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Atheist Clergy Colleagues Agree on Many Things, but...

August 31, 2015(2015-08-31T09:00:48+00:00) by [Linda LaScola](http://www.patheos.com/blogs/rationaldoubt/author/lascola/)

Editor's Note: Bob Ripley, a retired, non-believing United Church of Canada minister has mixed and strong feelings about the efforts of his former colleague, Gretta Vosper, to remain in the church as an open atheist. Both are also open members of [The Clergy Project](http://www.clergyproject.org). I gave advance notice of this blog post to Gretta and a few other TCP members and invited them to comment here. I know that some TCP members support Gretta and I don't know about some others' views. It's a touchy subject for sure. Your input is welcome. Me? I'm not sure how I feel about it, so I'm staying neutral on this one. Other bloggers have written about this subject [here](http://www.patheos.com/blogs/yearwithoutgod/2015/01/26/the-courage-of-gretta-vosper/?utm_source=SilverpopMailing&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=yearwithoutgod_012715U) [here](http://www.patheos.com/blogs/friendlyatheist/2015/08/22/as-atheist-minister-undergoes-heresy-trial-her-friends-are-asking-for-support/) [here](http://nakedpastor.com/2015/08/gretta-vosper-and-the-right-to-believe-what-you-want/) and [here](http://www.huffingtonpost.ca/junaid-jahangir/toronto-atheist-minister_b_8001962.html). Gretta is strongly supported in a [letter](http://www.grettavosper.ca/the-rev-john-shuck-presbyterian-church-usa-letter-of-support/) written by TCP member, John Shuck, who is pastor of a progressive [Presbyterian Church](http://www.southmin.org/pastor.html) in Oregon and in a [blog post](http://www.patheos.com/blogs/yearwithoutgod/2015/01/26/the-courage-of-gretta-vosper/?utm_source=SilverpopMailing&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=yearwithoutgod_012715U) by TCP member Ryan Bell.

**** 9/1/15, 11AM EDT Update **** There is a new hour-long [podcast](http://www.spreaker.com/user/lifeaftergod/2-interview-with-gretta-vosper) in which Ryan Bell interviews Gretta Vosper. I have listened to the first 20 minutes of it and recommend it to those who would like to hear Gretta speak directly.

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By Bob Ripley

I agree with former Canadian colleague in Christian ministry, **Gretta Vosper**.



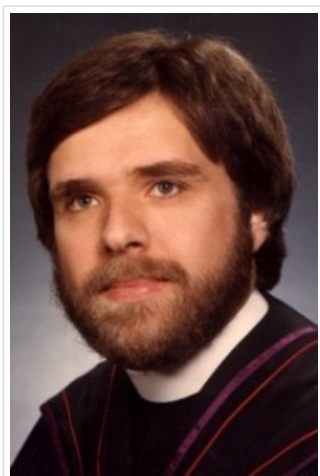
<http://wp.production.patheos.com/blogs/rationaldoubt/files/2015/08/Gretta-Vosper.jpg>

I agree that how you behave trumps what you believe. I agree that religion is a human construct and a source of horrific violence. I agree that God and Jesus, along with the hundreds of deities humans have worshipped, are the products of mythology.

Like Gretta, I took the vows of ordination that I believed in God: Father Son and Holy Spirit, that I believed God was calling me to the ordained ministry and that I was willing to be subject to the oversight and discipline of [The United Church of Canada](http://www.united-church.ca)<http://www.united-church.ca>. And like Gretta, I subsequently changed my mind.

I disagree, however, with Gretta's insistence on continuing to serve a [Christian congregation](http://www.westhill.net)<http://www.westhill.net> under those vows.

A year ago I came out publically in my newspaper column as a non-believer and launched my book [Life Beyond Belief: A Preacher's Deconversion](http://www.amazon.com/Life-Beyond-Belief-Preachers-Deconversion/dp/0988132362)<http://www.amazon.com/Life-Beyond-Belief-Preachers-Deconversion/dp/0988132362> to explain why. A week later, I was asked by the church to voluntarily submit the form that would take away my ordination. While I was shocked at how quickly the request came, (the church, after all, is notorious for moving at a glacial pace) I did not want to engage in a messy fight and humiliate the denomination that had employed me for over three decades. Besides that, I saw the disclosure of my skepticism as an attempt to be authentic and that to be consistent in my authenticity, needed to submit to the oversight of the church which granted my ordination in the first place. Ordination, after all, is not something I achieved but was bestowed by the church along with permission to celebrate the sacraments.



[Q](#)*Rev. Robert Ripley, 1977*

I was sad. I still am sad. I studied for six years to fulfill all the requirements for ordination. I wore my dog collar proudly and worked tirelessly to help people and to help God's kingdom come. Being a minister was the lion's share of my identity. That gone now.

For closeted clergy, ministers who are still active but no longer believe, the risks of candor are huge. Family and finances are jeopardized. The other looming loss is the church-sanctioned identity as a pastor or priest. While some who have disclosed their disbelief have formed humanist assemblies of like-minded folks replete with songs and readings and the passing of the plate, ordination is one more loss we have to face. The church giveth and the church taketh away.

But Gretta Vosper is not going quietly. She has held on to a congregation within the United Church who knows she does not believe but who [supports](http://www.westhill.net/blog/2015/8/17/friends-of-gretta-vosper-association.html) her nevertheless. As she explained to me, they have theists and atheists and everything in between.

Some, naturally, are questioning why and how she is able to continue to enjoy the benefits (salary/pension) of being a Christian minister when she doesn't hold to the vows of her ordination. The United Church is being forced to face her and possibly fight her. They are in a tough place. The United Church has always prided itself on inclusion. It's a denominational big tent and you are welcome to be part of any congregation. Its understanding of God has been in a state of flux for some time now.

But criteria for the church's leadership are different. What are the boundaries of belief? While there are active clergy who have kept their doubts to themselves, the church has never had to deal with an avowed atheist in the pulpit before.

For her part, Gretta sees herself as a catalyst for changing the church into something that jettisons a theistic god in the absence of doctrine. But the church is a community of believers in a **supernatural deity**.



http://wp.production.patheos.com/blogs/rationaldoubt/files/2015/05/Creation_of_the_Sun_and_Moon.jpg

Beliefs are shaped, for better or worse, by language. Rather than a righteous cause,

some people see her resistance as disingenuous. Theists are appalled by the incongruity and audacity of calling herself an atheist minister. Atheists are embarrassed by someone, who, as a friend suggests, wants to eat a bacon sandwich in the front row of a vegetarian conference.

Gretta's friends are raising money to [support](http://www.gofundme.com/fogva) her legal costs in a potential "heresy trial." There will be no heresy trial. Whatever happens, she will not be tried for heresy. She is not being persecuted. The church may conclude, after due process, that she is no longer faithful to her ordination vows. It is the church's right and duty.

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<http://wp.production.patheos.com/blogs/rationaldoubt/files/2014/09/ripley2-photo.jpg> **Bob Ripley**, also "The Atheist ex-pastor" here on the blog, is a syndicated religion columnist, broadcaster, former preacher and author of Christian devotional material. His book, which came out in October 2014 is titled [Life Beyond Belief: A Preacher's Deconversion](http://www.amazon.com/Life-Beyond-Belief-Preachers-Deconversion/dp/0988132362).

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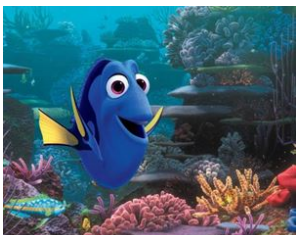
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About Linda LaScola

Linda LaScola is co-author, with Daniel C. Dennett, of *Caught in the Pulpit: Leaving Belief Behind* (2013) and "Preachers who are not Believers" (2010). She is an independent qualitative research consultant who works out of Washington, D.C. She holds a Master's Degree in Social Work from the Catholic University of America and is a co-founder of the Clergy Project.

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Elizabeth. • 7 months ago

About the question as to what the UCC is like, where its lines in the sand are -- Gretta IS the UCC... she's not "apart" from it, she's "a part" OF it, unless the situation changes. She is part of the growth that's been happening.

I respect opinions to the contrary, but to me it's good to appeal, to challenge. I'm remembering how I had to lol when it dawned on me that the Charles Briggs who was excommunicated from the Presbyterian Church in 1893 after lecturing that there were errors in scripture, was the same Briggs of the Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew/English lexicon, fondly known as "the BDB" in probably every Evangelical library in the land today :) "Since it first appeared in the early part of the twentieth century, BDB has been considered the finest and most comprehensive Hebrew lexicon available to the English-speaking student." [Amazon]

Some ask why Gretta would want to be part of an institution associated with Christianity. For me, whereas there's much to disagree with in the Christianity I grew up with, there's still much wisdom and spirit I treasure and would never want to give up. I like how Thich Nhat Hanh describes that we have many "spiritual ancestors" -- that we can "touch" whenever we need to ["Going Home"] -- all the figures that have influenced us for good... For himself, he finds not only Buddha

and his own father, but also Jesus to be an ancestor whom he can "touch" for a spirit of compassion, energy, and insight. I want to keep what's good and add to it from the ever-widening circles of global or universal community.

I am so sorry this burden falls on Gretta, but thank her for steadfastly pursuing truth, love, and justice.Sorry to be late weighing in... new questions to work through. Thanks to all for the deeply engaging posts and comments.

3 ^ | v • Reply • Share ›



Elizabeth. • 7 months ago

I hope the UCC will continue their Song of Faith, their commitment to "the fully shared life at the heart of the universe." To me, Gretta fits perfectly the Song's statement that "One could safely describe the metaphorical 'head, heart, and guts' of the United Church's sense of itself as, respectively: its approach to the interpretation of scripture, its affection for the concept of inclusivity, and its passion for social justice." <http://www.united-church.ca/be...>

I think the understanding of the term "atheist" is in the process of change. I just listened to a Jack Caputo interview about his forthcoming "Hoping Against Hope (Confessions of a Postmodern Pilgrim)," where he talks about the name "God" as a way we name being-seized-by-the-ground-of-being [a la Tillich], a name "in which and under which a form of life is galvanized," or "what's going on in the name of God." He says the ideas of a Being "riding over the hill to save us," or watching to determine whom to punish or reward, these are mythological and can be even blasphemous ways of talking. Please listen or watch the podcast, because I'm surely not doing his ideas justice!! Start minute 27 of Homebrewed Christianity, "Hoping Against Hope with Caputo and Race in America with Clark" <http://www.podbay.fm/show/2762...> [iTunes works if this site down]

The UCC has begun a wonderful journey -- may they continue, with Gretta in the forward pathfinders!

2 ^ | v • Reply • Share ›



jeffstraka • 7 months ago

Others here have rightly criticized Mr. Ripley's use of this public forum - and using it at this especially sensitive time - to rebuke Gretta Vosper for what many of us see as courageous and necessary in moving the liberal/progressive church towards post-theism. I have commented here as well. One thing I want to emphasize that I think many theists and non-theists tragically miss (or want to completely avoid for "interfaith" dialogue) is that fact that unless and until the liberal/mainline church (and mosques and synagogues) lets go of God as an interventionist, tribal deity, and lets go of the bible as a "God-inspired", privileged authority, the conservative/fundamentalists will continue to see the need to violently react and fight against these perceived "heretics".

I recently finished a couple of books on Christianity's role in the Civil War (one was "The Civil War as a Theological Crisis", by Mark A. Noll) and it was breath-takingly clear that this war - which took over 700,000 lives - was a RELIGIOUS war between the liberal church theology of the North (who moved towards a more spiritual reading of the bible) and the fundamentalist church theology of the South (whose literal reading found a God who commanded slavery and favored white supremacy). BOTH sides still believed in a providential, interventionist God and

[see more](#)

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Linda LaScola Mod → jeffstraka • 7 months ago

Call me an optimist, but I think that ultimately progressive Christians will do the right thing. They have up to this point, although it's been hard and has cost them members. They have been on the right side of history on so many humanist issues, that I think they will continue on that path. How will it happen? I don't really know. but I think people like Bob Ripley and

...and support a non-binary identity, but some people are not happy, and Gretta Vosper, although they disagree on some things, will play an important part.

2 ^ | v • Reply • Share ›



jeffstraka → Linda_LaScola • 7 months ago

I certainly hope you are right and I do want to be as optimistic as I can be. Yes, most of the mainlines HAVE made progress on humanist issues (slavery, women's rights, segregation, women clergy, LGBTQ rights) but ONLY when culture pushed them into a corner and ONLY when they were able to find a way to creatively exegete the bible to "fit" their new-found revelation. But those humanist shifts did not involve the Institution giving up the authority of God (and the bible) - they are able to still use this non-existent authority as a "hammer" over those outside their tribe. So this "Theist God line" will be a difficult one for them to concede for sure. If you've not yet read LeRon Shults' "Theology After the Birth of God", it is well worth the time.

^ | v • Reply • Share ›



John Shuck • 7 months ago

I might as well make a plug for my interview with Gretta on Religion For Life that I just uploaded today. She tells her side. <http://kboo.fm/gretavosperagod...>

1 ^ | v • Reply • Share ›



John Shuck → John Shuck • 7 months ago

You can also find my interview with Gretta and subscribe to podcasts here. <http://religionforlife.podomat...>

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Linda LaScola Mod → John Shuck • 7 months ago

I look forward to listening to it -- though it might be a while, as I'm without regular internet access right now.

1 ^ | v • Reply • Share ›



johnshuck • 7 months ago

I find myself a bit angry with this post. I respect Bob's decision to check out of the ministry. I don't see how it is his business what Gretta does. How does he get to make the rules? I am in a similar position to Gretta in that I remain in the church. I get why people in the church want me out, but I find it distressing when ex-pastors or atheists who are outside the church (and members of TCP especially) tell us who are doing our thing within the church what we should do. Bob has a right to his opinion. He has expressed it. In my opinion and in my position, I find it less than supportive.

1 ^ | v • Reply • Share ›



Bob Ripley → johnshuck • 7 months ago

Hi johnshuck. I'm not making any rules but simply offering a different perspective on a difficult topic based on how I chose to respond to my loss of faith.

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johnshuck → Bob Ripley • 7 months ago

Bob,

But it isn't just two perspectives. You aren't saying there are two ways, two perspectives. You are saying your way is best. Your way is the way she should go. You are making the rules for her. You made your choice. Good for you, I respect it. I can't imagine she cares what you do either. But you criticize her for making her choice, publicly, when she is most vulnerable?

Second. The timing and the format is insensitive at best. TCP is a support group. Clergy have been encouraged by Linda who runs this blog to be more honest with our congregations. So when Gretta does, members of TCP trash her publicly? It is one thing to send her a private email telling her you don't like what she is doing or use the private forum, but to make a public statement criticizing her decision seems to me to be antithetical to the purpose of TCP.

Third. This is not simply a perspective of arcane conjecture. Should 500 or 1000 angels dance on a pin. How might we understand you

[see more](#)

1 ^ | v • Reply • Share ›



Linda_LaScola Mod → johnshuck • 7 months ago

John - Some members of TCP don't agree completely with Gretta. That is different from "trashing her publicly."

She is acting as an individual. TCP as an organization has not made a pledge to support individual members in whatever individual actions they decide to take. Meanwhile, Gretta has a lot of support from individuals, some of whom are members of TCP.

Some people, in and out of TCP, have mixed feelings about her actions, some feel negatively and some think that what she's doing is wonderful. Some don't know quite how they feel -- it's a whole new concept to them.

I'm glad people like you and Gretta are acting in ways that challenge people to think and change. I don't want to cut off conversation about it because it isn't completely the way some people wish others already were thinking. I don't want to shut people up -- that's too often what the church has done. It hasn't worked well.

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Linda_LaScola Mod → Linda_LaScola • 7 months ago

PS to John -- My role as a researcher, as a blogger and as a co-founder of TCP is not to encourage non-believing clergy to be more honest with their congregations. If anything, I encourage them to do whatever works best for them in their delicate and varied situations. Most of all, I encourage them to seek support from members of the clergy project -- people who have been where they have.

As I often say when people ask me what non-believing clergy are like -- they are all different - there's not one way people's beliefs change and there's not one best way of responding to it.

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This comment was deleted.



Linda_LaScola Mod → Guest • 7 months ago

John -- I value your opinion, just as I value Bob's and Gretta's. In fact, you are one of several TCP members whom I asked in advance to comment on this blog post, because I thought they supported Gretta. I asked a few others not knowing how they felt and it turned out some were completely supportive and some were mixed. I informed

completely supportive and some were mixed. I informed Gretta of this post in advance and invited her to respond in the comments (which she has done) or to write her own post (which she has not yet done). I look forward to listening to your podcast.

TCP members support each other in their non-belief and promise to keep discussions that take place on the private forum private. Those are the only expectations that I'm aware of. They are individuals with individual opinions that they are free to express outside the private forum. It's not my opinion that TCP members have "gone out of their way" in this public venue to be non-supportive, but I respect your

[see more](#)

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This comment was deleted.



Linda_LaScola Mod ➔ Guest • 7 months ago

I'm traveling and unable to respond to each point. Not sure I would at any rate, but I do appreciate you laying it out.

This post is not out-of-character if you consider that I like understanding the differences among people who are otherwise similar in many ways.

You may not agree, but I think it's useful for progressive Christians and others to hear different nuances and points of view from WITHIN the UCC and from other non-believing clergy, past and current. This is different from the comments on the Friendly Atheist blog about you, which were from non-clergy, (as far as I could tell.)

I can't imagine that the UCC (Canada) will heavily weigh a defrocked, openly atheist clergy's opinion in their decision, or the comments of a few thoughtful non-believing clergy on an atheist blog. I CAN see that, if any are reading here, that they might think twice about their arguments and their real

[see more](#)

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jeffstraka • 7 months ago

I am an atheist and am extremely proud and encouraged by what Gretta AND HER CONGREGATION (funny, Bob, but it seems the congregation is holding on to HER) are boldly doing. What she and her congregation are doing is exactly what John A. T. Robinson (Honest to God) and Thomas J. J. Altizer (Radical Theology and the Death of God) tried to do 50 YEARS AGO: move Christianity forward (isn't that the very point of being "progressive"?) and prevent its obsolescence in the face of progressing science.

Lloyd Geering (Christianity Without God, Re imagining God: A Faith Journey of a Modern Heretic) is also a hero of mine. He's 97 and still writing books and speaking! He went through a heresy trial in the New Zealand Presbyterian Church 50 years ago (see Westar's latest "The Fourth R") for having the audacity to think outside the box and suggest the very same thing as Gretta - 50 YEARS AGO.

Do you get it? This conversation is not NEW - it was going on 50 YEARS AGO and the "progressive" mainline church has continued to try to tamp down these "dangerous" ideas all this time. Think of it: had the mainline church admitted 50 years ago that the bible is a HUMAN product, would there have even BEEN an

[see more](#)2 ^ | v • [Reply](#) • [Share](#) ›**Linda LaScola** Mod → [jeffstraka](#) • 7 months ago

Hi, Jeff - for you and others who may not be aware of Bob Ripley's "journey" - he started out conservative and then, like many other ministers, became more and more liberal as the years went on and eventually became a secret atheist. He served as pastor for a few years after that and then elected to retire early. A few years later he wrote a book on his changing religious views and his thoughts on Christianity.

His journey is not unlike that of many other clergy. Some stay on until retirement without ever publicly mentioning their change of beliefs and even after retirement some choose to stay quiet.

1 ^ | v • [Reply](#) • [Share](#) ›**jeffstraka** → [Linda LaScola](#) • 7 months ago

And that's tragic that there is such a fear of the institution that they cannot be honest and have to stay closeted. And it's tragic that the mainline institution intentionally suppressed the progressive theological conversation that was initiated 50 years ago. As your book *Caught in the Pulpit* exposed, many progressive seminaries DO cover some progressive, critical theological ideas, but then pastors are told to keep it under their hat for fear of losing church members. And yes, there are pockets where the conversation has continued in a more public view - Westar/Jesus Seminar and Sea of Faith - but those conversations have been widely called heretical by the mainline institution. Is it any wonder that the church is being increasingly seen as irrelevant when they are ALWAYS 50 years behind culture?

^ | v • [Reply](#) • [Share](#) ›**Bob Ripley** → [jeffstraka](#) • 7 months ago

Hi Jeff, I wasn't afraid of the institution for a second. It was a matter of conscience. I couldn't abide by my vows off ordination so I left without fanfare or rancour.

^ | v • [Reply](#) • [Share](#) ›**jeffstraka** → [Bob Ripley](#) • 7 months ago

Though I've not read your book, Bob, Linda points out that during your years as an active pastor, your theology transitioned from conservative to liberal. Thus, your views on the vows and the belief statements you took initially accepted would also have taken on a different perspective (if not rejection) WHILE you were a pastor on this journey. And certainly you would agree that this journey towards a more liberal/inclusive theology was a positive thing - something an institution should encourage and not lock in place. And as a pastor, I would think you would want this same progressive journey for those in the pews - you would not expect (or want!) them to view the membership vows THEY claimed as beginning members to be exactly the same years later? How many in the pews do you really think agree with every one of your 1940 Statement of Faith? Should those who no longer believe in all those beliefs be asked to leave? Oh, that's right. In 2006, the UCC came out with a "Song of Faith", a document "honouring the diversity of our church and acknowledging our place in a pluralistic world and in an ongoing and developing tradition of faith". So, why would one not give pastors this same "grace" and latitude in how

they personally define their original vows? Would you actually WANT a pastor whose views on his/her ordination vows have not changed or progressed in 20 years in the UCC?

^ | v • Reply • Share ›



Bob Ripley → jeffstraka • 7 months ago

Hi Jeff. Thanks for the thoughtful comment. You are right. My mind changed a lot over the years. Same sex marriage would be one example. And like the UCC I became more tolerant not only of those of other faiths but also those who, say, saw Jesus as not THE way to salvation but one of many ways. The UCC, as you point out, more formally expressed its shifting theological foundations in Statements of Faith. But the church has always acknowledged the Divine in some form. While some commentators on this forum have suggest that I'm being judgemental, I simply find it hard to understand how a vow expressing faith in God can be reinterpreted to include atheism. It also interests me that no commentators have address my inclusion of the third vow of ordination in which one submits to the authority of the church. While some may find the very idea distasteful, the vow was taken. What of it? Do we say that when we disagree with the church, the vow is to be reinterpreted and we vow instead to fight the church? Again, I'm not trying to come across as judgemental, merely putting out to TCP members that one of the losses that accompany candour may be the loss of ordination and however that plays out, it can be a hard road.

^ | v • Reply • Share ›



jeffstraka → Bob Ripley • 7 months ago

Post-theistic views within the church are nothing new, nor is the possibility in a post-theistic/atheistic Christianity. Certainly you're aware of John A. T. Robinson's 1963 book, "Honest to God", Thomas J. J. Altizers' 1966 book, "Radical Theology and the Death of God", and the discussions this launched (and the church quelled). Certainly you are aware to the work and the heresy of Lloyd Geering in the '60's for saying the VERY same thing that Gretta is 50 years later, not to mention his 2002 book, "Christianity without God". If you've no idea who Lloyd Geering is (he posted a supportive letter on Gretta's blog), watch this video where he explains how Humans Made God: <https://vimeo.com/68583460> .

Certainly you have been exposed to John Shelby Spong's many books pleading for the church to let go of the bible as a "divinely inspired book" and to accept it as a human document, and pleading people to let go of the interventionist sky-god in favor of a more scientific-

[see more](#)

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Linda_LaScola Mod → jeffstraka • 7 months ago

Perhaps insulation; perhaps denial or cognitive dissonance.

1 ^ | v • Reply • Share ›



Linda_LaScola Mod → Bob Ripley • 7 months ago

I hope the matter of the meaning of vows is something that is

closely examined as a result of all this. I think there are many clergy who are interpreting their vows idiosyncratically and just keeping it to themselves - and no one is pressing them to be more specific. It would be interesting to know exactly what individuals mean when they make their vows and how much "the church" cares about it and wants to know.

^ | v • Reply • Share ›



Linda_LaScola Mod → jeffstraka • 7 months ago

Jeff - I'm aware of and agree with much of what you say. I'm hoping that the progressive church eventually openly supports modern knowledge of Christianity the way they have supported so many other worthy humanist causes of the 20th and 21st century. As Dan Dennett and I predicted in a recent article:

<http://www.patheos.com/Topics/...>

Liberal clergy will continue to lead the move away from biblical religion. They are humanists' natural allies — in the forefront of all progressive causes — anti-slavery, women in the clergy, LGBTQ. They do this not to tailor their image, but because it's the right thing to do. They are losing members while preserving their integrity. We predict they will keep discarding bits of Christian doctrine until it's gone. This is already happening via the "human Jesus" studies of the Westar Institute that focus on Jesus as a first-century

see more

2 ^ | v • Reply • Share ›



jeffstraka → Linda_LaScola • 7 months ago

Your and Dan's article was extremely insightful and the "Proviso" at the end I thought to be startlingly true. Thus, we need to find a way to ENCOURAGE more "Gretta Vospers" and "John Shucks" and not chastise them as Bob seems to have done in this post. If the REAL progressives leave the church and the conversation before this post-theistic shift gains momentum, my fear is that the mainline remnants will become "evangelical light" at best. Thanks for your dialog and your work.

^ | v • Reply • Share ›



Linda_LaScola Mod → jeffstraka • 7 months ago

You're welcome! and thanks for adding your voice to the chorus. I'm grateful to both Gretta and Bob for speaking out in their own ways, as well as for the others who have contributed to the discussion here. Really - things are happening -- not fast enough, maybe, but with the ability the internet gives us to have open dialogues like this one, I like to think we're on our way to some major positive changes.

1 ^ | v • Reply • Share ›



Pat LafordGreen • 7 months ago

I will be brief. As a member of TCP, I am not sure I wish to remain after the spectacle I have seen from Linda and Bob. It has placed many people in divisive positions and a lot of others who are in emotionally vulnerable position in the crossfire. I do not know the motivation for the level of thoughtlessness, nor do I give a toss.

Is this an important discussion to have? Yes. But not in the manner it was

presented.

I promise you that for me to stop here is a mercy to a few.

Cheers.

3 ^ | v • Reply • Share ›



Linda LaScola Mod → Pat LafordGreen • 7 months ago

Hello Pat,

The primary qualifications to be a member of TCP are to be former or current clergy who do not believe in the supernatural. There is no rule and no expectation that members will be alike in other ways or agree on other issues. There have been other disagreements among TCP members, some expressed on this blog, and I expect there will be more in the future.

People's responses to Bob Ripley's post here on the blog generally have been very thoughtful, irrespective of writers' personal opinions. I've been very happy with the level of discourse here. I expect it will help people, both clergy and lay, to think more deeply about their own points of view and about the future of Christianity.

Gretta and Bob and many other TCP members are doing groundbreaking work on religion, not always in the same way and not always in complete agreement. I'm pleased that both Gretta and Bob expressed their heartfelt points of view here and think it will add to the ongoing conversation about this very important issue.

1 ^ | v • Reply • Share ›



gretta vosper • 7 months ago

Thank you to all of you for your thoughtful comments.

I, too, know of no other term that could provoke more head shakes than “atheist minister.” Yet the work in which I am engaged in The United Church of Canada is neither at odds with what I believed when I was ordained or what many of my colleagues in mainline, liberal, Protestant pulpits believe. I differ from the many solely in my argument that we can and must create a barrier-free space where those who do and do not believe in the god called God can congregate and be inspired by the intentional creation of meaningful community. I believe, as does my community, West Hill United, that The United Church of Canada is the denomination in which this work can and must begin.

Bob Ripley may have heard the words of the ordination question – Do you believe in God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit? – literally when he was asked it. I did not. What I did hear and what allowed me to answer that question with a “yes” was the affirmation of a committee charged with discerning whether or not I was in “essential agreement” with the UCC’s Articles of Faith. The tradition of discerning essential agreement arose out of the challenging dialogue which forged the denomination in the first decades of the twentieth century; it permitted clergy

[see more](#)

4 ^ | v • Reply • Share ›



Linda LaScola Mod → gretta vosper • 7 months ago

Gretta, thanks for contributing to to conversation here and expressing yourself so eloquently. As I said above in another comment, I think you and Bob and others in TCP are doing very important work -- each in your own way.

2 ^ | v • Reply • Share ›



Ryan Bell • 7 months ago

I have been a long time admirer of Gretta. We met last year at one of her speaking appointments back east and we have kept in touch ever since. I've read her book, *Witch on a Wicket*, and found it a very compelling explanation for how she has

with or without God and found it a very compelling explanation for how she has come to the point where she is.

My feeling is that religious liberals just draw the theological lines differently than conservatives, fundamentalists and evangelicals. It's odd to me that the United Church is willing to encourage and support intellectual and theological rigor...up to a point. The church has evolved for centuries into what it is today, but now they have decided this is the last point of evolution. From my point of view, what Gretta is doing is simply continuing the evolution that has been going on for ages.

The author comes across, unfortunately, as jealous and petty. If he thinks for a minutes that Gretta is doing this for her own personal gain, he really needs to sit down and have a conversation with her.

In fact, I just did that. Here's a 1 hour conversation I just had with Gretta for my podcast!

<http://www.spreaker.com/user/1...>

3 ^ | v • Reply • Share ›



Linda LaScola Mod → Ryan Bell • 7 months ago

Thanks Ryan -- you're another on the list of TCP members actively working toward a humanist future.

FYI to readers: Ryan links to the same podcast I mention above in the post. I've now listened to the whole thing and highly recommend it.

1 ^ | v • Reply • Share ›



GraceandTom Difalco • 7 months ago

If the Presbyterian Minister is so "for" the atheist ministers, then maybe he should invite them all to become Presbyterian ministers and have them tell congregations there is no God from the Presbyterian pulpits (Grace).

1 ^ | v • Reply • Share ›



mason → GraceandTom Difalco • 7 months ago

That would be a good clean fresh start :)

1 ^ | v • Reply • Share ›



Linda LaScola Mod → GraceandTom Difalco • 7 months ago

Hi, Grace -- welcome to the Rational Doubt blog. This post is written by a retired United Church of Canada minister about a current United Church of Canada minister. I'm curious, who is presbyterian minister are you referring to in your comment?

****UPDATE**** sorry - I realize you are probably referring to John Shuck who is mentioned in the editor's note as a supporter of Gretta. He was recently called to a Presbyterian church in Oregon that is very happy to have him.

^ | v • Reply • Share ›



Debbie Robinson • 7 months ago

I have a question. Why must a religious community insist that everyone has to believe in the supernatural to stay within the community? Why can't its unifying principle be something else within its tradition?

There are secular Jewish groups and rabbi who don't insist on a belief in the supernatural as a baseline for membership. There are Anglican clergy who are openly agnostic or non believers. I know an atheist Buddhist, who is an open materialist and his view that karma is a metaphor does not disqualify his position within his organisation.

I personally have no desire to re enter a religious community, but if that community has been your life and is part of your tradition and daily life, sometimes going back generations, why must you be forced to leave? Why do your

forfeit your membership because you decide to be honest about your opinions?
Why does professing belief in the supernatural, even if you are lying to everyone, have to be the baseline for membership?

3 ^ | v • Reply • Share ›



LeAnn Blackert → Debbie Robinson • 7 months ago

These are great questions but for me the real question is why a religious body which grants credentialing for those who lead its congregations, which are clearly identified as Christian, should continue to credential someone who has clearly identified as not Christian. If a clergy identified as agnostic ("without knowing") rather than atheistic ("without God"), that is very different. It is one thing to be a member of a congregation and an entirely different thing to be in leadership as a minister in a Christian denomination when you no longer identify as Christian.

^ | v • Reply • Share ›



Debbie Robinson → LeAnn Blackert • 7 months ago

In this very interesting interview she talks about her domination and how she was trained to view the Bible and god as a metaphor.

<http://www.lifeaftergod.org/ca...>

This is what they preached, while the liturgy still propagated a more literal view of everything. There are reading lists church members engage with that are at odds with the liturgy. There are different flavours of Christianity. Maybe without a belief in the supernatural Christianity becomes impossible. Except the Anglican Church has a small number of priests who state that God is a "human construct".

<http://www.independent.co.uk/n...>

Quote from the article

"The Rev David Paterson, a retired Church of England priest, said there was no conflict in preaching while being unable to believe in God. "Within my congregation I would take the line that how you

[see more](#)

2 ^ | v • Reply • Share ›



mason → Debbie Robinson • 7 months ago

Great questions and examples Debbie. It is so ironic that the baseline for membership in theistic groups is a vow of belief in the mythical and irrational. :) I have approx 20 Jewish friends and all but one are secular. Secular Jews in the US and Israel seems to be a fact that is deliberately obscured from the American public.

1 ^ | v • Reply • Share ›



Debbie Robinson → mason • 7 months ago

I have no desire personally to go back to religion, but I do wonder why the price of honesty has to be a complete severance of ties. If some faith traditions enable space to be made for people who still want to identify and belong for some other reason, why not this one? It seems to me to be almost there anyway?

Does religion always have to involve thought control? The Secular Jewish tradition seems to encourage people to think for themselves. Surely at least some brands of Christianity could allow that as well? Otherwise, I suspect that within a generation or two a lot of Churches may cease to exist. Maybe that would be a good thing. But then again why couldn't some demonstrations morph into something more relevant and real.

3 ^ | v • Reply • Share ›



Mister Two → Debbie Robinson • 7 months ago

I can see both sides. In fundamentalist churches, even if they have fairly liberal views, the point of "being a Christian" is to trust that a god called Jehovah or Yahweh is really doing things and that when you die you're really going to go to a place called Heaven. Contrary to what we often read online and even some of what we've seen in person, these people can actually form a good support group, and many or most are good, kind people. But if you don't believe in Jehovah, well, they don't even understand why you would call yourself a Christian!

On the other hand, there are so many churches today where the majority live in the real world and understand where we really came from. Many of these people will still have some sort of belief in Jehovah or at least "Nature's God," but many won't. If it's mostly about the community, and all of the judgmental beliefs have been abandoned, then "Christianity" becomes more about believing in doing good and in community and less (or not at all) about believing in actual supernatural things. Rather than being part of a community that believes it's following a deity, it's about being part of a community that shares a philosophy, and if the writings about Jesus' sayings form the basis of it, why not continue to call it Christianity, and why not continue to call yourself a Christian?

^ | v • Reply • Share ›



Debbie Robinson → Mister Two • 7 months ago

Given how many thousands of varieties of Christianity there are, I am not sure if you really could find even one core belief or definition of a belief all of them have in common. There are groups who call themselves Christian who believe Jesus was man not a god. Other Christians who believe he was a god claim they are not 'true' Christians. People have gone to war over who has the 'true' church. There are as you say, Christians who believe Christianity is a philosophy not supernatural, but may still believe in some sort of 'soul' or impersonal 'force' at work on their lives, others do not.

Even within some groups of Christians you are going to get wide range of values and beliefs. I just find it interesting that some religious traditions have space within their 'umbrella' for atheists. Not all Christians define God as supernatural.

I have listened to some of Gretta's speeches and I think she has an interesting approach. That what unites them is a sense of community and a desire to do good for others in the world, and to explore ideas. I do wonder if I had been exposed to a Church like this if I might have stayed? But I think now I would find it difficult to find anything of value in Christianity, and I kind of have a large chip on my shoulder I would need to get past.

1 ^ | v • Reply • Share ›



mason → Debbie Robinson • 7 months ago

"Thought control" has been the stock in trade for much of the religions. Without it they lose the control of their adherents. I suspect some may morph and many will go by

the way side, thanks to the information age.

^ | v • Reply • Share ›



Debbie Robinson → mason • 7 months ago

You are most probably right. I grew up in a cult so my experience always makes me wary of any group that wants to dictate how people think. Personally, I saw it as a good sign that this particular Church didn't try to force their people to lie about their beliefs and seemed to actively encourage people to explore ideas. Until the people had the wrong thoughts and then "how dare you"!! Just like all the rest.

This was very much like what I grew up with. They pretended to encourage us to search for truth until we asked the wrong question, didn't accept the 'right' answer or found a different truth. Then your thoughts were 'of the devil'. You had to pray hard to root the devil out of your thoughts. Because God would always give you the right answers and thoughts unless they contradicted the authority of the leaders and then they didn't come from God - obviously!

I still can sometimes get anxious feelings when something I think does not line up with what I perceive to be an authority.

2 ^ | v • Reply • Share ›



mason → Debbie Robinson • 7 months ago

Thanks for sharing your experience. Yes, the psychological impact of being raised in these autocratic delusional groups can last a lifetime. I was raised Baptist and I consider it very much a cult back then and today. I consider all theism cultish; it's just a matter of degree of control severity and absurdity. Bravo to you for your intellectual courage to find your way out of the particular theism you were indoctrinated into as a credulous child!

1 ^ | v • Reply • Share ›



Debbie Robinson → mason • 7 months ago

I am not sure that it is all cultist. I have met people who have a sense of spirituality that are very open minded and curious about the world. However, I do think that any ideology that asks you to suspend disbelief and just accept things has the potential to be used in that way. But that is not just true for religious belief. Political ideologies, even companies, also have that potential. Any group that places too much emphasis on conformity, especially around the expression of ideology and 'correct' thoughts and behaviours could lean in that direction.

I worked for a company years ago in Japan that was triggering all sorts of stuff - it seem eerily familiar. But a religious mindset does seem to be the most vulnerable. Thought I am not sure what the research on that is.

1 ^ | v • Reply • Share ›



Linda LaScola Mod → Debbie Robinson • 7 months ago

Hi, Debbie --Good thoughts above.

I think a lot of "spiritual but not religious" people don't have an ideology about their spirituality -- it's more a "sense" of things, that needn't be and often isn't attached to an existing

religious dogma or set of beliefs. Personally, I don't think there's value in steering these people to identify as non-believers, but that there is great value in NOT steering them (or anyone) to identify with an existing religion as the "right one" to believe.

Right now, the norm in the US is still to believe in a particular dogma, but that is changing quickly, in part due to the many vocal ex-clergy we're hearing from these days.

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