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**Junaid Jahangir** [Become a fan](#)

Assistant Professor - MacEwan University

## Why I Support This 'Atheist' Minister

Posted: 08/18/2015 5:23 pm EDT | Updated: 08/18/2015 5:59 pm EDT



HuffPost Religion [recently published an article](#) on the potential firing of a United Church minister for her beliefs on God and the Bible. Rev. Gretta Vosper has been noted for rejecting the idea of "an interventionist, supernatural being" and for supporting the view that "how one lives is more important than what one believes."

Online commenters including both believers and atheists have been harshly judgmental of her. However, as a Muslim who occasionally attends the [Southminster-Steinhauer](#) United Church, I express my unstinted support for her.

Vosper is concerned about how mindless faith can motivate harmful actions, and how basing moral authority in a supernatural source can trump "humanistic endeavours."

These are extremely important questions that merit careful reflection. Yet, some online commenters have asserted that an "atheist minister" is an oxymoron. Others have mentioned that she should join the Unitarian Universalist tradition. One commenter even asserted, "when you stand for nothing, you stand for anything."

However, similar arguments have been made by homophobes who like to impose their worldview on others by asserting that the word "gay Muslim" is an ["oxymoron"](#). Likewise, some simplistically [argue](#), "You can believe anything and be a Unitarian Universalist."

It seems that such commenters, including both believers and atheists, reduce spiritual traditions to mere rosters for frozen rules as opposed to living traditions that speak to the ever-changing human condition.

They may want to reflect on the idea that they cannot let their limited imaginations define the identity of another human being let alone define their spiritual path.

Vosper is right in claiming that deriving morality from supernatural sources can come at the expense of ethical living and cause immense suffering.

Obsession with the proper doctrine has led to the [persecution of Ahmadis](#) in Pakistan through *takfir* (excommunication). Likewise, the [hateful rhetoric](#) of Evangelical preachers in Africa has contributed to immense persecution of the LGBT community. It is true that socio-economic and political factors are also at play in such instances, but religion is often the primary vehicle for expression and justification.

Religion is often presented as breaking the barriers of socio-economic status, sexual orientation and other characteristics that define human beings. However, in creating such brotherhoods/sisterhoods, one based on religion is created. In following her calling, Vosper simply wishes to do away with that barrier.

Her approach is reflective of radical *Tawhid* (Oneness) that unites all humanity on different paths to truth. Indeed, among some Muslims, Islam is not about mindless submission to a *baniya* (merchant) deity obsessed with debit-credit accounting but about being in a state of sanctuary.

One does not have to be a Muslim to achieve that inner peace. Islamic philosopher Seyyed Hossein Nasr elucidates "God" as an ideal, which for an individual manifests in personal philosophy. According to exegete Muhammad Asad, Judgment Day simply refers to individual moral responsibility.

Viewed in this light, believers and atheists are both included, when verse 2:62 offers salvation to all, who believe in Allah and the Judgment Day. In other words, the atheist's wager based on good deeds is far closer to the Islamic spirit than Pascal's wager based on fear.

Critics harp on labels like "atheist minister," however the 18th century Sufi poet Bulleh Shah expressed, "In the Lord's court both the believer and *kafir* (unbeliever) are treated alike."

Likewise, Karen Armstrong has written that a *kafir* (unbeliever) is not an atheist in our sense of the word but someone perversely ungrateful. Viewed, in this light, there are atheists who are actually believers and theists who are in fact unbelievers.

The late Ayatollah Murtadha Mutahhari clearly wrote in Islam and Religious Pluralism.

In my view, if there are individuals who do good to other people ... even if they know that no benefit will accrue to them and not even a single person will come to know of what they did or say so much as "God bless you" to them ... one must say that in the depths of their conscience there exists the light of recognition of God. And supposing they deny it with their tongues ... their denial is in reality a denial of an imagined being ...

The criticism of Vosper is not novel, but of the same stock that time and again has sought to create differences, erect barriers and keep people separate from their unity in diversity.

Fortunately, Vosper is not alone. Her steadfast West Hill congregation stands by her. They create a theological-barrier free space in which those with and without beliefs gather to encourage and inspire one another.

Many West Hill congregants would not be in a church were West Hill not available. It is a very special place for those who call it home. As such, the congregation feels the review by the powers that be is as much on them as it is on Vosper.

What perhaps puzzles them is that no official United Church of Canada person has ever come to have a conversation with them or inquire as to why the congregation feels that this is work the United Church should be doing.


I too stand by Vosper, for I see Rev. Nancy Steeves, whom I affectionately refer to as father, mirrored in Vosper and I see the Southminster-Steinhauer congregation, which accepts me without ifs and buts, reflected in West Hill.

The 13th century Persian poet Saadi expressed that worship is not done through rosary beads, robes of piety or prayer carpets, for service to humanity is the whole of worship. He also asserted that to comfort a single heart by a single act of kindness is better than a thousand prostrations in prayer.

He was only echoing the Prophet (upon whom be peace), who had stated that keeping good relations with people is better than prayer, fasting and charity.

As such and with great admiration, I affirm the courageous stand of Vosper and the West Hill congregation for their convictions.

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## Conversations

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**Ashok Chawla** · Kurukshetra University

An atheist (in the terminology of followers of religions) who follows the righteous path is a true follower of Dharma. He does not belong to any exclusive club (religion) but to humanity at large. He cares for flora and fauna as he cares for fellow human beings. He follows true inherent nature of human beings. For him service to fellow human beings is out of natural volition than "stick and carrot" philosophy or the fear of "Heaven and Hell".

Same applies to a theist (a follower of an organised religion or believing in their concept of Mother Nature, Providence, Deity or God ), as long as he... See More

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**Ben Robertson** · Windsor, Nova Scotia

Well said. Thank you.

Like · Reply · 1 · Aug 18, 2015 6:07pm



**Douglas Taylor**

Just what do you "unstinted" support? Freedom to hold spiritual beliefs and interpretations as you choose? No problem. But the denomination ordains (licenses) its clergy with oaths and declarations of acceptance and adherence to certain doctrines. So do you support the rights of a denomination to hold employees to adherence to certain values and protocols? You do when you are employed by Grant MacEwan University.

You are free to attend a United Church but you will not be a member of this denomination until you are schooled in its doctrines and protocols and you declare in a public church meeting to accept and adhere to these beliefs and protocols. Give up the Muslim faith and join the family of the United Church. You might find what you're looking for.

Like · Reply · 1 · Aug 18, 2015 6:37pm



**Luca Fancello**

Get over yourself asap !

Like · Reply · Aug 23, 2015 4:29pm



**Gerry Laarakker**

Thank god I am an atheist.

Like · Reply · Aug 18, 2015 8:21pm



**Joe Talbot**

Oneness and inner peace aside she really shouldn't be preaching under the United Church's flag. It's just ethics. The message that faith is more important than belief is real and could, should be ministered. Best of luck to her, very smart woman.

Like · Reply · 1 · Aug 18, 2015 4:17pm

Like · Reply ·  1 · Aug 19, 2015 4:47am



**David Hayward** · Creator and Owner at Nakedpastor


I support Gretta as well, and I appreciate your post and your support of her. I also posted a cartoon and wrote a bit on it this morning:  
<http://nakedpastor.com/.../gretta-vosper-and-the-right.../>

Like · Reply ·  2 · Aug 19, 2015 7:05am



**Dave Jones**

Vosper is breaking new ground and it is very difficult. She recognizes the need for the support and healing provided by community and is attempting to do provide that to a congregation but without the doctrine of an old man on a throne sitting on a cloud as the communal focus. At West Hill you will hear teachings from all belief systems whose holy books are recognized as allegory.

Like · Reply ·  1 · Aug 19, 2015 7:06am



**Géó McLarney** · Montreal, Quebec

Nobody is questioning her value in God's sight or the sincerity of her beliefs. It's just a question of integrity: she's no longer willing to do the job she signed up for, but she wants the pay cheque. That's what it boils down to. Religion is almost a red herring: she would be just as hypocritical if she managed a McDonald's and decided to start serving Burger King food there.

Like · Reply ·  4 · Aug 19, 2015 8:26am · Edited



**George Spencer** · Northern Alberta Institute of Technology

And what job would that be? Enforcing the dogma of the corporate body or doing good in the world? I hope doing good is more important than towing the party line.

Like · Reply ·  1 · Aug 23, 2015 12:04pm



**Luca Fancello**

. She has more integrity than many....

Like · Reply · Aug 23, 2015 4:30pm



**John Ford** · Charles Sturt University - CSU

Junaid Jahangir writes mischievously endeavouring to portray Islam as some sort of universal wager that one might take out at the local betting shop, just in case things get nasty at the end. In doing so he joins the popular chorus that sings the attraction of individualism where God is devolved to a 'mashy swamp', to quote Said Nursi, of secular ideology masked as intelligent conversation, which increasingly seem to emanated somewhat frequently from the domain of academics. It would be interesting to hear what al Ghazali, Ibn 'Arabi or al Bayhqi might has said by way of reply. But as Jaha... See More

Like · Reply · Aug 19, 2015 8:50pm



**Harvey Joyner** · Pastor at First Congregational Christian United Church of Christ

There is plenty of room for nontheistic Christians in the church. Making the world a kinder, more just, and peaceful place does not require belief in an interventionist deity. We do not all have to think alike to love alike!

Like · Reply · Aug 20, 2015 7:13am

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