



The Enlightenment



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The Gretta Vosper Story

By Don Hatch

I first heard about Gretta Vosper about fifteen years ago when I read a Toronto Star article about a United Church minister who was leading her congregation into a new kind of Christianity at West Hill United Church in Scarborough, Ontario. The article was about an incident involving her ten-year-old daughter, Hazel. One of Hazel's teachers developed a brain tumor and Hazel prayed devoutly every day that the tumor would be cured. When the teacher died, Hazel was devastated. "Why did she die, when I prayed non-stop?" Hazel asked. It is a question that would rock any parent and it shook Gretta to the foundation of her belief.



Rev. Gretta Vosper

Gretta, as an enlightened clergy person, had for some time been wondering why, "the intense and difficult conversations theology students had at divinity school were not echoed in congregational discourse." She further stated, "we are keeping congregational members in Kindergarten." She knew it was necessary for people in the pews to learn about the historical events that occurred after the crucifixion in order to fully understand how Christianity evolved into a religion based on the supernatural. This meant educating her congregation, as well as others, about the newer concepts being put forward by progressive religious scholars. She realized she could no longer continue preaching the traditional supernatural Christian message from her pulpit at West Hill. That is, the old message embodying a God in heaven that answers prayer, and influences events on earth. A God who supposedly begot a son named Jesus who was born of a virgin, was crucified, and rose from the grave, possessing the power to forgive the sins of believers. As time went on, Gretta abandoned preaching about supernatural beliefs and emphasized values of love, mercy, compassion, forgiveness, and beauty. Her messages included not only the teachings of a human Jesus, but also the wisdom of poets, philosophers, the Buddha, Confucius and others. For me personally, it was very refreshing to learn that an ordained United Church minister was questioning some of the basic tenets of Christianity, as I was also doing.

So, how did the West Hill congregation react to this novel approach as she gradually introduced the newer progressive style of Christianity? Well, things came to a head in 2008 when she stopped reciting the Lord's Prayer. Attendance dropped from 120 to 40, but West Hill continued on, coping with the inevitable financial

challenges. Today, Sunday attendance ranges between 85 and 90 people. All along, Gretta has received strong support from her remaining congregation, eager to participate in her explorative journey.

In 2004, Gretta founded the Canadian Centre for Progressive Christianity (CCPC), an organization devoted to furthering the newer progressive Christian ideas, modeled after the Center for Progressive Christianity, founded in 1996 by retired Episcopalian priest James Rowe Adams in the U.S. Both organizations published an eight-point statement of how progressive Christians defined themselves. CCPC published a quarterly journal called *Progressions* that was mailed out to over 1000 subscribers. They also held periodic conferences in major Canadian cities. In the autumn of 2011, a well-attended CCPC conference was held at First St. Andrews United Church in London Ontario. After a sustained run of twelve years, CCPC was wound up in April 2016.

In 2008, Gretta published her first book, *With or Without God: Why the Way We Live is More Important Than What We Believe*. It became a bestseller. The Foreword was written by the well-known liberal Episcopal Bishop John Shelby Spong. Her second book was entitled *Amen: What Prayer Can Mean in a World Beyond Belief*. She has also published three shorter works, *Holy Breath, Another Breath* and *We All Breathe*. In 1971 Gretta published *Time or Too Late: Chasing the Dream of a Progressive Christian Faith*. Over the years she has been in demand as a speaker at many venues, often at liberal Christian churches. In 2011 she was the guest speaker at the Humanist Association of London and Area's annual Wolf Hall event.

For a number of years, Gretta continued on with her progressive messages with, as already mentioned, 85-90 parishioners attending each Sunday. Along the way Gretta's changing thoughts about God were made known. She explained, "in 2001 I made it clear that I did not believe in a supernatural, interventional supreme being. At first, I identified as a non-theist, as I do in my first book published in 2008. Then in my second book, I felt the need to further distinguish myself from those who use the term non-theist but retained a belief in the aspects of god; there I identified as a theological non-realist. In 2013, I embraced the term atheist which means, literally, no belief in a theistic supernatural being."

Well, that put the cat among the pigeons, so to speak. This would never do! Even in the United Church of Canada (UCC), which is recognized as probably the most liberal and progressive denomination in the nation, you cannot have an atheist in the pulpit. In September 2015, the Church's Toronto Conference Review Committee stated that Gretta's atheism made her "not suitable to continue in ordained ministry." And in November 2016, the United Church *Observer* even published an issue with the word 'Unsuitable' superimposed on a cover-picture of Gretta. The matter was referred to the Judicial Committee of the United Church of Canada for a decision that could have her defrocked. They promised a decision by November 2017, but the powers that be seemed unable to solve this dilemma. All throughout these proceedings, the members of West Hill remained staunchly supportive.

Finally, the Church's Executive Officer of Ministry and Employment set a date for a trial, sometimes described as a "heresy trial." Preliminary proceedings began on November 5, 2018, with the trial expected to last five weeks. After a very stressful first day for Gretta, an unexpected announcement occurred on the second day. The two sides reached a confidential agreement leaving Gretta free to minister to her West Hill congregation in the progressive manner she has been doing all along. Gretta was exalted, saying; "It has been a long three and a half years. I'm both exhausted, relieved, and deeply grateful." And, "It's going to be wonderful. We'll be out from underneath that heavy cloud. Now we'll be able to really fly." And in a further statement, Gretta said: "This coming Sunday, I return to my congregation without a cloud hanging over our

heads and secure in the knowledge that the community we have built at West Hill United Church can continue, without conditions. I cannot say how central your support, love, expressions of empathy, and constancy has meant to me over these three and a half years (plus one day!). It has strewn this difficult path with wisdom, late night and early morning insights, en-coeur-agements, letters of support, of outrage and sorrow, perspective, cups of tea, space for the expressions of anger or heartbreak, shoulders braced against the wall. You persevered, and this story has been told. In the telling, in the hearing, we have been affirmed. The first denomination to allow an atheist, whose heart and mind, leadership, and theology, formed by that church's own hand, to continue unobstructed in their ministry. Might I even say "celebrated?" It is a new day in the Christian world. And I am so grateful for your presence by my side."

"With much love,"

"Gretta."

Wow! What an unexpected and glorious victory. It is a tribute to Gretta's courage, her perseverance and determination, that enabled her to bring about this victory. But the decision is very confusing on the part of the United Church. After the initial statement was released on the United Church of Canada website, the church put out a second one on behalf of the denomination to stress that the decision "doesn't alter in any way the belief of The United Church of Canada in God, a God most fully revealed to us as Christians in and through Jesus Christ" and that they would hold all three parties in prayer. The Right Reverend Richard Bott, the recently elected Moderator of UCC stated, "as a Christian church, we continue to expect that ministers in the United Church of Canada will offer their leadership in accordance with our shared statement of faith." The new UCC Creed mentions God six times and the new Song of Faith mentions God ten times. How does this square with the decision of the trial to allow an atheist, who does not believe in the traditional Judeo-Christian God, to stay in the pulpit? It is a mystery to me!

Nevertheless, we are pleased to learn that Gretta, a declared atheist, will be allowed to continue leading her congregation with her progressive message. But we wonder: what will UCC do the next time a minister declares that he or she is an atheist?

The United Church of Canada now faces another problem: what to do about its falling membership? When the UCC was formed in 1925, it had 609,729 members (7% of the population). At its peak in 1965 it boasted 1,062,335 members (5% of the population). By 2016 membership had fallen to 413,717 (1.25% of the population). If present trends continue, the UCC, and probably other mainline churches, will be near extinction by 2045 if not before. The reason of course is that most congregations consist mainly of grey-haired women and grey-haired or bald men. Young people are not joining. It has been said that young people are asked to park their brains at the door when they enter a church. This is not surprising. Think about it! Who in this modern scientific digital age would believe in a supernatural God, a virgin birth, and a resurrection from the grave? Only some older faithful people and all evangelical Christians. Most young couples are busy raising their families and have little interest in joining a church with outdated beliefs.

But what about progressive Christianity? As I understand it, it was Gretta's hope that the structure of the church could be used to foster a new movement that would attract the young and other venturesome people who would be amenable to exploring newer concepts, while continuing with the outreach and fellowship of traditional churches. Alas, this has not happened. Again, the reality is, there is a lack of interest.

So, in what is likely to be a futile effort to stop, or slow down, membership decline, the UCC, a supposedly liberal Church, has chosen not to be progressive, but instead has become more conservative and retains

outmoded beliefs. Thus, the misguided decision to attempt to defrock a minister that has been conscientiously trying to keep the United Church vibrant and alive.

In what is supposed to be a caring and compassionate organization, the UCC can only be described as being cruel in bringing about unwarranted allegations against Gretta, and delaying the hearing for over three and a half years, causing “moments of incredible despair.” This whole prolonged procedure, that has brought about substantial legal fees, was unnecessary.

In conclusion, I must mention again, the incredible courage and fortitude that Gretta Vosper has exhibited during this stressful period. Gretta credits, “the incredible support and energy of that support and love and affirmation from my congregation and across the country and around the world,” for helping her get through this trying stretched-out ordeal.

Origin and Usages of the Word Humanism

It is often stated, that what has become known as humanism, originated with the teachings of early Greek philosophers, particularly Epicurus (341-270 BCE) who postulated:

- If gods exist, they cannot influence events on earth.
- There is no afterlife. Live this life to the fullest. This is all there is. Enjoy life, but in moderation.
- Happiness is the avoidance of pain.
- The universe is made up of atoms

But the philosophy of Epicurus did not survive. It was overtaken first by Stoicism with its pantheon of mythical gods, and then by monotheistic Christianity espousing belief in only one God.

But cracks began to occur in Christianity when Christian supernatural beliefs began to be questioned by Enlightenment philosophers and scholars such as Benedict Spinoza (1632-1677) and David Hume (1711-1776). Today, these pioneering individuals are often referred to as humanists, but the word itself did not come into use until the early 1800s, and it had nothing to do with rejection of belief in God.

The word humanism was coined by theologian Friedrich Niethammer in the early 1800s to refer to a system of education based on classical literature. Subsequently, the word began to be used to describe the rediscovery of the Greek and Roman classics by Petrarch, and other scholars, during the Italian Renaissance in the 14th century. Thus, the phrase, “Humanism of the Italian Renaissance” came into being and the subjects being studied became known as the “humanities,” a term still in use today. Other than this use, the word humanism apparently did not appear at all in the 19th century.

But during the 1800s, other words referring to non-belief in the supernatural were in fact coined. In England, in mid-century, George Holyoke coined the word “secular” to describe non-belief in supernatural phenomena. Shortly after, his friend Charles Bradlaugh founded the National Secular Society and ever since the word secular has become a part of the English lexicon. Webster’s International Dictionary describes Secular as: relating to worldly or temporal as distinguished from spiritual or eternal, or: relating to the state as distinguished from the church, or: relating to laity as distinguished from the clergy.

Another word coined in the 1800s was Agnostic. It was first used by Thomas Huxley (Darwin’s bulldog) in 1869 at a meeting of the Metaphysical Society in London. He said, “it simply means that a man shall not say

he knows or believes that which he has no scientific grounds for professing to know or believe.” Ever since then, many non-believers prefer to call themselves an agnostic rather than an atheist. An atheist firmly believes God does not exist, but the word implies nothing else about the traits of the individual. An agnostic usually says God probably does not exist, but it is impossible to know for certain.

Getting back to the word humanist, the earliest use of the word in the 20th century, that I have been able to uncover, was in 1927 when an organization called the “Humanist Fellowship” was founded in Chicago. (This group later became the American Humanist Association in 1941). The word humanism cropped up again with the publication of the First Humanist Manifesto in 1933. After WW II, the word began to be used by secular-minded associations, both Nationally and locally, throughout the world. The members in these organizations adhere to a set of principles that hold humanity must seek the truth through reason and the best observable evidence and endorse scientific skepticism and the scientific method. And as well, it is stipulated that decisions about right and wrong must be based on the individual common good, with no consideration given to metaphysical or supernatural beings. A general motto: do good and live well in the here and now. This life is all there is! In short, be good without God.

With a couple of exceptions, membership in these organizations is not large. National association membership is usually in the low thousands and local membership is often less than a hundred. But these groups do serve a purpose by providing a place for like-minded individuals to meet, share ideas and learn more about the advantages and desirability of living a secular mode of life.

But as things have turned out, I believe it may have been a mistake for humanist groups to usurp the word humanism in the title of their organizations. Why? Because the original use of the word humanism and the implications in which it is being used in the media today have nothing to do with a rejection of belief in God. Instead, the word humanism is being used to describe a concern for the welfare of all humanity as elaborated on in the next paragraph. People are free to believe or not believe in the supernatural.

Enlightenment readers may have noticed that the word humanism is cropping up more and more in the various media. Usually in the context of making life better for all humans, while affirming some notion of human dignity, freedom and progress. The ultimate goal is human flourishing in a well functioning democracy. The word often comes up when referring to concerns about what is going on in today’s world, with a declining middle-class and a rise in populism. Those using the word in the media are attempting to imply that in the uncertain times ahead, with advancing technology and with capitalism out of control, the welfare of all humans and the conditions under which they live must be of prime concern. This to me, is how the word should be used, rather than exclusively by what are now known as humanist groups. For the members in these organizations, humanism is a personal thing. They call themselves humanists because they adhere to the beliefs and principles of the organization to which they belong. In contrast, the way the word is being used in the media today implies a more inclusive approach, suggesting a need for concern of the welfare of all humanity. Whether a person is a believer or non-believer, does not enter the equation.

Thus, the word humanist has become a homonym. A word that is spelled the same and sounds the same, but has two different meanings. The word bark is an example. It can mean the outer covering on a tree or the sound a dog makes. So, as things stand today, a humanist may be a member of a humanist association with specific beliefs and principles, or a moral and ethical person living in a humane society with optimum freedoms and opportunities to live a satisfying life. The latter is how the word is being used today by the media. I look on this use of the word in a positive light.

In the past there have been suggestions for a better name for what are known as humanist associations. Some are being used. The Freedom From Religion Foundation, an organization dedicated to the separation of church and state in the U.S. avoided the word humanism. The Center for Inquiry in Amherst N.Y., which broke off from the American Humanist Association, declined to use the word. They are, however, associated with the Council for Secular Humanism, thus qualifying the word. Susan Jacobi, the well-known American secularist proposes Free Thinkers as an ideal designation. A few years ago, the word Bright was suggested as a substitute for humanist. As would be expected, it did not catch on. And of course, there is the word secular itself, that can be used alone or as an adjective as in the oft-used phrase secular humanism.

As a person who has been a member of a humanist association for almost twenty years, I have often thought the word humanist does offer a perfect fit. When I tell someone I am a humanist, I usually get a blank stare, or I am asked what is that? I have to explain that I do not believe in the supernatural and that I adhere to the principles of the humanist organization to which I belong. If I said I belong to a Secular organization or a Free Thinkers association, then the person in question might have a better understanding of what I was talking about.

It is an established fact that a person living in a democratic environment with firm separation of church and state, is free to be a believer or non-believer, while at the same time, most likely having a concern for the welfare of humanity as a whole. As stated several times already, this is the sense in which the media is now using the words humanism and humanist.

In actual reality, it is not likely that many, if any, humanist organizations will have any desire to change their name. They will continue to operate as in the past, providing an opportunity for members to meet with like-minded persons. Members will generally be non-believers who recognize the shortcomings of religions. They will believe in the scientific method, be concerned about human rights, and promote secular democracies as the preferred form of government. All this is very good stuff, but the reality is that these organizations have had minimal effect on betterment of society. Most people don't know they exist. Therefore, they all have a challenge on how to be more effective in the future. I suggest they need to get more political, concentrate on human rights and also on the preservation of secular democracies.

In summary, my look into the origin of the words humanism and humanist has revealed that it was in reference to a system of education in classic literature that words were first used. That is, concern with academic subjects that became known as the humanities. An early application was in the phrase, humanism of the Italian Renaissance.

In the 1900s, the words were usurped, for better or for worse, by organizations that began rejecting belief in God. They could have chosen better more descriptive words like secular or free thinkers, truth seekers or even non-believers. Or perhaps secular humanism would be quite appropriate, because secular suggests non-belief in the supernatural, as well as separation of church and state while humanism suggests concern for the welfare of all humanity. Just a thought.

Not long ago, I came across an article commenting on the troubled state our world is in today and outlining the gargantuan challenges that lie ahead. At the end, the author suggested that in setting strategies for the way ahead, a long-term aim should be striving to bring about conditions under which every child born on this earth is provided with clean air, potable water, food, clothing and shelter. This would be humanism at its best. (DAH).

Will Wars Ever End?

I recently finished reading A. C. Grayling's latest book entitled *War*. It is divided into three parts.

Part 1: War in History and Theory.

Part II: The Causes and Effects of War.

Part III: Ethics, Law and War.

The history and effects of war are straight forward. Many books have been written documenting ancient, medieval and modern wars in much detail, while the effects of war including loss of life, injuries, devastation of land, destruction of buildings and infrastructure, rape of women and girls, and lasting psychological conditions (PTSD) are plainly evident for all to see. But when it comes to the theory of war, the causes of wars, the ethics of war and the laws of war, things get more complicated. Nevertheless, in his scholarly book *War*, Grayling tackles these latter subjects and succeeds in arriving at credible explanations. But there is not space in this *Enlightenment* for a detailed book review of *War*, so this will have to be a subject for a future issue. I would, however, like to comment on the last chapter entitled, "Concluding Remarks."

In this short last chapter, Grayling notes that attempts to end wars through organizations such as the League of Nations and the current United Nations have been failures, and he states: "As the techniques of war grow even more sophisticated and destructive, the truth enunciated by John F. Kennedy comes ominously closer: if we do not end war, it will end us. Perhaps it will. Or perhaps one day everything recounted in this book will be considered as past nonsense from irrational times when folly too often reigned. I hope so."

Unfortunately, at this time in world history, the end of wars is nowhere in sight. But, are there any signs of hope? Yes, there is one and that is the World Olympics.

Every four years, the athletes of the world assemble together at Summer and Winter Olympic games to compete for gold, silver and bronze medals. During the competitions, athletes from diverse backgrounds, cultural and religious, live together in harmony in Olympic villages intermingling and exchanging souvenirs with each other. If the youth of the world can do this today, will adult leaders learn how follow their lead sometime in the future? I hope so! (DAH).



Tessa Virtue and Scott Moir
Three Gold & Two Silver Medals

What is a Good Life?

Socrates talked about living a "good" life and Steven Pinker talks about living a "flourishing" life. But just what would such a life consist of? Most likely, everyone will have a different idea of what an ideal life would be like, so I trust *Enlightenment* readers will indulge me while I take the liberty of relating what I believe would be a good life. (While I had a pretty good life, it was not entirety what I would have wished for).

I would like to be born into a *secular* home with loving parents and maybe one or two siblings. I would want my parents to instil sound moral and ethical values in me and teach me about the values of an education. I

would hope to live in a well functioning democratic society with optimum freedoms. I would like to attend good schools, have a few good friends and be able to attend the university of my choice. Along the way I would like to learn the importance of maintaining good health and establish regimes that would help to maintain healthy living.

I would want to be able to establish a successful career in aviation as an aeronautical engineer, perhaps specializing in avionics. For a hobby, I would like to become a private pilot and engage in recreational flying. On the domestic front, I would want to be married to a loving compatible wife, raise a couple of children, giving them a “good” life. On vacations, it would be great to travel and explore the wonders of nature with my family. Although my career would be connected to science and technology, I would hope I could achieve a balance in my life by having an interest in the arts including literature, music, drama, and other subjects such as history and philosophy. And I trust I would be able to eschew greed and desire only the material possessions necessary to live comfortably, while showing compassion for the misfortunate and offering them assistance in some appropriate manner.

After a hopefully successful career, I would want to be in a financial situation that would allow me and my wife to partake of a comfortable and interesting retirement. Do some travelling around the globe and learn how other people live. Engage in activities that keep the mind active and perhaps enjoy the presence of grandchildren on occasion.

Of course, very few if any individuals will live a utopian life. There will be set backs along the way. My life was certainly not utopian. I was raised in a strict Baptist home, a far cry from a desirable secular environment. I wanted to be an electrical or aeronautical engineer, but due to lack of finances, had to settle for a less satisfying education and career. Nevertheless, life is pretty good now with almost thirty years of retirement under my belt. And if I may offer some advice to the young, I would like to stress the importance of working hard in order to prepare for a career that will help ensure the ability to make a good living and enjoy retirement. Now as I approach my ninetieth year, I look back and think I have done my best to live life to the fullest extent possible, under the circumstances that prevailed. And after much reading and soul-searching, I now believe that this life is all there is, and this enables me to have complete peace of mind and no fear of death. (DAH).

Everyone of course will have their own idea of what would constitute a good life, I invite Enlightenment readers to submit their thoughts on what a good life would be like, if they so desire. dahatch@rogers.com

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