

Atheist minister on Canadians leaving religion behind

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A United Church of Canada minister who has openly said she no longer believes in God says she believes that religion and faith are changing in Canada.

Gretta Vosper, 57, has been outspoken in recent years about her atheist beliefs, which has prompted the United Church to announce it will be reviewing her fitness to lead her congregation.

Vosper says she believes that many Canadians want to move beyond rigid religions and work on leading meaningful lives and creating a country that doesn't divide itself along religious lines.



United Church of Canada minister Gretta Vosper speaks to Canada AM on April 4, 2016.

“(People) are not in search of doctrinal beliefs that are dictated by religious organizations, however progressive those beliefs may be articulated,” she told CTV’s Canada AM Monday.

“I think people want to find ways to create meaning in their lives, they want to come together to engage in those conversations. They want to find ways to improve their own wellbeing and their engagement in the community beyond themselves.”

Vosper has fought the United Church’s efforts to hold a review of her work and determine whether she is being faithful to her ordination vows. Last week, a judicial committee of the church rejected her final appeal.

On Monday evening, Vosper is taking part in a larger discussion on religion when she and several spiritual thought leaders gather for “The Walrus Talks Spirituality,” an event presented by the United Church Observer.

The event comes just a few weeks after an Angus Reid survey revealed one in four Canadians are now inclined to reject religion – a percentage that is significantly higher than the one in 25 Canadians who said the same back in 1971.

The survey found that less than one-third (30 per cent) of Canadians reported they were inclined to embrace religion, with the remaining 44 per cent saying they fell somewhere in between.

Vosper says she believes that organized religion is not as important to many Canadians as it once was, but that many still seek community, the sharing of social values and norms, and social engagement.

Retired Anglican bishop Michael Ingham agrees that religion is shifting. Ingham, who is also taking part in Monday's talk, says that the role religion plays in the lives of most people in the Western world has shifted drastically from centuries ago.

"It's no longer at the centre of power in many Western societies. And as religion has moved to the margins, we've been able to become a voice for people at the margins," he said.

Another panellist, Timothy Caulfield, a professor at the University of Alberta's Faculty of Law and School of Public Health, has been studying the connection between celebrity culture and spirituality. He agrees that religion is on the decline in most OECD countries.

"I think science is on the rise and I think that's part of the story. We're getting this interesting mishmash right now in this era, between science and spirituality – and for sure, celebrities are part of that story," he said.