

FROM THE CCBLOGS NETWORK

How not to cross a boundary

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Gretta Vosper has been making headlines for a while now. She's the pastor of West Hill United Church in Toronto. She also claims to be an atheist. According to a recent article at Vice News, Vosper decided back in 2001 that the idea of a supernatural being who intervened in the affairs of the world was a very silly thing to believe. She has, nevertheless, been soldiering on in her church for the last decade and a half in the service of the more worthy and "progressive" concerns that she feels the church ought to be about.

Initially, her Toronto congregation was OK with this. But more recently, the complaints have been mounting. Her church has launched an investigation to determine whether she's fit to keep her job. Vosper is, of course, appealing, seeing her desire to hang on to her position as the minister of a Christian church as an act of solidarity with all the other unbelieving ministers out there who are too afraid to admit it. (I've written a bit about this before here). She hopes that the United Church will be the "first denomination to have the courage to step beyond doctrinal boundaries and say we are a church that is about love, compassion, and justice." Whether or not such a step should be deemed "courageous" or "incoherent" will be decided by an ecclesiastical court in September.

What Gretta Vosper does or does not believe about a "supernatural interventionist" deity is of very little concern to me. She's not the first and she certainly won't be the last to prefer a God of her own choosing or to reject the God revealed as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit in scripture. I don't even much care if she retains her position in the United Church of Canada. Yes, the idea of a self-declared atheist serving as pastor of a Christian church is, well, bizarre, but while the United Church of Canada contains many committed, compassionate Christians (I work with a number of them on a refugee project in our city), there are pockets of the denomination that have not felt particularly shackled by the constraints of orthodoxy for some time now.

There are a number of things that I do find remarkable and/or noteworthy about this whole situation, though. First, I am struck, again, by the phenomenon of apparently intelligent people abandoning the idea of God when they encounter suffering in their lives. According to the article, in Vosper's case this seems to have occurred when the teacher of her young daughter died of a brain tumor. Her daughter had prayed and her teacher wasn't healed. Evidently, God was a lie.

Now, suffering must never be minimized, and I don't in any way want to imply that this was anything less than a heart-wrenching experience for Vosper and her daughter. But people have been suffering and dying for a very long time in our world. And Christian orthodoxy has almost without exception been articulated and practiced in contexts where human life was, far shorter, far harsher, and far more unforgiving than it tends to be in twenty-first century suburban Canada. God has, evidently, been failing to consistently intervene according to the preferences of human beings for quite some time. The fact that prayer isn't a formula or that people who believe in a "supernatural, interventionist God" still suffer and die are not exactly revelations. It would seem to require no small amount of hubris to proclaim as some kind of discovery the idea that there must not be a God because very bad things happen in the world and very bad things shouldn't happen if a loving God is in charge.

The other thing that strikes me about Gretta Vosper's story is how utterly, predictably, yawn-inducingly symptomatic it is of our cultural moment. A Christianity that has little use for a higher power that might presume to make demands upon us, or a view of reality that constrains human behavior and reorients human preferences, or an understanding of faith that makes it mostly about *us* and about the values that we are most pleased to think define us ... all of this is, well, pretty much exactly the sort of religion that you would expect to see in a postmodern, post-Christian, reasonably wealthy, and individualistic nation like Canada, where there are really no higher values to aspire to than our own versions of personal fulfillment, authenticity, inclusion, social justice, tolerance, etc.

And then, of course, there is the obvious question of why Gretta Vosper is so determined to cling to words like *Christian* and *church*. Why not just walk away and enjoy the society of other suitably progressive folks who have no

use for God? This is what another former United Church minister, Bob Ripley, did when he found he could no longer believe, and what he wishes Vosper would do:

People who no longer believe in a supernatural divinity, have every right to do so. They can and should form their own communities. But to do it under the umbrella of a Christian denomination, I just can't go there."

He added that Vosper's fight is not an issue of justice or inclusiveness. "I think the church has to give some definition to what it is, which is people who believe in a supernatural divinity. That's what gives it its substance," he said.

In other words, while the church obviously changes over time, and while Christian theology morphs and develops and evolves in this or that cultural context, there is obviously a point where one's beliefs are no longer within the parameters of anything recognizably Christian. And the church is not being oppressive by saying so. It is simply reaffirming what gives it substance. All organizations have boundaries of some kind. You probably can't be a card-carrying member of Greenpeace and a major shareholder of Syncrude. And, no matter what Gretta Vosper might think, you can't be a Christian pastor charged with teaching and modeling the way of Jesus (who seemed to have a few convictions about an interventionist God and prayer and a life beyond this one, among other things) and an atheist.

You can try to refashion Christianity and construe it as an "understanding of God that is more about relationships with oneself, the others, and the planet." But even though these values can find their place in the Christian narrative (and, can be chastened and grounded coherently, it should be said), that's not what Christianity has ever been, and it's not what it is now. It just isn't.

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Comment

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