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## Atheist minister defends her views at United Church 'inquisition'

By Colin Perkel

The Canadian Press



In an appearance before the inquisition this week, Gretta Vosper defended her views, which include a lack of belief in God and the Bible.

*THE CANADIAN PRESS/Colin Perkel*

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TORONTO – An avowed atheist fighting to keep her job as a United Church minister is now waiting to hear if a review panel will recommend she be defrocked for violating her ordination vows.

In an appearance before the panel this week, Gretta Vosper defended her views, which include a lack of belief in God and the Bible.

"The reason why Rev. Vosper finds herself on the receiving end of a Church inquisition is due to her use and adoption of the term 'atheist'," her written submissions state.



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"Rev. Vosper adopted the label 'atheist' in 2013 as an expression of solidarity with people around the world who were being persecuted and murdered for challenging religious fundamentalism and extremism."

The main issue at stake, she argued, is whether the United Church would insist on a "singular definition" of God or allow its ministers and members to explore and define their own ideas.

Vosper also pointed out that members of her congregation – many of whom were on hand to cheer her on – were highly supportive of her.

In oral submissions, the minister told the panel she supported values that "transcend our personal interests and needs, and which help us envision a better world."



gretta vosper

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God, in the traditional sense, is not a concept she believes in, she said.

"Were I to be given incontrovertible proof that a god does, or gods do, exist, the evidence of the cruel and capricious realities of disparity, tragedy, illness, and anguish in the world, and the truth that our world and our experience of it is wrapped not only in beauty but also in excruciating pain, would prevent me from worshipping it or pledging my allegiance to it," Vosper said.

"There are no moral codes that have been formed by the mind of a god. Rather, there is a morality that we have created."

Vosper, 57, who was ordained in 1993, joined her West Hill congregation in east-end Toronto in 1997. She has been upfront about her beliefs for years.

Things came to a head after she wrote an open letter to the church's spiritual leader following the Charlie Hebdo massacre in Paris in January 2015, pointing out that belief in God can motivate bad things. The general secretary of the church's general council decided on the unprecedented review of her fitness to preach.

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Rev. David Allen, executive secretary of the Toronto Conference, has said he took complaints about Vosper to the church's executive, which decided it wanted to investigate whether she had gone too far.

Essentially, the review panel required that she answer several questions affirming her ordination vows, including whether she believes in the Father, Son and Holy Spirit and if she was "committed to God."

In her closing comments, Vosper urged the panel to find that the way forward was "not through an aberrant disciplinary process, but through a collaborative effort to improve" the United Church.

The panel is expected to take several months to render its decision.

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