

Gretta Vosper

Gretta Vosper, a Minister in the United Church of Canada, and Chair of the Canadian Centre for Progressive Christianity, is a fresh voice in modern theology. She is blowing a blast of fresh air through hallowed portals. This is the essence of her view expressed in her first book: ***“With or Without God – why the way we live is more important than what we believe.”***

Out of the multitude of understandings of religion, spirituality and faith; out of the varying views of the origins, nature and purpose of life; out of the countless individual experiences of what might be called divine; out of it all may be distilled a core that, very simply put, is love.

This core message carries its own authority. It needs no doctrine to validate it, no external expert or supernatural authority to tell us it is right. Love is quite demanding enough as a foundation, sufficiently complex and challenging without the requirement of additional beliefs, unbelievable to many. The church the future needs is one of people gathering to share and recommit themselves to loving relationships with themselves, their families, the wider community, and the planet.

She recognises that this requires change that will come at great cost. Without it she sees no future for the mainline church, and no need for one!

She argues that in most disciplines these days, fresh ideas, new knowledge, and further discovery are a natural part of life. Theology, she believes, tend to resist new knowledge in favour of emphasising what is unchanging. She wants the church to lead in areas of ethics, relationships, meaning and values that are rooted in our best thinking, and not contrived to align with whatever biblical verses can be construed to support them.

She reviews the development of Christian beliefs through history, and presents what she sees as the current challenges to Christianity. Then she moves forward with ideas to liberate and reconstruct Christianity, a programme of freedom with integrity, which she sees as fulfilling a responsibility to our own generation and those following.

Her style is open and direct, but also very pastoral. Like Spong, she has led her congregation into new ideas – not left them behind. Her second book “Amen – what prayer can mean in a world beyond belief” explores the diverse experiences of prayer, including those of unanswered prayers, the secular critique of supernatural intervention, and the need to fully acknowledge suffering. Her challenge to her readers is to reconsider prayer in a secular environment, and find ways that are intellectually and emotionally satisfying to explore it.

The core of what she is saying about prayer is to adapt the classic concepts of the acronym ACTS – Adoration, Confession, Supplication, and Thanksgiving, and use those concepts as secular spiritual activities. ACTS – becomes Awe, Concerns, Thankfulness and Self-examination.

Awe is the ability to reflect in wonder at the beauty, the complexity and grandeur and the mystery of all that is, and all that we encounter in other people.

Concern involves us in bringing to mind people and issues which move us to compassion, action, expressions of opinion, campaigning, choice of priorities in how we live, we strengthen our imaginative sensitivity about how we transfer our concern into something constructive.

Thanksgiving is the considering of all that for which we can be profoundly thankful. As we work that spirit of thankfulness into our thinking and our behaviour, we change our mindset, and our behaviour.

Self-examination is the process by which we review how we are living, what choices and relationships we make, how we are with those we love and those we find it difficult to love. We recognise any need to change, and seek to make those changes. As Socrates is reported to have said: *"The unexamined life is not worth living"*.

Gretta Vosper is taking the agenda of progressive Christianity further than any of the heavyweights of the movement, apart perhaps from Lloyd Geering, have taken it so far. There are plans being explored at present to to hear her in person in September 2014 on her first speaking tour in Britain.

Michael Wright