

On the Precipice – But of What?



I notice that Bishop John Spong has recently sent a letter to Moderator Cantwell of the United Church of Canada imploring the church to pull back from “this precipice”. What follows in the letter is a scolding of the small, pre-modern minds who have dared to call the Rev. Gretta Vosper to account. That is, whether she is fit for ministry.

Gretta is the minister of West Hill United Church in Scarborough, Ontario. This was the church I served before coming out to Vancouver. For years following the transition I would get emails and phone calls from former members who had left the congregation because Gretta had made many significant and disconcerting changes, most of which were the logical consequences of her growing clarity that she was an atheist. I just listened to these folks compassionately.

She continues to identify herself with “progressive” Christianity. If you go to [her website](#), she identifies herself as “minister, author, atheist”. It’s catchy to say the least. But I think what her choice to continue to lead a church as an atheist doesn’t make a lot of sense. It makes no more sense than the Atheist Society of Canada having as their leader a devoted Christian.

Bishop Spong’s letter mistakenly assumes that by “atheist” Gretta means a-theism. That is, that she is merely rejecting the theistic God of traditional Christianity.

Gretta has called herself "an atheist minister." While that language is startling to some, the Christian academy knows exactly what she is saying. To refer to oneself as an "atheist" does not mean that one is asserting that there is no God; it means that the "theistic" definition of God is no longer operative or believable. It has not been operative in intellectual circles since the 17th century. Perhaps if Gretta had called herself a "non-theistic" pastor, people would not respond with the negativity that is born out of such incredible and profound theological ignorance. Gretta's style, however, is to shock people into opening their minds to new possibilities and thus to call them into a new understanding of God.

Ummm...I don't think that's what she's saying Bishop. I was a co-keynote speaker with her when she presented the universe as cold and indifferent and meaningless and there being no role for *any* kind of God. She isn't trying to shock anybody into believing in another kind of God. After reading the letter, I seriously wondered if he had engaged Gretta in an in-depth conversation before writing his letter of support.

He should really be aware that 99% of the clergy in the United Church of Canada are non-theistic, if the theism he's talking about is the traditional interventionist God. But he should also be aware that there are very intelligent and nuanced forms of theism these days. Dr. John Haught in my opinion is a very credible theist.

Spong goes on in the letter, rather arrogantly I thought, running down all the those in the UCC who are persuaded that Gretta should be required to clarify her thinking on the matter. His tone along with his critique misses the ethos of the UCC, which has never been accused of being close-minded. It is more post-modern, than traditional.

Gretta was the President and co-founder, (I believe), of the

Canadian Centre for Progressive Christianity. But what she is about is not progressive, it's not avant grade, as Spong makes it out to be, and there is much confusion about this. It modernist atheism, a simple rejection of any kind of God. Which is good and fine. Atheism is a legitimate worldview. It's been done and is being done very well by many philosophers and scientists, who assume an ideology of materialism (physicalism). It's secular humanism—a particular form of spiritual intelligence. But it's not cutting edge. Thomas Jefferson attempted to reduce Christianity to morals and values over 200 years ago with his version of the Bible, that cut out all the miracles, the resurrection, and any reference to Jesus as divine.

Gretta defends her choice to remain in the church because her Board and the existing congregation is happy with her. But nobody is asking the majority of those who left the congregation.

She also defends herself by making a distinction between beliefs and actions. What's important is how you act not what you believe. But belief, not as intellectual assent to dogma or doctrine, but heartfelt conviction (based in personal experience) about the Mystery that inhabits us as conscious beings in a vast universe, does matter. When she says that the universe is cold and indifferent and proceeding without any apparent purpose, that is a belief. It's metaphysics. She makes that conclusion, based not on empirical fact, but on her interpretation of facts. And that interpretation is itself shaped by the modernist ideology reduces reality to the physical, that is persuaded that reason is our salvation, and is committed to jettisoning a traditional view of God.

Now in the human realm belief systems are part of the wonderful diversity of creation. They are an expression of differentiation, and there is unity in differentiation. Church is distinct from Buddhism, Hinduism, Judaism, etc. but not separate from other belief systems. But the differentiation is

real. It's not a bad thing. It's the way reality shows up—in all its variegated, unified glory. Church shows up as a community that believes certain things about Reality. Those beliefs evolve certainly, and there is a very wide range of beliefs in the UCC, but all of which include whatever we mean by G_d.

Gretta has a different set of beliefs about reality. And reality needs her beliefs to be whole. They are part of the glory of creation. But they sufficiently distinguish her from that aspect of creation called “church” in such a way that she no longer “fits”. What is being tested by the UCC is precisely Gretta's “fitness” for ministry. This is not a moral test. It is not a test of her goodness as a human being. It's an inquiry into whether or not she is a fit. Why not welcome that inquiry?

Oh, and this isn't about “inclusivity”. There is so much misunderstanding about this UCC mantra. It's not about the church being “inclusive” enough to make room for atheist clergy. Using a biological metaphor, if the cell membrane fails in its function of allowing what is essential in, and keeping what is non-essential or is actually detrimental to the cell out, it will cease to be what it is in very short order. For a particular kind of cell to be itself, it needs the intelligence to discriminate what belongs in and what doesn't. If it loses this intelligence, it dies.

Now, I'm not saying that it would be the end of the world if the church died but as long as it is “church” it needs to be self-defined. An atheist society would cease to be what it is if it allowed its leadership to be Christians or Jews. And to repeat, the glorious diversity of creation needs atheist societies. But inclusivity doesn't mean confusing the two.

Gretta is playing an important role in the UCC, whether or not she is taking on that role consciously. She is forcing the church to look at how philosophical materialism, rationalism,

and empiricism has crept into the institution. Our historical realization that we needed to take science seriously if we were going to be credible, brought with it a Trojan horse—an underlying modernist agenda to rid the world and the universe of Spirit. Rationalism and materialism, *as a belief system*, has in many quarters trumped the mystic sensibility. They have a place in the order of the universe, but not in a church.

Bishop Spong has provided great leadership for which I am grateful. But he's off-base in this letter. He's missed the ethos of the UCC, what the actual issues are, and he's missed Gretta's theology or lack thereof. Gretta too is a fine human being and a compassionate defender of the marginalized. But it's time to move on.

Honestly, this is the last you'll hear from me on this.