

Review Article

WITH OR WITHOUT GOD: Why The Way We Live Is More Important Than What We Believe by Gretta Vosper. Toronto: HarperCollins Publishers Ltd., 2008. Pp. Xvi + 384. Hardbound \$29.95

In 1730 Bishop Warburton stage-whispered to a fellow peer in the House of Lords, “Orthodoxy, my Lord, is my doxy; heterodoxy is another man’s doxy.” And for the past three centuries mainline Protestants have found it neither practical nor reasonable to stage a serious trial for heresy. Why is that so? Because moderns regard themselves as the single legitimate authority for judgments about religious truth, and they strongly react against external agencies making binding pronouncements on such matters. Bishop Warburton was exercising his celebrated wit, but his aphorism captures the way modern Protestants think.

Gretta Vosper is an ordained minister of the United Church who ministers with the congregation of West Hill in Toronto. She is also Chair of the Board of Directors of the Canadian Centre for Progressive Christianity. In her book she has published an eloquent argument for abandoning God and Jesus, her purpose being to rescue the church from irrelevance and extinction. Some have wondered how she could regard herself as still being “in essential agreement with the Basis of Union”, or call herself a Christian. A few have questioned why the church does not remove her from its order of ministry for reasons of heresy. I want to argue in this review that there are things the United Church ought to do, but holding a heresy trial is not one of them.

Vosper states that the core of Christianity is love and that

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 (p.4).

For the most part this section is thoughtfully argued. Vosper's years of experience as a respected pastoral leader are reflected in the considerate manner in which she announces her purpose:

I am not, in any way, attempting to wrest from anyone his or her sense of a relationship with God or Jesus... My intention is, rather, to provide a model for a way of life, a way of faith, a way of gathering together for those who either do not believe in the supernatural elements of religion or do believe but do not feel we can make absolute, universal claims about it...; for those who have no need of "God" — it is for these people I write (p.18).

Positively speaking, Vosper finds that modern clergy and laypeople know what values are essential:

hope, peace, joy, innocence, delight, forgiveness, caring, love, respect, wisdom, honour, creativity, tranquility, beauty, imagination, humour, awe, truth, purity, justice, courage, fun, compassion, challenge, knowledge, daring, artistry, wonder, strength and trustworthiness (p.32).

She sums up her position: "To be Christian, for me, is to do whatever it takes to bind me to a life lived in a radically ethical way" (p.197).

Vosper privileges individual experience over religious tradition, including scripture and the Jesus story, in a concluding passage that is almost identical to Sigmund Freud's comments in *The Future of an Illusion*. She says:

We believe that there are no supernatural beings, forces, energies necessary for or even mindful of our survival. What we have dreamt in the past have been dreams. They have enriched us and challenged us to seek out what we needed to survive. What we need now cannot be found in these dreams. We need to dream again, recognizing that our visions, ideas, choices, and challenges, all come from within us, not from somewhere else. We are our creators, and we have the challenge before us to create a future for this planet in which love, made incarnate through justice and compassion, is the supreme value (p. 316).

For this reason Vosper recommends that we wean ourselves from the notions of God and Jesus, particularly as they have been defined over time by church councils initiated by the Emperor Constantine in the 4th century (p.211). Despite her account of how to make

judgments in a fair-minded manner (e.g., pp.214-5) she is highly selective in what she adduces as historical evidence for how religious traditions and authorities have deceived people.

For example, Vosper describes the Babylonian Exile of the 6th century BCE as a key instance in which criticism of God is deflected by showing that the Israelites — Vosper surely means to say the Judeans — had sinned against God and therefore deserved God's punishment (pp.226-7). But she should have noted that Isaiah offers the radically innovative notion that suffering can be redemptive, and that the exiles are to be honoured as servants who are in no way to blame for their own suffering. This is why Christians have used Isaiah 53 as a description of the work of Jesus, and why Jews have seen the passage as an account of how the Jewish community redeems the world through suffering.

Vosper misrepresents Ockham's razor as undermining the understanding of God (p.233), and she argues that the church has said "absolutely not" to any effort to declare that an experience of sexual orgasm can be "holy" (p.229) — a statement that would doubtless surprise traditional Christians like Teresa of Avila and C.S. Lewis. Vosper suggests that mystics may be practising self-deception when they conceive an awareness of the presence of God that is no more than the result of prayer that separates thought from feeling (p.229). But this is to ignore that the first step for traditional mystics was often to despair of God (i.e., to cease to hope that human effort can create an awareness of God) and for whom the final step was frequently the "dark night of the soul", in which their carefully cultivated, human awareness of God was crushed by God's action. Vosper reports that the World's Parliament of Religion held in Chicago in 1893 was "a not-so-pretty picture of religious disharmony as attempts to gather leaders of the world's religions around the ethic of the Golden rule were stumped by divisive squabbling over incompatible beliefs"(p. 151). In fact the meeting was praised by thousands of participants — including the Principal of Vosper's *alma mater*, one of the Canadian delegates — for its respectful exchange of views.

In addition to being selective about her facts, Vosper is often selective about her theories. She cites James Fowler's work on the psychological stages of religious development, and suggests that Fowler sees such development as leading to the elimination of belief in the supernatural (pp.261 ff.). But this ignores the way H. Richard Niebuhr's *theological* understanding is inextricably woven into Fowler's thinking.

Vosper argues that once we have achieved historical consciousness we can never turn back to mythological thinking (p.78) — apparently unaware of Mircea Eliade's warning in *The Sacred & the Profane* that those who develop historical consciousness often slip back into ideological thinking that is terrifyingly absolutist and dehumanizing. But then, Eliade saw historical consciousness as generating the "terror of history", while Vosper has what seems to be a totally benign view of historical consciousness.

She summarizes the purpose of religion by saying, "When They Say It's About the Community, They've Got it Right!" "That's what the roots of religion were all about..." (p.309). It's as if Max Weber never existed and instead left the field of sociology to be defined exclusively by Émile Durkheim.

I have argued elsewhere¹ that sometime before the First World War, mainline Canadian Protestants resolved the contradictions between their faith and the teaching of the higher criticism; they agreed that the former is true practice while the latter is pure theory — a distinction that is characteristically modern. What Canadian Protestants did then relieved them of the burden of staging heresy trials, but it left a gap between theory and practice that calls out for mending. Gretta Vosper, however, dismisses the gap as something comparable to a defect in the brain — the physical breakdown of the *corpus callosum* (p.111 ff). She invites her readers to validate

¹"Theory Divided from Practice: The introduction of the higher criticism into Canadian Protestant seminaries," *Studies in Religion/Sciences Religieuses* 10/3 (1981).

her argument by playing a parlor game with a word written on a piece of paper — a game whose seductive simplicity must send shudders down the spine of any neuroscientist.

Vosper is dismayed by the contradictions between theory and practice in liberal churches — between what modern learning has revealed and what traditional authority has said is revelation. And Vosper is compassionately aware of the way that some conservative Christians have suffered as they become aware of the incompatibility of modern scholarship with traditional doctrine. Her dismay over the self-deception of liberal Christians and her compassionate awareness of the plight of conservative Christians become anger, laced with a certain amount of sarcasm, when she addresses the key issues of scripture, God, Jesus, and prayer.

Irritated by an African bishop's scornful attacks on gay and lesbian Christians, using a witty acronym, Vosper coins her own acronym, TAWOGFAT ("The Authoritative Word Of God For All Time") (p.53; see n.28, p.364) and proceeds to use it to sweep away all arguments that the canon of scripture might be accorded a special place in the Christian search for truth (p.90,103-4,135,220-22, *passim*). The useful distinctions in biblical interpretation made by Martin Luther, John Wesley, Rudolph Bultmann, Albert Outler, N.T. Wright, *et al.*, are beaten into homogeneity with the views of biblical literalists.

When she turns to the subject of "God" Vosper relies upon the writings of Lloyd Geering, a Presbyterian who was tried for heresy in 1967. After a brief, public trial his General Assembly dismissed the charges and closed the case. It seems to me that Vosper's presentation of Geering's work should be judged in the light of Hans Küng's conclusion — that the modern criticism of the doctrine of God is sufficient to raise doubts about God's existence, but not to make God's non-existence unquestionable.² Vosper disagrees: "non-theism not only grows out of the Christian

²Hans Küng, *Does God Exist? An Answer for Today* (New York: Doubleday, 1980).

tradition but is the only logical next step for the church to take” (p.231). She invites us to play with a list of 101 words that we can substitute for “God” and assures us that doing so will “sweep a lot of old stuff onto the dustpile” (p.236). Moving beyond the traditional images of a judgmental God who condemns human beings as evil will allow us “to embrace the being-ness of our own divinity” (p.236).

Turning to Jesus, Vosper discusses Albert Schweitzer’s position as portrayed in his famous book, *The Quest of the Historical Jesus* (incorrectly dated to 1904). She claims his inquiry revealed that “the first-century Jew had little to say to the ethical and moral struggles of the contemporary world” (p. 152). But this is the book in which Schweitzer concludes:

Jesus means something to our world because a mighty spiritual force streams forth from Him and flows through our time also. This fact can neither be shaken nor confirmed by any historical discovery. It is the solid foundation of Christianity...

He comes to us as One unknown, without a name—as of old, by the lake-side, He came to those men who knew Him not. He speaks to us the same word: “Follow thou me!” and sets us to the tasks which He has to fulfill for our time. He commands. And to those who obey Him, whether they be wise or simple, He will reveal Himself in the toils, the conflicts, the sufferings which they shall pass through in His fellowship, and, as an ineffable mystery, they shall learn in their own experience Who He is.³

I can’t help but wonder whether Vosper relied on defective secondary sources about Schweitzer rather than his own writings. He went to serve in Africa because he was inspired by Jesus, not because he thought Jesus was irrelevant.

Vosper says her own view of Jesus today is similar to the picture painted by the Jesus Seminar: the historical Jesus is a person who lived a short life within a relatively small geographical area, but “the church stretched, pulled, and reconfigured the story of Jesus to give us that Son of God it said we had to have” (pp.237-8).

But, stripped of the designation as God’s only begotten, complete with its

³*The Quest of the Historical Jesus* (London: A & C. Black, 1910) p. 403.

requisite claims to salvation, there is nothing that he said or did that we must take more seriously than anything said by anyone else (pp. 238-9).

However, Vosper's pastoral skill and commitment show up again when she discusses prayer.

For the community with which I serve in ministry, prayer is one of the most important aspects of our spiritual life even though the images of god that are held by the members of that community are incredibly varied or the concept of god is entirely denied. Broadening an understanding of prayer can allow for its retention as a vibrant spiritual tool during what might be a difficult journey of faith (p. 245).

Rather than abolishing prayer, Vosper proposes to transform it gradually until at last we learn to "live god, through our spirits, throughout our own lives. To do so is to pray" (p.250). To this end she enlists the help of her songwriter husband, composing an alternative to the Lord's Prayer suitable for use by children during public worship (p.252). She aims to free us from any sense that we are unworthy, and she rejoices in the moments when we reject such negative thoughts — thoughts that are engendered by the doctrines of the church, not by any realistic assessment of who we are (p.258).

As I finish this summary of Vosper's argument it seems to me that I have become increasingly negative. I think it's because so often she takes a critical view of Christian theology, makes a good point or two, and then proceeds to absolutize them, ignoring alternative positions except where they can be satirized through a piece of rhetoric like "TAWOGFAT". It reminds me of the "take-no-prisoners" style of debate that I learned back in college — extracurricular debate, not scholarly debate.

It would be an injustice to Vosper, however, to ignore the moments when she appears most authentic and even self-critical. I particularly admire the honesty of her conclusion that a children's story that she told during a Sunday service caused her daughter deep pain when she was in Grade 5 and her favourite teacher died. The fact that the people of Vosper's congregation support her work is further testimony to her authenticity.

Still, I want to conclude by challenging the main argument of the book. I agree with her sub-title, since I believe St. James was right to admonish us to be doers of the word, not merely hearers, and the anecdote concerning the two sons preserved in the Jewish *seder* echoes the point. I think the Jesus we encounter in the Gospels takes the same view.

But this is not the same as saying that belief is irrelevant — the claim of Vosper's main title, *With or Without God*. Indeed, in his supportive introduction to Vosper's book John Shelby Spong subtly suggests that belief in "God" remains central to Christian communities everywhere (p.xv)!

As I see it, the experience of the one God is foundational to all the communities that spring from Mount Sinai, and Jesus the Christ is foundational for those who call themselves Christian. Sinai monotheists in general, and Christians in particular, share much in common with other religious people and with secular humanists, but God and Jesus cannot be regarded as optional without emptying the word "church" of its meaning as "those who belong to the LORD".

All religion has to do with living out a relationship between the absolute and the contingent, and holding Jesus the Christ at the centre of their struggle to live rightly is what identifies those who confess themselves to be Christian. Now perhaps I am insisting on that definition because I fear a loss of reputation or income — after all, I enjoy a sinecure as a salaried, honoured, theological professor. But if I am required to moot that criticism of myself, perhaps the same may be said of Gretta Vosper when she redefines the terms "god" and "Jesus" so radically. I respectfully suggest that she has pushed the redefinition so far that it begins to echo Humpty-Dumpty's nominalist excesses in *Through the Looking Glass*.⁴ It seems that Vosper feels justified in doing this because she is convinced the church through the ages has been dishonest at worst, self-deceived at best, and she believes that the resources inherited by the church of today should be given over to progressive

⁴Martin Gardner, ed., *The Annotated Alice* (New York: World Publishing, 1963) pp.268-70.

humanists who know how to use them. My criticism of her may be summed up by the truism that two wrongs do not make a right.

What we need in the United Church is not a heresy trial but a modern community that tries to confront the question of God with all the courage, fairness and openness that Jesus the Christ demands of us. We need to include Gretta Vosper in that community, or we must be prepared to confess our failure to love the Christ. But we need also to challenge Progressive Christians like Vosper to be as honest and loving as the United Church should be. While confessing that the church through the ages has often betrayed its LORD, I bear witness that Progressive Christians too have often fallen short of the mark.

As Gretta concludes in her command to drop the prayer of confession, “Enough said” (p. 329).

— Tom Faulkner