

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

1. *Why did you write this book?*

The attacks of September 11 demonstrated to me—to all of us—the dangers of religiously-motivated violence. Afterwards it was no longer sufficient for me to wave my hands at hate-mongering Christians and say, "oh, that's not Christianity." The Crusades were Christian. So were Inquisitions, and burning witches and heretics at the stake. I felt it was crucial to trace out the theological and political origins of such behavior. Where did this come from? How does knowing its origin help us to recognize and oppose similar trends in today's culture? Above all, what is the proper relationship between church and state? We can't say that the state is not morally accountable at all, but theocracy is clearly a disaster. What's the alternative?

2. *How can Christianity even dream of escaping responsibility for Crusades, Inquisitions, witch-burning, heretic-burning, and the like?*

I'm not trying to escape responsibility for it. That's my point, in fact: Christians and everybody else need to understand the cultural origins of such episodes, because that's our best defense against such trends today. Historians of theology can explain quite clearly how Crusades and torture and burning people at the stake came to be seen as morally acceptable and in fact appropriately "Christian"—despite the nonviolence preached by

Jesus. I started reading around in such stuff because after 9/11 I began to question my own half-in half-out relationship to Christianity. Either I was going to find a good explanation for Christian complicity in political violence, or I was going to get out of the church once and for all. The story I unearthed is incredible stuff.

3. *Isn't any religion inevitably a source of violence against those it considers "infidels"?*

Religion is only a source of violence against "infidels" if it has a theology—a conceptual structure—that validates violence. If we take seriously what the historical Jesus of Nazareth preached about the character of God, then violence against non-Christians is never legitimate. Violence against anyone, for any reason, is never legitimate. Jesus said "love your enemies and do good to those who hate you." That doesn't translate into "blowing them away in the name of the Lord." Theologically speaking, then, the big question is "Is God violent?" I say God is not violent. Jesus said God is not violent. But other Christians have disagreed, and their reasons for doing so go back to what happened to Christianity when it became the state religion of the Roman empire.

4. *You say Jesus preached nonviolence. How did Christianity get from that to Crusades?*

Christianity got from Jesus of Nazareth to the Crusades in three steps. The first was accepting state funding from the Roman Empire, which meant producing a litmus test for "who are the real Christians?" under the

watchful eye of the emperor Constantine. Needless to say, the "creed" they produced said not a word about the confrontational teachings for which Jesus died. If Constantine knew what Jesus said, he might have resumed feeding Christians to the lions. The second step was becoming the one-and-only official state religion of Rome, which happened sixty years later, in 390. In a theocracy, heresy and treason become interchangeable concepts. More Christians were killed by the empire *after* that point than had died in the early persecutions, because Christianity was remarkably diverse theologically. And that was unacceptable to the empire. The third step was allowing the emperor himself—this was Charlemagne, in 800 CE—to mess directly with Christian beliefs in order to justify his brutal campaigns to conquer the Saxons. That's the theology from which we get to Jerry Falwell urging George Bush to invade Iraq: "Blow them away in the name of the Lord."

5. *What about polls showing that Christians disproportionately support the death penalty, torture of political prisoners, harsh sentencing laws, military adventures abroad, and so forth?*

Those polls worry me a lot. They embarrass me both personally and theologically, because such attitudes are flatly opposite to what Jesus taught. But they are fully consistent with what Christianity became under pressure from its church-state merger with the Roman Empire. That merger involved a progressive redefinition of the identity of God. Jesus taught that God is universal compassion and forgiveness. In Hebrew, the word *chesed* literally translates loving-kindness. In Greek, the language of the gospels, the equivalent concept is a Greek word, *agape*, that's translated into

English as *love*. God is love. The God of Jesus is love. But the God of Charlemagne was both vindictive and stunningly violent. That was a God of condemnation and brutal punishment. And according to the story told under Charlemagne, Jesus dies to save us from the wrath of God. Jesus himself would have been quite astounded.

6. *If Christianity is what you say, why is that not what we see in the news more often?*

I must say that from there has been excellent coverage of God's nonviolence in *The Onion*. Stephen Colbert also reported accurately from time to time that Jesus was a dangerous liberal. More seriously, Nicholas Kristof writes regularly in the *New York Times* about genuinely Christian things that Christians are doing in various places. So does a magazine called *Sojourners*, whose editor, Jim Wallis, has also written several books offering an authentically Christian take on politics. But there are two reasons why Christian fundamentalism dominates the news. The first is that with a lot of hard-Right funding, they have done the patient work of local-politics organizing and training. They have successfully redefined the "brand identity" of Christianity. They have out-organized the progressive Christian left. Or as my pastor said one Easter, Jesus has been the victim of identity theft. I'm one of many Christians trying to speak up to reclaim what "Christian" actually means.

The second reason is much more subtle: Christians saying or doing something outrageously un-Christian is newsworthy. People going about their lives quietly trying to love their neighbors, to live honestly, to refrain from hatred and vengeance, and so forth—that's just not newsworthy.

There's nothing unique-and-newsworthy about people living in accordance with core Christian ethics, because these moral teachings are universal. They're global. Each religion has a unique set of *reasons* for such behavior, and a unique set of stories, and a unique set of spiritual practices to help people learn to behave that way consistently. But the behaviors themselves? Good people behave like this across the board. Common-sense compassion is not news.

Outrageous hate-mongering makes the news because it offends good people everywhere. Racism is news because it is equally outrageous. Somebody claiming the earth is 6,000 years old is equally newsworthy, especially when it's a seminary professor at a fundamentalist seminary. But real Christians behaving in genuinely Christian ways? That's so ordinary it's invisible. And that's fine.

Nonetheless, kind-and-decent Christians need to speak up from time to time against the misappropriation of our heritage. We need to reclaim the brand, to speak crudely. We want our religion back. We want our God back.