



# into the Melting Pot

*the question is more important than the answer*

Sunday 13 October 2019

## **Creating A World Beyond The Beliefs That Divide**

**Gretta Vosper**, is an ordained minister of the United Church of Canada (West Hill Toronto) who is a self-professed atheist. Her beliefs have caused controversy both within and outside of the United Church. In 2016, following the Charlie Hebdo shooting in Paris, her public statement that the belief in a supernatural God promoted hatred led the United Church of Canada to institute an official review of her suitability as a minister. In 2018 that process was discontinued when Vosper and the United Church reached an agreement that left her free to continue as a minister. Her published works include 'With or Without God: Why The Way We Live is More Important Than What We Believe' and 'Amen: What Prayer Can Mean in a World Beyond Belief'.

*The following notes are taken from DVD2 recorded at 'Lectures at the Church' Carrs Lane, Birmingham October 2017 (linked to the Progressive Christian network Britain).*

*I have tried to summarise the content using, where possible, direct transcript of her talk.*

### **Nones**

People who have no religious affiliation have been labelled as 'Nones'. They form 24% of the population in Canada, but over 50% in the UK. Of these about half identify as Atheist or Agnostic and only 3% define themselves as 'spiritual but not religious' - from a church growth point of view, these latter are not worth chasing.

The majority of those below age 35 years identify as 'Nones', although there is still a significant proportion through older age groups, but it is primarily younger people. For every person brought up in a non-religious household who becomes religious, there are twenty five brought up in a religious household who abandon religion.

Nones have the same basic human needs and aspirations as those with a religious faith: they wish to be part of a community where they can be stretched to be the best people they can possibly be. After shelter, food and clothing, they wish for security, love, belonging, esteem and self-realisation.

People in faith communities place high on this list, adopting responsibility for those below them. However, Nones are often isolated outside communities and on their own; their lives are more hectic and challenging than ours ever were (eg job security and progression - young people switch jobs frequently).

### **ACTS**

From her book 'Amen' the structure of prayer often found in churches can be a useful parallel for describing how religion has wrapped around our basic human needs.

ACTS is Adoration, Confession (dreadful word), Thanks, Supplication.

- We need awe and wonder - it takes us out of ourselves and stretches us.
- Self-reflection essential - we need to consider being in right relationship with ourselves, others and our planet.
- Gratitude is a gift

- We need to express our needs, and require community in which to explore this aspect of our lives.

### **Goodness**

A traditional view has God as both the source of goodness and the agent for it. Goodness will out – but if there is no supernatural interventionist God, then we define goodness and are also the source of that goodness and the agents for it in the world.

It is not our job to save the Church; our work is to provide communities that people who want nothing to do with Church might find helpful, where they might feel a belonging and where needs can be met.

### **Outreach**

Gretta Vosper was drawn to Church by the breadth of what Church offers, in particular engagement in social justice. Her role includes 'Outreach'. Her church has a weekly Food Bank, and they have a variety of programmes that bring people to the church (eg English as a Second Language classes). However, this is what she calls 'Dutch-door outreach' where people come to the door, engage briefly and go away again. What is needed is Exponential Outreach to transform people's lives so they would offer change wherever they were in their communities. Those at West Hill have for example

- moved jobs so that there are community benefits from their employment
- those who earn more than sustainability use their excess to benefit their community

Where do Nones get this engagement?

### **Oasis Network**

These are churches without being a church, drawing people who value community but not religion. West Hill has planted one in Toronto, although the first was in Houston and there about fifteen around North America.

Church-goers have a high subjective view of their own well-being. Those who don't go to church are less likely to donate to charitable causes, volunteer within their community and be friendly to strangers, and considerably less likely to vote (which means the political situation is vulnerable to influence by strong minorities – eg last USA election).

People need places for belonging, being recognised, social connections, empowering individuals to act within their communities in a bigger way. They are the world beyond the beliefs that divide; a belief that we can and we will. The belief that there is more that we can be.

The liberal United Church of Canada has balanced the religious fundamentalist and the libertarians to ensure social justice is at the heart of government, but as the Church crumbles, social democracy is at risk.

We need to look for what is common rather than what is different. Faith doesn't have to be religious belief; faith is a belief that we can and united we will. The belief that there is more that we can be. No narrative is fulfilled of itself – it needs working at!

### **Questions**

- 1 How can you be a follower of Jesus and also non-theistic?
- 2 What is your experience of Nones?
- 3 Why are people abandoning religion?
- 4 What communities might Nones have access to?
- 5 Is the acronym ACTS helpful to you? Is this something we promote?
- 6 Do we define, create and promote goodness? If so, how?
- 7 Should we 'save the Church'?
- 8 How actively is the Church engaged in social justice?
- 9 Should we be concerned about political vulnerability?
- 10 Are we providing a community for Nones?
- 11 What narrative are we working at?