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Douglas Todd: Atheist clergy should remove masks

It's high time United Church stopped being so nice and cleaned house

By Douglas Todd, Vancouver Sun columnist July 4, 2015

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To most non-United Church of Canada members who have followed the peculiar case of the semi-famous Rev. Gretta Vosper, it's a no-brainer. Why on earth, outsiders ask, would a Christian church allow someone who has long been an outspoken atheist to remain in the clergy?

However, for many in the United Church, which is barely holding its status as the nation's largest Protestant denomination, the case of Vosper is something best not to discuss. After all, Vosper has until recently remained largely unchallenged because most United Church leaders wouldn't want to hurt anyone's feelings, or be criticized as intolerant.

Sometimes United Church people seem so Canadian that way, which I'll get to in a moment.

Given the openness of the United Church — to which more than 2.5 million Canadians still claim affiliation — it's of note that a bit of pushback has finally arrived.

The church's Toronto presbytery politely began asking in May whether Vosper is doing her religious duties. She leads a small congregation in Toronto, from where she often denounces her leaders (including national Moderator Rev. Gary Paterson, of Vancouver).

Even though Vosper has been proudly declaring for 14 years, on all media platforms, she is atheist, it looks as if her dubious employment will drag on, at least in the short term. The review of Vosper has bogged down in a bureaucratic "appeal."

That shouldn't stop the rest of us from musing on the strange case of Vosper.

She is the author of two best-selling books on atheism's superiority, and a frequent go-to source for journalists at secular media outlets when they feel they need to find a new angle on Christianity.

Vosper's website describes her as "minister/author/atheist." Her first book was *With or Without God*. It is not a put-down to suggest if Vosper was not writing and speaking about her atheism from an ostensibly Christian pulpit she would be widely ignored.

Despite calling herself "progressive," she is not a radical thinker. Her views are commonplace among Canada's many atheists and in the venerable Unitarian Universalist denomination, in which members are roughly divided between atheism and theism. Vosper would also be at home in the new secular humanist Sunday Assemblies, which seem like a great idea for atheists.

What's most notable about Vosper is not her character or ideas, but what her continuing employment says about what's become of the once-influential Protestant denomination, which in the 1950s was frequently considered "the conscience of the nation."

Notre Dame University historian Mark Noll said the United Church has declined in part because it embraced secularism, pluralism and multiculturalism, Ontario scholar Nancy Christie adds it faltered because it promoted personal freedom above public morality.

One of the things the Vosper case strongly suggests is the United Church has become so freedom-fixated and inclusive — often boasting "We Welcome Everyone" — that it has lost its boundaries.

For what it's worth, many people maintain too many Canadians act like United Church members: They, too, have also lost a sense of identity.

A surprising one in four Canadians recently reported to Angus Reid Institute pollsters the country doesn't have a "unique culture," which suggests they believe Canada is some sort of blank slate, lacking distinctive traits.

For now let's stick with the church's vague definition. There is a story going around United Church circles that a UCC reverend spoke at a denominational gathering about being upset by a prayer offered in the name of Jesus Christ. Why? Because, even though she is UCC clergy, she was "offended as a Buddhist."

And what are we to make of the frequent warnings on UCC discussion boards — by both Vosper's supporters and anxious clergy who predict the denomination's destruction if she is terminated — that many Christian clergy are similar to Vosper?

In other words, they're also atheists.

There is a deep spiritual issue at play here if it's true many closet atheists toil among the United Church's more than 3,000 clergy, about a third of whom are female. (There is no real way to measure this claim without a confidential survey.)

I'm all for Christians and others exploring doubts and curiosity about the existence of God, however defined. But it's one thing to dig into questions. It's another for a clergyperson such as Vosper to consistently declare with absolute certainty there is no God, and to tell members who think there is they are dangerously delusional.

Vosper's vociferous supporters stand for her because they say it's high time for the denomination to reject what they claim to be the traditional supernatural "interventionist" God; basically a Father-in-the-sky figure.

To be sure, there is no shame in saying goodbye to this image of God, if it no longer makes sense to you.

The trouble is Vosper and supporters somehow think the "interventionist" God is the only God there is. If you reject their over-simplified understanding of this theology, they argue you have to be an atheist.

Nothing could be further from the way it is. There are many alternative understandings of God, and one umbrella term for them is pantheism.

Pantheism treads a middle path between pantheism (in which nature and God are seen as one) and "interventionist" forms of theism. Pantheism teaches God is both within nature and transcends nature.

Some great minds have supported pantheism and its variations, such as process theology. They include Friedrich Schelling, Heraclitus, Emily Dickinson, Charles Hartshorne, Ramanuja, Abraham Joshua Heschel, Meister Eckhart, Henri Bergson, Alfred North Whitehead, Jurgen Moltmann, Sallie McFague, John Cobb, Michael Lerner, Marjorie Suchocki and countless others. Many Bible scholars argue Jesus and the apostle Paul were pantheists (that debate is not going to be solved here).

If you are a clergyperson having doubts about the "interventionist" God and don't know pantheism is an option, you're not looking very hard.

If you can't embrace either the so-called interventionist God, or some version of a pantheistic entity, you owe it to yourself and your church (of any denomination) to find a new line of work.

That all suggests it might be time for the United Church, which has long advocated justice and full rights for females and homosexuals, to reform itself, by becoming more honest.

As Canadian psychologist Evelyn Sommers points out in *The Tyranny of Niceness: Unmasking the Need for Approval*, there is a dark side to needing to be liked. That, I suspect, is what many open-minded church members who tolerate Vosper's employment are guilty of.

I'm all for civility, but the particularly Canadian and United Church trait of niceness is mostly a way to avoid rejection. Worse yet, Sommers said it leads to people "masking who they really are."

A lack of authenticity is one of the clear dangers for the United Church and especially for any clergyperson who keeps walking up to the pulpit each Sunday and pretending to be some sort of theist when he or she really is no longer.

Just as outspoken Vosper should do the honourable thing and leave the United Church, so too should the more secretive clergy who won't declare they really are atheist, mainly because they don't want to lose their gig in a denomination in danger of becoming The Church of Niceness.

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