

Humanism's Return to What Really Matters: An Interview with Atheist Minister Gretta Vosper

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What is the purpose of a church? What does it mean to be an atheist minister or an atheist congregation? For many believers and nonbelievers alike, these questions seem paradoxical. Yet, Gretta Vosper has been an ordained United Church minister with a congregation in Scarborough, Ontario for many years.

Vosper's written humanist hymns, advocated for empathic problem-solving, attended and participated in multiple AHA conferences, and has participated in AHA's Common Ground interfaith/secular conference as a panelist in 2015. She is also the author of *With Or Without God* and *Amen: What Prayer Can Mean in a World Beyond Belief*, among other publications. I recently got the chance to speak with Gretta and have her divulge about the role she plays caught between two worlds, worlds that are not as different and opposing as they seem to be.

Sincere Kirabo: Your story is simply fascinating. For those unfamiliar, could you please briefly describe how you came to be an ordained United Church of Canada minister who

believes in neither God nor the Bible? What is the current situation in your showdown with church officials trying to defrock you?

Gretta Vosper: The liberal church has long had two tracks of theological discussion: one for its theological institutions and academics and one for its pastoral contexts. These two tracks have differed considerably, with the former using the tools of critical inquiry to evolve these paths of inquiry:

- the discussion of the god called God into a discussion of the human concept of god;
- the examination of the Bible as the word of the god called God into its examination as a human-constructed document with its varied parts situated in time, place, the socioeconomic and political contexts, and worldviews of its authors;
- the study of Jesus as the divine son of the god called God and arbiter of salvation into the study of Jesus as an historical figure about whom much was written and conjectured long after his death and the portrayal of whom is sketchy, at best;
- the discussion of Christology as a belief system crucial for eternal salvation into a discussion of Christology as a human-constructed concept.

My ordination interviews allowed for and encouraged metaphorical understandings of traditional terms, a perspective consistent with my theological training. The church has encouraged the exploration of some progressive elements by congregations. It has not, however, allowed a non- or post-theistic understanding of god to be clarified or equated with an atheistic understanding, even though the terms virtually sharing the same definition. My views were widely known due to the publication of two books which clarified them.

They were not a problem for the church hierarchy until I began to use the word “atheist,” a word that accurately, technically, describes the beliefs of many of my colleagues, almost all of whom distinguish themselves from me by using the terms “nontheist,” “pantheist,” “panentheist,” “process theologian,” and even “a pursuer of the god-presence,” whatever that means. It means, according to the clergy person who claimed it, that his ordination remains valid while my position lacks integrity and validity, despite the fact that “he doesn’t know anyone who believes in the god” I don’t believe in—in other words, the theistic, supernatural, god called God.

We are currently working with the [Toronto Conference of the United Church](#) to schedule a date for the “hearing” that they are calling an interview. A conference interview committee, made up of forty people (some of whom we have named as biased and so expect to be excluded), will provide five individuals to do the “interview.”

These individuals will report to the forty who will then make a recommendation to the Conference sub-executive committee (a group of up to eight persons) who may or may not accept the recommendation of the interview committee. The committee has been instructed that their recommendation is to be in the form “Yes, we recommend she may be retained on the roll” with a one-sentence explanation as to why, or “No, we recommend she may not be retained on the roll” with a one-sentence explanation as to why not.

Kirabo: I first came across your work after reading your [article about attending the 74th American Humanist Association Annual Conference](#). What I really appreciated was your written ruminations about Sikivu Hutchinson’s contributions to the “Humanism and Race” panel. How do you think experiencing that discussion has since influenced your outlook when it comes to religion, humanism, atheism, and beyond?

Vosper: Sikivu gave me permission to express my annoyance (that’s pretty mild) at the post-religious and atheist community and its ongoing fascination with all things religious. We need to move past that and onto the exact issues she drums into our heads: race, gender, ethnicity, economic disparity, violence, etc., all of which crisscross each other with varying levels of intensity and impact.

I had long been frustrated with those who obsess over the ills of religion and fail to put their energy into creating a more equitable social/economic/educational/political system. Her articulation of that same frustration validated my perspective and gave me courage to speak it more forcefully. Prior to that, I think it sounded more like a conversation about being polite. After the AHA conference, I was able to talk about intentionally refusing to cooperate with the “near mono-maniacal obsession” with religion of the humanist/atheist community.

Indeed, at that conference, a member of the panel I was on—“The Clergy Project Panel: Atheists in the Pulpit”—sang a song I had identified as inappropriate. I had stated that, if the tone of the presentation was going to lean toward ridiculing religion, I would be happy not to participate. I was assured he would not sing it. But he did, and I think he did because he thought I was being too sensitive: “They would love it,” he had said.

Then he went on to tell a story that was egregiously exaggerated and graphically disturbing, a story that was undoubtedly untrue but which raised a communal expression of dismay and anti-religious anger. I was humiliated to be on the dais with him at the time and appalled that the organization I served was being represented in such a manner. If you need therapy for your religious upbringing, do it privately, not when representing an organization.

Within the religious community, I often speak about spiritual, liturgical, and theological masturbation. There is an atheist masturbation that is just as ugly to watch as all those. And the energy that goes into it is as self-serving as masturbation ever only is. I lament that we cannot see beyond the self-satisfaction of narratives that put others down. We need to get working together on some of the realities we have the responsibility to create in the world.

Kirabo: Last month I attended an event where Rabbi Donniel Hartman spoke about the philosophy and purpose of his new book, *Putting God Second*. His talk revolved around his belief that monotheistic religions fail to produce societies that live up to their ethical ideas and that, instead, we're often left with the negative effects of "God manipulation" and "God intoxication."

This latest rendition of religious modernity promotes the need for universal humanist principles beyond acts of religious devotion and ritual piety. At the same time, Hartman's ideology is saturated with a strong belief in "what God really wants." What are your thoughts about this liberal theology and its message to the religious world? What similarities do you find between his position and yours?

Vosper: I have not read his book so don't want to give a response that would be based on my own growing prejudice against those who continue to try to retain something of their religious worldview by telling everyone they've been doing it wrong all this time. See? I just did it. So let me give another possibility.

The risks inherent in letting go of old paradigms is much less than those inherent in hanging onto them as, I believe, has been evidenced in the loss of the mitigating effects of liberal religious organizations on the struggle for control of the moral agenda of our communities. If we'd let go of the religious dogma and led in the area of human relationship and the moral implications of tending to those relationships, those institutions might have helped us find our way to the exact conversations we now need so desperately, and done it decades and decades ago.

[This quote](#) by environmental lawyer and advocate Gus Speth was shared with me by a friend: I used to think the top environmental problems were biodiversity loss, ecosystem collapse, and climate change. I thought that with thirty years of good science, we could address those problems. But I was wrong. The top environmental problems are selfishness, greed, and apathy...and to deal with those we need a spiritual and cultural transformation—and we scientists don't know how to do that.

Those aren't just environmental problems—they're economic problems, political problems, racial equality problems, gender acceptance problems. Those problems are also not going to be solved with issue-specific fixes. We need something more.

I think the world needs a new “spirituality,” not another reiteration of an old one. Even the word “spirituality” gets in the way of what we need to do. We need to tell the noble truth that we share, let it ignite the stardust that we are, and find a way of grace (by which I mean living in relationships of trust and forgiveness) that can take us toward a very challenging future with dignity, empathy, and resonance.

Kirabo: Could you explain what all is involved in your project that will provide resource material for use in traditional transitioning congregations? When it will be ready for the public?

Vosper: Each week, I review the lectionary readings for a Sunday—usually the Sunday in the next year’s cycle. I extract a “theme” and then collate readings and quotes to go with it. I also write resources to take the place of traditional liturgical elements—calls to worship, prayer before the readings, benediction, etc.

I try to write new words to traditional hymn tunes each week but found that after the review was started, it was a year before I wrote another one. A poem based on the theme is also written and links to pertinent videos, reading material, books, etc. are provided when I find them. Sermon notes are included but they need some refinement to make sense!

The project will likely take a while. If I had a few months off, I could finish it, but that isn’t likely to happen.