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Colby Cosh: The heretical minister to help her flock evolve out of the need for church



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Sometimes you find out that you were born too late. As a young atheist, I never considered that the Christian clergy might be open to me as a profession. I followed the hard road of other unbelievers, your Christopher Hitchenses and your Sam Harrisese, and became a writer and controversialist. It's a precarious living; newspapers did not think to introduce the practice of tithing when the time was still ripe.

But now I read of the innovative Rev. Gretta Vosper, a minister of the United Church of Canada (UCC) who preaches ... atheism! Vosper has turned her Toronto UCC congregation into an inclusive club full of songs, poetry and chat about ethics and politics. I say "inclusive" although, according to the *Globe and Mail*, something like two-thirds of the 150 parishioners have left West Hill United Church on the reverend's watch. You need not go there expecting to pray anymore, but you may hear the spiritual leader of the congregation say, "I am a negative atheist, which means I see no proof for the god called God or any other gods." Words after my own heart!

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Vosper has been a controversial figure in the United Church of Christ. Live is More Important Than What We Believe is especially unusual in having become a text for so many pastors are in this position, but most are former priests and pastors, which includes many who were pushed over the edge of unbelief by the High Church. angry.

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her 2008 book, *With or Without God: Why the Way We Live is More Important Than What We Believe* (ted?) The controversy does not arise because she is not a member of the professional clergy. It is agreed in UCC circles that she is still on the job — and many of these, in turn, were members of the professional clergy. Theist literature so often criticized as counterproductive and

The United Church of Christ is famous for allowing theological wiggle room. Vosper appears to have tested that leeway to the limit. Fellow members of the regional conference have requested that church leaders “interview” Vosper about her theology and find out whether she can perform her metaphysical functions. The procedure for investigating and defrocking a heretic is so little-used in the UCC that no one was sure, at first, how to go about initiating it.

Vosper has expressed a determination to fight for her position. Her place, she suggests, is inside the church, helping it to “evolve” towards a world in which no one believes in the supernatural. She uses that word, “evolve,” a lot. Her rhetorical imagining of a church overcoming itself, becoming a superior rationalist post-whatever, is all but Nietzschean. She has a strong conviction that churches are good for something, even if the members no longer share any beliefs about ultimate reality.

What they may even be good for is castigating religion itself. In January, after the Charlie Hebdo massacre in Paris, a prayer for the victims and the grieving appeared on the UCC’s website. Vosper sent an open challenge to the church’s moderator “question(ing) the merit of such a response” on the grounds that “it underscores one of the foundational beliefs that led to the horrific killing in Paris: the existence of a supernatural being whose purposes can be divined and which, once interpreted and without mercy, must be brought about within the human community in the name of that being.” She added that, precisely because of religious terrorism, “ours is not a time in which personal religious beliefs can be welcomed into the public sphere.”

This sounds so much like Anton LaVey-style Satanism, down to the garbled verbiage, that it surely constitutes a sort of final *reductio ad absurdum* — an epitaph, perhaps, for polite mainstream religious faith in the Western world.

I for one was never so atheist! As a practical matter there are distinctions in design and in harmfulness between religions. In this regard, it should suffice to point out that there are no Gretta Vospers in Islam. She will not be killed or imprisoned for apostasy, but the United Church seems likely to conclude that she has actively invited disinvitation from the body of believers. If that is still the right word.



Vosper seems to be opposed to traditional liturgical expressions and prayers even as emotional comforts or objects of contemplation — the Bible is full of objectionable incidents and moral certitudes, the Lord’s Prayer is insufficiently gender-neutral, etc., etc. In practice, this view that the Church exists only to transcend itself seems to leave no function at all but artsy-craftsy self-expression. Perhaps it goes without saying that Vosper and her husband have published several collections of “material for use in traditional worship settings” — prayer, but not to be called that, lest one be suspected of thinking someone is listening.

Of one of these collections, *Another Breath*, she writes, “No appeals to the god, God, are to be found, those who gather at West Hill eager instead to find their own responsibilities and potential and the many ways in which they can influence the world using their own power and influence.” This sounds so much like Anton LaVey-style Satanism, down to the garbled verbiage, that it surely constitutes a sort of final *reductio ad absurdum* — an epitaph, perhaps, for polite mainstream religious faith in the Western world.

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