itself. If we are going to confront fundamentalism successfully, then Christian thinkers have to take the lead—just as Islamic radicalism will only be stopped successfully from within Islam and under the leadership of Muslim historians and intellectuals.

3. *You propose a "Copernican turn" in Christian thought. You argue that Christianity orbits around human spiritual experience, not the Bible and not church dogma and all that. How does putting spirituality at the center provide any kind of remedy for the radical Right-wing politics that have brought Washington DC to a standstill?*

Placing the human spiritual experience at the center of Christian thought is not an direct remedy for today's political dysfunction. But it does provide a way to unplug the Religious Right from the cultural resources and religious traditions they have been exploiting.

I'm reclaiming what has always been the core of Christianity as a religion, which is the individual, deeply personal encounter with a compassionate God. If you want to use Christianity to defend an authoritarian, theocratic abuse of power, then you have to define God as raw power. You have to project dysfunctional human control-needs onto the character of God.

But the core of Christianity is human spiritual encounter with a loving and compassionate God. So the question becomes, where does this obsession with power come from within Christianity? I trace its origins back to classical antiquity.

4. *You go back further than classical antiquity: you have a long chapter on the story of Moses and the burning bush, and that's an Iron-Age story. You argue with how that scene has been translated. Explain what's going on there.*

We need to remember that every translation is also an interpretation. You are never simply translating sentences. You are also always translating between cultures, the culture of the original text and the culture of the target language you are translating *into.*

So I do a simple close literary reading of the moment in the Moses saga in which burning bush tells Moses the name of God. When that old story was translated into Greek, and centuries later into Latin, it was translated from Jewish religious culture into a very different culture thoroughly dominated by Greek philosophy.

When that happened, the God who defined himself as compassionate Presence was redefined as a philosophical proposition—the Uncaused Cause, the Ground of Being, and so forth. It was as if those static metaphysical functions were added to God's job description.

The static God of philosophical inference and the dynamic God of compassion are something like two very different characters. And we need to keep them straight, or we need to keep these two dimensions of theology in an intelligent, appropriate balance. Christian tradition at its best does so quite easily. It always has. But fundamentalism is not Christianity at its best. They have reduced God to radical, vindictive control. Theologically speaking, that's pernicious nonsense.

5. *Talking about the God of compassionate presence brings up something else about Christianity that does not make any sense at all to a lot of people. How can anybody believe that there exists a God who is personally present to every single one of us? No offense, but that sounds crazy.*

Oh, it does sound crazy. I take that perception seriously. I talk at length about this objection you offer here. The idea that God is "personal" is true at a very deep level, but in another equally deep way, it is not true in the least.

That's an example of what I call the "quantum" turn in Christian religious thinking. To say that God is *personal* is to speak metaphorically. The experience of God is something like the experience of a sympathetic, supportive, compassionate friend. But the experience of God is only *something* like that. And the problem with fundamentalism is that it's literal-minded in the extreme. It can't cope with paradox, and so it's wildly, irrationally rigid.

I offer a whole set of other metaphors for the human encounter with God. And I explain that ultimately, tradition teaches, we have to get beyond metaphors of any kind into a pure "dark night of the soul" in which we realize that we can't say anything at all about God. We get to a radical humility.

And that humility is missing from fundamentalism. Fundamentalism is a toxic stew of heresy and political expediency. You don't have to become Christian or to believe in God to oppose what they are doing, just as you don't have to be Buddhist to object to the Taliban blowing up statues of Buddha or ISIS bombing ancient shrines to ancient gods. A valuable Western cultural heritage is at stake—a heritage that encourages compassion, respect for other people, honest humility, and intellectual responsibility. If this heritage were more widely recognized, they wouldn't get away so easily with what they are doing to Christianity.

6. *A God about whom we can say nothing at all seems to me only theoretically different from a God who simply doesn't exist. Again, no offense—but why is a God about whom we cannot speak anything other than an illusion?*

I appreciate your desire to avoid giving personal offense. That's very gracious of you. But I am not going to take offense at tough-minded, emotionally honest question. I think one of the real problems many people have with Christianity is that teachers or clergy did get offensive or they failed to answer such questions effectively.

Here's the issue. It's not that we can't say *anything* about God. It's that anything we *do* say about God is going to be very partial and it's going to be indirect. We have to use metaphor; we have to think and talk *by analogy.* After all, we are trying to describe experiences at the far liminal edge of human consciousness, off on the border between mind and body. If we learn to focus on that far edge of consciousness, the experience can be emotionally quite vivid. It's viscerally quite vivid. But it's not *intellectually clear* in the way that it's clear whether the bowl in front of you holds ice cream or hot salsa.

We all have had experiences that are elusive in this way—beyond our ability to explain. That's actually quite common. "It was awesome," we say. "It was stupendous. It was beyond belief." The encounter with the sacred is like that too.

And the question, then, is whether we trust those experiences. Whether we take them seriously or whether we write them off as endorphins or harmonic brain waves or some such. All through the *Confronting Fundamentalism* series I describe moments like that in my own

life—and how I wrote them off. Or how I didn't know what to do with them so I just ignored them.

My point here is that if we are gong to take such moments seriously, we have to take them seriously in the right way. Otherwise we deceive ourselves. And we risk doing real damage to other people. Literal-minded fundamentalism is self-deceived in that way—and it has done a lot of damage.