

## Interview with Cate Wallace about *The Confrontational Wit of Jesus: Christian Humanism and the Moral Imagination*

1. *You say there's satire in the Gospels. Can you explain that? Most people don't see anything at all funny in the Gospels.*

We miss the laugh lines because satire assumes we know the relevant cultural context. Two thousand years later, we need scholars to reconstruct that context. Christian humanism has made that possible, which is why fundamentalism demonizes all humanists as rabidly anti-religious atheists. We're not atheists. But we do undercut what fundamentalism tries to say about God and about Jesus.

I examine several examples of satire in the gospels. For instance, the Roman army was paid in coins that proclaimed Caesar Augustus the "son of God." Many of the famous titles given to Jesus—like "Prince of Peace"—were titles given first to Caesar Augustus. Many famous lines attributed to Jesus completely change their meaning when you recognize the local context. For instance, the poor widow who is praised for contributing to the Temple is in fact confronting the ways in which her vulnerability has been exploited by religious bureaucrats in cahoots with Rome.

Here's the point: Jesus was executed as an insurrectionist, and we're missing everything if we fail to recognize how he confronted the socioeconomic status quo of his own day. Jesus was a quick-witted guy. Today we'd call him "media savvy." He makes the same point over and over again, each time from a different angle: God loves everybody. God smites no one, and so we should lay off this abusing and exploiting of one another.

The nonviolence of God changes everything. Jesus used that claim to confront Rome and to confront the collaborationist toadies in Jerusalem who were helping Rome to bleed the country dry.

*2. At one point you compare the gospels to historical novels. Do you mean that these are just stories? That's what atheists say, isn't it? That these are all just stories?*

To say "just a story" is like saying "just an electron" and then ignoring nuclear physics and quantum mechanics. Stories are the most powerful, most durable media we have for stabilizing and transmitting complex insight.

Here's the deal: Jesus taught by telling stories, and the gospel writers teach us *about* Jesus by telling stories about him. The gospels are like historical novels: the core narrative reflects known historical facts, but there are plenty of invented scenes, invented dialogue, and so forth. From this distance, we can't always tell which episodes are historical and which are parables about Jesus rather than parables *by* Jesus. I don't worry about that one way or another. What matters to me is whether the story is true in what it says about God and what it says about the human condition. Not whether it happened historically.

Fundamentalists think that the truth of the gospels depends upon the historical accuracy of every episode. I disagree. I think the truth of the gospels is rooted in the complexity of these stories *as stories*. They are densely symbolic. And they reflect storytelling habits that are very different from our own.

I'm a literary critic. I take storytelling seriously. Storytelling is culturally one of the most powerful things on earth. That's why it matters that fundamentalism misrepresents Jesus.

**3.** *You say that Jesus was a remarkably original theologian. That's an odd thing for a Christian to say. Don't Christians believe that Jesus was God? How can he be a "theologian"?*

I have an entire chapter on what the Gospel authors mean when they say that Jesus was the "son of God." They are *not* talking about extraterrestrial sperm. To say that Jesus was "the son of God" is to make a complicated symbolic claim about his authority, not his genetics. They were asserting that Jesus was correct in his radical claims about the nature of God. That's what I'm getting at when I call him a "remarkably original theologian."

Here's the radical claim Jesus made: God is completely nonviolent. God smites no one. God sends no one to hell. God cherishes all of humanity. Sure, there are some horrific tales in early Hebrew tradition about the violence of God. But Jesus—the historical Jesus, the real-deal guy—was clearly not a biblical literalist. Jesus took a very strong interpretative stance. He resolved ancient tensions in his own religious heritage between a warrior God and a compassionate God.

Jesus said God is nonviolent. God's love embraces everyone. That changes everything.

**4.** *You say at the outset that you disagree with the teaching that Jesus died to rescue sinners—to save us from the wrath of God. Explain that. Why did he die, then?*

Jesus did not die to save us from the wrath of God. We don't need to be saved from God. There's a massive scholarly consensus behind the claim that Jesus taught nonviolence and Jesus proclaimed the nonviolence of God. This is probably the biggest single point on which I am confronting fundamentalism.

Jesus died because he confronted the Roman empire. Jesus used laughter as a weapon of mass disruption. He taught people to stand up for themselves in pointed, witty, and nonviolent ways. He counteracted the learned helplessness suffered by desperately exploited peasants. The man was a threat, and Rome saw that. Rome recognized the satire that we need scholars to reconstruct for us

Jesus would also confront the threat that fundamentalism offers. Here's the issue: if God is violent, as fundamentalist says, then human violence can be similarly virtuous. Our killing people, or torturing them, or letting them die of preventable diseases can be the morally correct thing to do. *They deserve to die. They deserve to suffer.*

Jesus would disagree. He is still a dangerous thinker.

**5.** *If I'm not a Christian, why should I care what Jesus said or didn't say about the character of God?*

If you are not a Buddhist, why should you care about the Taliban blowing up ancient statues of the Buddha? Or ISIS bombing ancient shrines? Why should you care that the Chinese government is trying to name the next Dalai Lama rather than allow Tibetan Buddhists to name their own? An immense cultural heritage is at risk. That's of concern to any thoughtful person.

And not only that. Non-Christians might pay attention to my work because Christianity exerts a remarkable influence over American politics. Candidates fall all over themselves proclaiming their Christianity. What does "Christianity" stand for, then?

Fundamentalism proclaims a violent, vindictive God who will torture everybody but them for billions of years. That's a pernicious influence on American politics. I confront that influence with the facts about Jesus. Theologically speaking, defining God as both violent and vindictive shows up for the first time a thousand years after Jesus. That's the God of crusades and inquisitions. It's the God of theocracy, not the God of Jesus.

The God of Jesus—the ancient God of the Jews—demanded socioeconomic justice. He demanded inclusivity. The measure of our relationship with God is how we treat other people. That kind of Christianity would turn Washington DC on its head. It would give the Tea Party apoplexy.

You don't have to believe in God to recognize the political power at stake in confronting fundamentalist misrepresentations of what Jesus taught. I think Jesus gets a veto over what is said in his name. *God will send you to hell* is not anything Jesus ever said.

**6.** *One of the weirdest things about Christianity is this business about eating Jesus's body and drinking his blood. Can you explain that?*

Yeah, it sounds like cannibalism, doesn't it? It's an extraordinarily complex set of metaphors. I worry that Christians use these ancient metaphors without listening to themselves—without stopping to think about how we come across to outsiders.

Here's the deal. In the ancient world, humanity maintained relationships with the gods through ritual meals: an agricultural animal would be slaughtered and butchered in the usual way, and then there would be some ritual back-and-forth that metaphorically "shared" the meal with the gods.

In the Christian vision, we don't maintain our relationship with God by sacrificing agricultural produce to God. What pleases God, Jesus taught, is our willingness to share food *with one another*. We share food with one another because all of us carry the image of God. And so we enact the divine unity of all human beings everywhere in a ritual meal. The sharing of specially blessed food affirms in a very immediate way that the divine is *in* me just as it is *in* you.

The ritual meal everyone is welcome and nobody leaves the table hungry takes the place of animal sacrifice, especially the sacrifice of the Passover lamb. It also enacts in a very immediate way the commandment to love your neighbors as yourselves. Even the pagans marveled at how generously the Christian communities gave food away to the hungry in their neighborhoods, and how fearlessly they nursed the sick in the various plagues that swept through the ancient world.

What's "sacrificed"—what we are called to sacrifice—is not a cow or a sheep. It's human ego and status-seeking and one-upsmanship. We are called to sacrifice our willingness to confiscate natural resources and use these resources for private gain while the multitudes starve.

**7. So what about the resurrection? Was Jesus raised from the dead or wasn't he?**

That's a complicated question. Bottom line: what the gospel stories portray is not resuscitation. Resuscitated bodies do not appear and disappear. They don't show up in locked rooms and then vanish. They don't shape-shift, looking like a stranger and then suddenly looking like themselves again. Furthermore, the four gospels offer four entirely different accounts of Jesus's appearances after his death. The tools we need to make sense of these stories are the tools of literary criticism, not the tools of documentary history. All throughout biblical storytelling tradition, people have religious visions. The angel of the Lord comes to them. A burning bush speaks to them. Or whatever.

Here's the bottom line, at least as I see it. The real question here is not whether Jesus is raised from the dead. The question is whether you are, whether I am. Do any of us have a real alternative to life at its most bleak and meaningless? Is there more to life than *compete, consume, and die*?

That's a question worth asking. That's a question the gospel authors tried to answer. I don't think it's worth asking whether God could restart the Krebs cycles in each of Jesus's cells, or undo the brain damage that follows rapidly from a lack of oxygen. That's a magic trick. I'm not interested in a God of magic tricks. If God can do that, then God is responsible for not intervening in whatever atrocity or whatever natural disaster you want to name. As various scholars have said repeatedly, nobody in the ancient world denied the possibility of resurrection. All on its own, the mere fact of Jesus's resurrection didn't prove a thing. The question then—and the question today—is what did the resurrection *mean*.

What it meant is that loving others can rescue all of us from the stress and the craziness and the murderous dysfunction we see around us every

day. What it meant is that nothing anybody can do to you can damage the image of God in you. *God is with us. God is within us.* We can get through whatever goes wrong.

**8.** *So are you one of these "Jesus Seminar" scholars, the people trying to reconstruct the historical Jesus of Nazareth?*

Nope. Not a chance. They are biblical scholars. They can read all these ancient languages. I'm not a biblical scholar; I'm a literary critic and cultural historian. My degree is in English literature; in my first career as an English professor, I was a specialist in theories of the imagination. I have immense admiration for biblical scholars, but I belong to an entirely different tribe.

I'm also not what people call a "liberal theologian." Classic twentieth century "liberal" theology said that if biblical scholars can't demonstrate on a solid historical basis that the historical Jesus said or did something, then the episode should be dismissed out of hand as pious legend--as intellectually embarrassing pious legend, in fact.

In very weird ways, liberal Christians and fundamentalist Christians both agree that "historical event" is all that really matters. They think that we have to trace Jesus back to "historical events" or else Jesus is nothing much. I think that's naive. I disagree with both groups, I think that fundamentalism is far more dangerous politically than classic liberal theology, but I think both of them are equally wrong.

As a literary critic, I'm perfectly comfortably saying that the truth-value of a story is wrapped up in its metaphors and its symbolism, not in the historical status of the events depicted. I pay a lot of attention to what historians say about the historical Jesus, because that's a starting point for



recognizing the very different interpretation each gospel offers. And I pay attention to liberal theology because they have done a lot of good work assembling Jesus's sociological psychological analyses of the human condition. The fact remains that a great story is one of the most powerful things on earth.

As the poet Muriel Rukeyser said, the universe isn't made of atoms, it's made of stories. And the gospels offer some of the most powerful stories in Western tradition.