Atheist Controversy in the United Church of Canada: A Review of Gretta Vosper

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Abstract

Rev. Gretta Vosper (1958–), currently a serving United Church of Canada Minister in Scarborough, Ontario, has sparked debate in Canadian religious circles as a self-proclaimed atheist. In 2015, her unorthodox approach to public worship and her media statements about the high concentration of atheism among Ministers in the United Church brought matters to a head, and Vosper came under formal review by the Church’s Toronto Conference Ministry Personnel Committee. Meantime, the surrounding controversy left many people asking questions about what the United Church of Canada really believes. This thesis will examine the origins, progress and implications of the Vosper case, partly for its own sake, and partly as a lens through which to explore the history and possible future of the United Church. The argument will affirm a key Vosper contention, which is that her atheism can coherently be regarded as a product of her denominational background and of her theological education. Major theological movements that came to fruition during Vosper’s childhood years in the 1960s, and that appeared in the United Church theological mainstream in subsequent decades, can legitimately be said to make Vosper’s progressive, but atheistic version of Christianity possible. Though the atheistic implication is possible, however, it is not necessary. The thesis will, therefore, address the future of the United Church of Canada, maintaining that while Vosper’s progressivism chimes in well with current sensibilities, her atheism appears increasingly to be culturally outdated. Given the religious disposition of Millennials in particular, a more overt commitment to theism is needed in the United Church of Canada.

Keywords

Gretta Vosper, United Church of Canada, atheism, non-theism, Death of God, Canadian Christianity, Millennials.
Acknowledgments

This thesis was something that surprised me. It came out of the blue as I felt immersed in the questions and concerns of my fellow United Church of Canada members, and therefore I needed to find a footing to look at this issue deeper. I give my appreciation to anyone who helped ignite the flames of interest for this complicated issue prior to my application to the program.

I would also like to acknowledge the hard work and tremendous dedication of my thesis supervisor Dr. Gary Badcock. We came to work together a bit late in my program, and due to a scheduling collision with my ordination process with the U.C.C. Dr. Badcock and I had our work cut out for us. After many hours of sorting through my less-than-perfect skills in authorship and diction, I finally have some sense and continuity to my writing. I will be forever grateful for Dr. Badcock’s mentorship on this topic. It brings me even greater joy to know that my very first theology course during my undergraduate degree at Huron College was taught by Dr. Badcock.

I would like to thank Huron University College, its staff, and faculty for supporting me over the years. Huron University College has not only been a place of higher learning for me but also a place of employment and a home. Many memories have come from Huron over the last 12 years and it has shaped me as a person and ultimately shaped this thesis.

Finally, I would like to acknowledge my wife Sarah Shaw (Buck) who sat with me in my very first theology class with Dr. Gary Badcock all those years ago. Sarah was proof-reading my work then and she has continued to support me in that respect for over a decade. In both proof-reading and many more avenues of life, I could not have done it without this wonderful woman. Thanks for your dedication and love.
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Introduction

In March of 2016, the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation’s television news program *The National* interviewed a self-proclaimed irritant to the church; this irritant’s name was Gretta Vosper, and the church was the United Church of Canada (hereafter “U.C.C.”)\(^1\) Vosper had come under fire from the U.C.C. due to pushing boundaries in her practices as a United Church Minister, which included an affirmation of her own atheism publicly as a representative of the U.C.C. The context of the news item was the controversy Vosper’s views had by then generated, and the fact that in 2015, a formal process to address Vosper’s suitability for ministry had been initiated by the Toronto Conference Ministry Personnel Committee.\(^2\)

As a candidate for ministry in the U.C.C. at that time, I found that many of my personal interactions with individuals or groups who knew anything about the church tended to focus on Vosper. People were very interested in where a person like Vosper came from and how she was able to maintain employment as a minister in the U.C.C. Many people I spoke with regarding this topic seemed to believe that Vosper’s atheism was born outside of her U.C.C. upbringing, as if she were a surprise now appearing as an attacker at the gates of the church. However, Vosper claims the opposite: that her atheism is a product of her U.C.C. life, work and seminary training.\(^3\) In her interview on the National she affirmed this by saying, “As I have said elsewhere, I will feel betrayed by the church, um, because it has created who I am, it has been a major force in my life, it has taught me what I know, it has given me the tools to explore, it has demanded that I do that, and, so I have done that, and here we are.”\(^4\) People also expressed concern regarding the future of the U.C.C., with an atheist minister in its midst. The tone of these questions varied

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\(^4\) *The National*, “Gretta Vosper, Atheist Minister.”
depending on the background of those asking, but regardless, the ultimate question posed came to this: will Vosper be successful in irritating the church into the twenty-first century so that the U.C.C. will embrace atheism, as she appears to assume is inevitable, or are there other factors to be considered that make this unlikely?

This thesis was born out of the questions and concerns inspired by Vosper’s case, and attempts to argue a reasoned case in response to it, with four major areas of focus. The main focus of this thesis will be, first, to determine whether Vosper’s belief that her atheism is a product of the United Church of Canada can be determined to be accurate. Secondly, looking into this will allow the thesis to explore what this could mean for the future of the U.C.C. as a new generation of congregants begin to consider membership of a church with or without a God.

The first area of focus will highlight key aspects of Vosper’s theological biography. As she is a lifelong U.C.C. member, it is important to show what influenced her within her own story, and thus what brought her to make these radical claims. We will review her career at West Hill United Church and the controversial behavior she exhibited around liturgy. Vosper has also published a few books and a website. A key source for this thesis will be Vosper’s book, *With or Without God: Why the Way We Live is More Important than What We Believe*. This text in particular will help to ground our reflection on Vosper’s position on theism in relation to her case of suitability for ministry in the U.C.C.

Secondly, the thesis will seek to provide a clearer understanding of the main events that have occurred in the Vosper controversy. Currently, the only public sources of these events are found via news and online media, which are by nature scattered and occasional; it would be useful for the key moments to be laid out chronologically and in order. The controversy erupted in the public sphere with Vosper sharing her opinion relating to two international incidents where people were either executed by theocratic regimes or murdered by terrorists who were, they believed, serving an all-powerful deity. Her outspoken comments on the dangers of that theological idea drew attention from

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many news and media outlets, including the CBC and The National. Ultimately, Vosper went so far as to make the claim not only that she did not believe in such a deity, but that upwards of half the clergy in the U.C.C. do not believe in a theistic supernatural God, either.6 This sparked a debate of sorts between Vosper and Rev. Richard Bott, who would eventually be elected Moderator of the U.C.C. in 2018. Prior to this, Bott was interested in seeing if Vosper’s claim was correct and surveyed U.C.C. ministers in hopes of coming to a conclusion. Although his survey findings have not been published in full, some of the findings were released to media sources directly by Bott.7 This material will provide further insight into both the presence of atheism in the U.C.C. and its likely future.

Third, the thesis will try to show in what sense Vosper’s atheistic beliefs developed within theological history, as a tradition influencing her education, and within the theological development of the U.C.C., demonstrating that that tradition could simultaneously foster atheism as well as the more conventional clerical theism. To begin tracing Vosper’s convictions, a brief review of the variance around the term atheism will be provided to help flesh out any ambiguities. More importantly, a brief survey of the U.C.C.’s history will be provided, beginning prior to the denomination’s conception in 1925 with a review of many of the key theological movements that would have influenced the first generation of U.C.C. clergy and the newly formed denomination’s polity around ordination. The review will then delve into the shift of the 1960s and two additional significant influences, the New Curriculum, and New Evangelism.

Our treatment of the question will also extend, however, to wider theological movements of the 1960s, which included the Death of God movement and the impact of the theology of Paul Tillich. We will give closest attention to Tillich, one of the key theological figures of the post-War era in North American theology, as the most substantial of the theological voices cited by Vosper. It is somewhat unclear whether Tillich himself was an

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6 The National, “Gretta Vosper, Atheist Minister.”
atheist or a theist, and this is a question which is still debated by researchers, but a review of his work and ambiguous legacy will provide a lens through which to understand Vosper’s theological context. Tillich’s book, *Ultimate Concern,* which is based on a series of lectures given at the University of California in 1963, will offer further insight into the conversations around theism and atheism in academia in the generation prior to Vosper’s education. By the time Vosper was educated in theology, the ideas of Tillich were familiar in the language employed in academic theology in Liberal Protestant contexts in North America. To affirm that Tillich was not alone in his contemplations, two frequently named influences on Vosper will also be briefly noted: the Anglican Bishops John A. T. Robinson and John Shelby Spong.

This review of the U.C.C.’s theological and polity development will affirm Vosper’s position that she is a product of the United Church, which she grew up in, for the service of which she earned her Master of Divinity, and to which she was ordained in 1993. However, the thesis will dispute Vosper’s suggestion that upwards of fifty percent of clergy in the U.C.C. are non-theistic. Furthermore, the thesis will examine statistics surrounding which religious organizations are seeing the most growth in the current age, in a discussion regarding how the next generation of people coming into the church are more unlikely than likely to adopt the atheism that Vosper anticipates and desires.

Lastly, Chapter 3 will address the question whether there is a continuing place for theism and transcendence in the U.C.C. Though no complete treatment of the question is possible within the scope of this thesis, a range of approaches will be used to argue the positive case. Our argument will reference not only theological trends, but political trends, and transcendent and paranormal beliefs in popular culture, in order to determine whether there is a target demographic who may still find transcendence and theism to be valuable, and to raise the question what this may mean for the future. Finally, the thesis

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9 Although an audit of Vosper’s seminary syllabi would be beyond the reasonable limitation of this thesis, it was recently noted in an Observer article (a leading U.C.C. magazine) that Paul Tillich along with Karl Barth inspired the work of the U.C.C.: see Jane Dawson, “Common Creed,” *The United Church Observer* (March/April, 2019), 14-15.
will attempt to answer the question: what might the U.C.C. look like as it enters a post-Vosper age? Our argument will be that the U.C.C. may have to look to what have become rather unfamiliar characteristics of its own history in order to find the resources to approach a new generation.
Chapter 1: The Gretta Vosper Case

One of the basic points to be made in this thesis is that Gretta Vosper is not unique in her beliefs either as a member within the United Church of Canada, or as someone in a ministerial position. This is something that Vosper has been rather adamant about in her own claims about herself. The already noted claim made on *The National* demonstrates that Vosper believes she is not isolated in her beliefs, and that many others in the United Church of Canada (U.C.C.) umbrella would hold similar views to Vosper. Vosper believes that it is the U.C.C. itself that has formed her ideas about God and the church, stating, “I’m a product of the United Church. I grew up in it, earned my master’s of divinity and was ordained in 1993. But I don’t believe in a supernatural interventionist being called God.”

To determine whether Vosper’s beliefs are in line with theological thoughts within the history of the U.C.C., Vosper’s life, theology, and claims will be reviewed in detail to provide evidence. This will demonstrate that the core of Vosper’s beliefs are as follows:

1) The god called God no longer exists, never existed before, and there is no proof of supernatural forces otherwise; therefore, all belief in the supernatural and personified transcendence is outdated and irrational.

2) By holding on to those beliefs the church is anchoring itself to an archaic doctrine that is constructed on false assumptions and a with a disregard for developments in modernism and post modernism. In turn, science and humanism offer a more sustainable and honest basis for a religious experience.

3) No document or scripture can hold an intrinsic authority without a god or gods, therefore everything seen as religious because of beliefs in the supernatural or transcendent must be seen for what they are, human creations.

4) Progressive churches must remove the language and practices that affirm their old traditions and dogmatic beliefs and replace them with inclusive language both on the

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10 Johnston, “Q&A: Gretta Vosper, the United Church minister who doesn’t believe in God.”
basis of gender and for the sake of an enhanced spirituality.

5) Religious and spiritual experiences can be obtained by celebrating of intrinsic moral values which a communal group can decided upon as having value, i.e., love.¹¹

This chapter will review the biographical background, which should provide insight to the foundation of some of her beliefs, as well as introduce Vosper as a person. Second, this chapter will look at her publication, *With or Without God,* which highlights key points of her theological beliefs that reflect the list above. Third, the responses Vosper provides to hearing questions designed to mark a candidate’s commitment to a Christian ordination will be discussed. The value of this is that it will demonstrate Vosper’s objections to classical language and the idea of an interventionist deity. This chapter will conclude with a brief discussion on a controversy which sparked an indirect debate between Vosper and another U.C.C. minister on whether the majority of the U.C.C. ministers believe in a supernatural theistic God. The debate will give insight as to how Vosper has come to believe that she is not unique in the U.C.C., and that those who believe in the traditional Christian view of God (i.e., a transcendent, trinitarian God) are far and few between among her fellow clergy. This discussion will carry into the second and third chapters which will elaborate on where Vosper’s beliefs sit in the larger image of the U.C.C. in history and in its future.

1 Vosper’s Biographical Background

Vosper is often outspoken about her personal history. Whether in her books or media posts, or in articles where others speak about her, it is hard to approach Vosper without considering her background. Born in Kingston, Ontario, and baptized at Sydenham Street United Church, which is in the heart of the city of her birth,¹² she attended schooling for her ministry education at Queen’s Theological College in 1986.¹³ Vosper’s public fame is something that comes from her personality, a willingness to be a lone voice in a crowded

¹¹ Vosper, *With or Without God,* 236, 292
¹³ Milne, “Unsuitable.”
room. Vosper depicts in her book *With or Without God* that this willingness to stand up and speak, specifically about the “elephants in the room” comes from her mother, a trait she inherited along the way.\(^{14}\) Vosper continues by noting that ecclesial elephants are the issues she is least tolerant of.\(^{15}\) During Vosper’s time in theological training she utilized the skills that her mother taught her and would draw attention to the inconvenient observations that she noticed, often to the discomfort of her peers.\(^{16}\) For example, one of these observations that Vosper would often vocalize about was the need for gender-inclusive language. This was a thread that Vosper could pull at which she felt she had the fortitude to address at the time.\(^{17}\) The ability to approach larger elephants such as atheism would be later developments for Vosper — and something that, it is important to note, came after her ordination.

In 1997, a now ordained Gretta Vosper began her call to West Hill United Church.\(^{18}\) West Hill United Church would become the stage for several controversial behaviors which Vosper began to explore with her congregation. In 2001 Vosper began creating church services focused around inspirational values rather than a supernatural and interventionist God.\(^{19}\) In the same year, in a sermon entitled by Vosper as her “deconstructing God sermon,” she told her congregation that she no longer believed in God.\(^{20}\) In 2004, Vosper got involved in the foundation of the Canadian Center for Progressive Christianity (CCPC).\(^{21}\) The CCPC aims to provide a community for those interested in a progressive Christianity, and through its publishing hopes to make it “clear to denominations and congregations across the country that critical contemporary

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\(^{14}\) Vosper, *With or Without God*, 48-49.
\(^{15}\) Vosper, *With or Without God*, 49.
\(^{16}\) Vosper, *With or Without God*, 50.
\(^{17}\) Vosper, *With or Without God*, 50.
\(^{18}\) Milne, “Unsuitable.”
\(^{20}\) Milne, “Unsuitable.”
\(^{21}\) Milne, “Unsuitable.”
scholarship was alive and well and in the pews.” This statement, of course, makes a number of assumptions about what counts as critical contemporary theological scholarship, but we can leave this aside for the present. 2008 was the year of Vosper’s Canadian bestseller, *With or Without God: Why the Way We Live is More Important than What We Believe*. We will have occasion to refer to this publication throughout this thesis, but for the present, we can say simply that the overall theme of the book is that the image of God that tradition has produced is no longer life-giving, and that it is better to live as if God were in fact not there at all. As a result, while religious texts do not necessarily need to be left behind in church evolution, they do need to be recognized as purely human texts, which is to say that they do not rest on any divine authority, referred to in the older Christian tradition as God. This idea of living as if God is not there is not a passive move but an aggressive one. As Vosper states, “[r]eligious declarations and promises based entirely on speculation or individual experience or that claim a supernatural authority must be identified for what they are; we must refuse to grant them an authority they do not deserve.”

The same year, Vosper stopped using the Lord’s Prayer in Sunday Service replacing it with a “nonsectarian affirmation.” Vosper published a second book in 2012, entitled *Amen: What Prayer Can Mean in a World Beyond Belief*. This book offers the reader a progressive view of the value of church liturgy (i.e., prayer) and, in short, states that the benefits of prayer can still be experienced without God by substituting for the omnipresent God purely human values of life such as goodness, beauty, and truth. In

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24 Milne, “Unsuitable.”
25 Michael Gryboski, “Canadian Church Led by Atheist Minister: ‘Rarely’ Reads the Bible, Replaces Lord’s Prayer With Secular Mantra,” *The Christian Post* (October 2016), accessed March 1, 2017: https://www.christianpost.com/news/canadian-church-led-by-atheist-minister-rarely-reads-the-bible-replaces-lords-prayer-with-secular-mantra-170505/; non-sectarian affirmations are statements which can be recited similar to a prayer or mantra, but which are supposed to have no distinguishing characteristics of a religion, particular group, or party.
essence, the book states that since the values attributed to God are human constructs, these values can stand on their own as having their own intrinsic value, which can be appreciated in prayer.

A further major shift was made when Vosper began to self-identify overtly as an atheist. Although she had already explored non-theistic language in worship, this was the point when she came out as choosing the label of “atheist,” ostensibly to express solidarity with Bangladeshi secular humanist authors who had been labeled as such, arrested, and were being threatened with execution in 2013. Simultaneously, a Turkish pianist declared himself an atheist on social media and was sentenced to ten months in prison. The idea of being labeled in solidarity is something Vosper feels the U.C.C. taught her to value.28 In 2013 Vosper’s personal website labeled her as “Minister, Author, Atheist.”

Vosper’s atheism had created waves in United Church circles by this stage for some years, but in 2015, tragedy brought the atheism of Vosper into more public scrutiny. On January 7th, two masked gunmen entered the Paris offices of the satirical magazine Charlie Hebdo and murdered ten journalists and two police officers. The attack was in response to published caricatures of the prophet Muhammad. The two gunmen were brothers linked to al-Qaida, who were killed by police. If this was not tragic enough, the Charlie Hedbo murders were followed by a hostage situation at a kosher supermarket, leaving four men dead. These two events were then followed by a third: a police officer was murdered twenty-four hours later. In support of the magazine and the victims, thousands of people walked the streets across France, many carrying signs that read “Je suis Charlie.”29 Following these events, the U.C.C. posted a prayer on its website, written by the Very Rev. Gary Paterson, the Moderator at the time. Following her tendency to stir up religious controversy, Vosper responded to the prayer with a public letter to Paterson addressing his reference to “a supernatural being whose purposes can be divined,” in relation to the terrorist events which had occurred, claiming it was a belief

29 Milne, “Unsuitable.”
that “has led to innumerable tragedies throughout the timeline of human history and will continue to do so until it fades from our ravaged memory.”\textsuperscript{30} This public criticism of faith in God would not go unnoticed. Semi-retired U.C.C. minister Rev. David Ewart wrote that Vosper should leave the U.C.C. by her own efforts, calling her ideas about God “juvenile and unbelievable.”\textsuperscript{31}

In the spring of 2015, the U.C.C. Toronto Conference Ministry Personnel Committee began a relatively rare disciplinary process which could have led to Vosper being marked as unsuitable for ministry in the U.C.C.\textsuperscript{32} It was decided that the U.C.C. Council could determine whether Vosper was fit for her duties as an ordained minister in the U.C.C., by way of a review of Vosper’s current answers to the vows she took at her ordination.\textsuperscript{33} The idea was that if she were asked to take the vows now, would she still stand by the values of the U.C.C., twenty plus years into her career? More will be said on Vosper’s responses to these vows later in this chapter.

In June of 2016, Vosper and her two lawyers met with the Toronto Conference. The meeting concerned the question of her “essential agreement” with the teaching of the church, “essential agreement” being an important term used in connection with ordination and adherence to doctrinal standards in the U.C.C. and many other Christian denominations.\textsuperscript{34} Despite Vosper’s efforts, the majority of the Conference committee was not convinced by Vosper’s answers to the doctrinal ordination questions. Therefore, it was concluded that Vosper was “not suitable to continue in ordained ministry because she does not believe in God, Jesus Christ or the Holy Spirit [and] does not recognize the primacy of Scripture, […] will not conduct the sacraments and […] is no longer in

\textsuperscript{30} Milne, “Unsuitable.”
\textsuperscript{31} Milne, “Unsuitable.”
\textsuperscript{32} Mike Milne, “Presbytery turns down bid to halt Vosper hearing,” UCOBSERVER (January 2017), accessed March 1, 2017: www.ucobserver.org/faith/2017/01/vosper/.
\textsuperscript{33} Milne, “Executive rejects bid to delay Vosper proceedings.”
\textsuperscript{34} According to the U.C.C.’s handbook for those entering into ministry, the Church must “satisfy itself that the candidate is in essential agreement with the statement of doctrine of the United Church.” A major challenge here is what it means to be “in essential agreement.” While this debate is beyond the scope of this thesis, it would be worth further investigation in later studies. See: United Church of Canada, Entering Ministry (Toronto: The United Church of Canada, 2017) accessed February 5, 2018: http://www.united-church.ca/sites/default/files/resources/handbook_entering-ministry.pdf.
essential agreement with the statement of doctrine of The United Church of Canada.”

Although it was the decision to deem Vosper as unsuitable, the decision was not unanimous. The Conference committee included minority reports of those who felt that Vosper was suitable for ordained ministry, although this was only four of the twenty-four members of the Council. In the following September, Toronto Conference’s sub-Executive received the interview committee report and held a session to hear from Vosper, and her legal counsel, congregation, and presbytery support.

Following the hearings in September 2017 that decided in a split vote that Vosper should be deemed unsuitable for ministry, her case was postponed indefinitely. The reason for the postponement seems by all accounts to have been logistical issues such as finding dates to accommodate schedules, although there are suspicions that the reasons for the delays ran “deeper than scheduling issues.” After a long delay many U.C.C. lay members and personnel were shocked when a simple and concise statement was released from the U.C.C. stating that “the Rev. Gretta Vosper, and West Hill United Church have settled all outstanding issues between them.” This was followed a day later by a longer statement by the recently appointed 43rd Moderator of the U.C.C., none other than the Right Reverend Richard Bott. Bott here affirmed the settlement statement, and added his position on the question to it, as if his statement offered further insight to the decision of Toronto Conference. However, in my opinion it just muddies the water. More will be said on this in the third chapter of this thesis.

2 Vosper’s Theology

Controversial she may be, but as this thesis insists, Vosper’s theological ideas are not unique to her; rather Vosper’s ideas are the product of a clear trajectory both in modern

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35 Milne, “Unsuitable.”
37 Perkel, “United Church postpones hearing for atheist minister indefinitely.”
and postmodern theology, and in the internal development of the U.C.C. in recent decades. Vosper’s theological ideas are best examined in three phases. The first is in relation to her work *With or Without God*, since this text provides most of the background to and overall case for Vosper’s willingness to let the traditional theological concepts fade from her ideal church. The second is Vosper’s written responses to the U.C.C.’s questions for ordination which require an “essential agreement” to become ordained. Vosper posted her answers on her website in a public forum, which allows us to gain further insight into Vosper’s theological understanding from them. The final question that we will address is Vosper’s claim that upward to fifty percent of U.C.C. ministry personnel are non-theistic. This claim sparked a debate in three main areas: Vosper’s original claim, Rev. Bott’s rebuke in the form of a survey targeted towards clergy theistic beliefs, and Vosper’s defense to Bott. Each of these will need to be reviewed in what follows.

2.1 *With or Without God*

We begin with a review of Vosper’s book *With or Without God*. This is a text that highlights many of the “elephants in the room” which progressive Christians and religiously inclined atheists feel the traditional church authorities (U.C.C. and otherwise) have grossly overlooked. The text is essentially a thorn in the reader’s side begging the question, “Are you Christian and if you are, do you need to believe in a supernatural deity called ‘God’?”

The book argues that the values of Church life and doctrine can be properly harvested once the pre-assumed idea of a supernatural deity is stripped away and the true value of the church is seen for what (Vosper believes) it is, that is to say, a community that values the core human constructs of love and other humane values. The book’s central claim is that the value of the idea of “God” has outlived its usefulness to people, and that the church can accordingly let go of the shackles of the theism that it imposes on its ministry. As a result, Vosper calls the church to change and the book aims to clear the waters to

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39 Though there are other Vosper publications, her *With or Without God* provides all that is needed for the present argument.
allow for that. Vosper focuses her critical analysis on central issues of religious belief and religious authority. All traditional Christian religious structures (beliefs or authorities) are based on claims that are not based on empirical data but rather on individual experiences which are merely assumed to be the result of the action of the supernatural or transcendent in revelation. There is a refusal in Vosper’s position to grant any authority to the divine for these experiences. Vosper is not calling on the church to eradicate the experiences, or the resulting traditions or texts produced from them (i.e. the Bible or Church tradition), but rather to stop the attribution of divine qualities, or the association of a Godly authority, to them.\textsuperscript{40}

Throughout the text, Vosper employs an acronym when discussing Scripture, TAWOGFAT (the authoritative word of God for all time),\textsuperscript{41} and it is this concept that she fights against for more than the first half of her book. Vosper insists that she is not trying to pull people away from their “sense of relationship with God or Jesus,” but rather to free them from the shackles that TAWOGFAT places on them. Vosper offers that if any of those relationships “moves people to live lives of justice and compassion” she celebrates that.\textsuperscript{42} The book is thus targeted to a specific audience, as Vosper says:

\begin{quote}
[m]y intention … is 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 cannot accept church doctrines but who deeply and passionately believe in the goodness and rightness of love; for those who have to ignore, reword, or quietly object to much of what is said in a typical liberal church service, and long to listen, learn, sing, pray, and speak in terms that make sense in the pew, the home, the workplace, and in the quest for a more humane world; for those who see religion as a way of living oriented to ultimate life-enhancing values or for those who live this way but don’t like the word religion; for those who have no need of “God” — it is for these people I write.”\textsuperscript{43}
\end{quote}

A core value that can be extracted from Christianity and other faith systems would thus
be love. The message of love, for Vosper, carries its own authority; therefore, it does not need either church doctrine or a supernatural deity to validate it. The change Vosper would like to see in the church is that the church would become progressive enough to allow people within it to let go of the beliefs and traditions that Vosper believes can no longer continue in a contemporary, secularized world.44

One major critique offered early in this text concerns the problem of an interventionist concept of God. This objection notes the use of thanksgiving toward God for the benefits experienced in life. If one is to thank God for the food they eat, what does this say to those who are starving in the world? That God views them as undeserving of food? If one thanks God for surviving a car wreck, does that mean that since God is good to one person that God was responsible or bad to those who did not survive their car wreck?45 What Vosper is presenting here is a version of the traditional problem of theodicy, which could be summarized as the following: if there is an all-powerful interventionist and good God, then how can we explain the existence of evil in the world? Although a detailed review of the traditional problem of evil is obviously beyond the scope of this thesis, it is important to note that this philosophical question is something that can be found debated by elementary philosophy and theological students. This is not a new issue presented by Vosper but rather an on-going debate that she has found a side on. Vosper’s solution is to simply take God out of the equation; if you are thankful for having food or surviving a car wreck but do not attribute the event’s outcomes to God then there is no theological problem arising in relation to those who did not reap the same reward. Since Vosper’s emphasis is on engaging value systems like love and thanksgiving without the idea of a God present, these values stand on their own. As a result, the language of church doctrines and liturgies can be done away with in favor of more contemporary language. This does two things for Vosper: it gets rid of exclusive language from church services and communities, and it boils faith systems down to a way of recognizing, expressing and

44 Vosper, With or Without God, 12.
45 Vosper, With or Without God, 29-30, 246.
uniting essential values.\textsuperscript{46}

These changes Vosper calls the church to make are hindered by what she sees as an unspoken conspiracy between the congregation and the ministry leadership in the churches. This is driven by an underlying world view assumed from pre-modern times that God is there, the proof of which lies in the Biblical account, which is then supported by a circular reasoning that God proves the Bible to be true.\textsuperscript{47} Since church ministers are called into employment by the congregation to meet the need and desire of the congregants, and since congregants are not often willing to disrupt their world view, there is no growth in the church beyond such pre-modern beliefs. Vosper, by contrast, positions humanity as sole creators of Christianity and therefore maintains that humanity is responsible for the character of Christianity.\textsuperscript{48} It is, according to Vosper, irresponsible for us to continue as if the turn to humanity in modernity had simply not happened.

Vosper presents her claims in a rudimentary summary of Christian history, theology, and church practice\textsuperscript{49} to drive home her point that any authority within the Bible or Church history is solely a human creation, but her vision of the result is not fully developed. Vosper seems to want to redefine Christianity, but there is some vagueness surrounding what its new definition may look like. One may need to look to other progressive Christian authors to find a clearer notion of what progressive Christianity would look like, such as Marcus Borg or Don Cupitt.\textsuperscript{50} There is, however, a problem here, in that Vosper’s writing seems to be something a bit different; where Borg and Cupitt both seek to offer a reinterpretation of Christianity, both authors tend to appreciate and honor the origin of their reinterpretations to a much greater extent than Vosper. Cupitt, for instance, apparently expects that traditional Anglican liturgical life should continue. Vosper, on the

\textsuperscript{46} Vosper, \textit{With or Without God}, 50, 319-20.
\textsuperscript{47} Vosper, \textit{With or Without God}, 74-79.
\textsuperscript{48} Vosper, \textit{With or Without God}, 54.
\textsuperscript{49} Vosper highlights many major events in the history of Christianity as it is understood to have developed as a messianic and eschatological Judaism to the dominant Roman religion ushered in by Constantine. See Vosper, \textit{With or Without God}, 74-92.
\textsuperscript{50} Note that these authors are mentioned in a comparative manner and a full explanation to the theology and ecclesiology of these authors is beyond the scope of this paper; see also Marcus Borg, \textit{The Heart of Christianity: Rediscovering a Life of Faith} (New York: HarperCollins, 2004) and Don Cupitt, \textit{The Sea of Faith: Christianity in Change} (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988).
other hand, wants to discard all but the reinterpretation — abandoning even the sacraments and use of the Lord’s Prayer — leaving the critic to ask the question: Why still call it Christianity? Even taking minimal examples of Christian belief, the belief that Jesus taught valuable lessons and a way to live in line with God and, second, that Jesus can meaningfully be spoken of as both human and divine, we find that Vosper shuts the door on both of these. Vosper states,

What we need is a broad base that will help us wrestle with those difficult ethical issues. Jesus just isn’t able to provide us that broad base — his vision is constrained by the context in which it was cast. A Christianity based on the belief in his divinity can’t either […] In trying to capture exactly what he said so that it could be brought into our time, we have found, quite by accident, that what he said has little power.51

To support this radical position, Vosper emphasizes that the right to the name “Christian” ought to relate to our fidelity to what she perceives as the original purpose of the Jesus movement, rather than what it has come to mean in the Christian tradition. Whether or not someone named Jesus ever lived, the stories that describe his ministry have a particular focus, and that focus, she suggests, is not the man called Jesus. For Vosper, the real focus is on how to live. Jesus himself serves purely as an exemplar of those values by which we should live.52

As to what a progressive Christianity should look like, Vosper speaks of eight essential values, which she describes largely in narrative terms: an open mind, passion, creativity, intellectual rigor, honesty, courage, respect, and balance.53 Vosper thus places Christianity and Jesus himself at the service of these humane values, as we will see in a moment. The key argument then is against the treatment of Christianity’s Scriptures, rituals, or language as inherently authoritative or divine (TOWOGFAT). The progressive church must not engage in any conspiracy of silence, which could perpetuate the belief in an unknowable intrinsic authority. The remnants of Christianity may remain if they foster

51 Vosper, *With or Without God*, 155.
53 Vosper, *With or Without God*, 158-188. A detailed account of each of these values is beyond the scope of this thesis; however, it should be noted that these values and other values that Vosper notes throughout her text are not distinctive to Christianity but can be found in the core of Christianity.
spiritual growth and ethical living along the lines indicated, perhaps, but only insofar as progressive Christians maintain a conscious responsibility for judging their worth and usefulness by their own humane standards rather than assuming that they should conform to a divine standard which cannot be negotiated.\textsuperscript{54}

With TOWOGFAT now critiqued by Vosper, and the core values of a positive progressive Christianity outlined, where does that leave God and Jesus in Vosper’s understanding? Vosper believes that by removing TOWOGFAT from the equation, “everything [in the Bible] is up for grabs,”\textsuperscript{55} meaning that even the concept of God is up for debate. Vosper notes that the Bible contains ambiguous and conflicting accounts of God. She gives many examples she believes to be problematic. An example would be Psalm 139 where God is described as both omnipresent as well as a warrior who would slay his enemies.\textsuperscript{56} Vosper also notes the theory of author Lloyd Geering who claims in his work \textit{Christianity without God} that the trinitarian formula used by Paul in 2 Corinthians, “The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with all of you” [NRSV], was not intended to be law or the basis for a normative understanding of God, but rather merely that Paul was expressing a personal understanding of God.\textsuperscript{57} Vosper maintains that to best explore the concept of God, one must be willing to consider that God is not there.\textsuperscript{58} Vosper notes John A. T. Robinson’s reasoning, “if we change our thinking of God as being ‘up there’ to ‘out there,’ then we start thinking of god in entirely different terms than ‘out there,’ too.”\textsuperscript{59} By being “fast and free with the concepts of god,” it is possible to find personal religious insight, and indeed, on these terms Vosper sees opportunity for humanity and its understanding of God.\textsuperscript{60} The

\textsuperscript{54} Vosper, \textit{With or Without God}, 198.
\textsuperscript{55} Vosper, \textit{With or Without God}, 225.
\textsuperscript{56} Vosper, \textit{With or Without God}, 227. It is unclear if the difference between these terms is what she considers to be evidence that the Bible is an unreliable source, the idea of omnipresence, or the statement that God is a warrior.
\textsuperscript{58} Vosper, \textit{With or Without God}, 229.
\textsuperscript{60} Vosper, \textit{With or Without God}, 234.
twist to this argument is that Vosper continues her thought with the suggestion of replacing the term of God with something else. Vosper suggests that a large plurality of different nouns can be used instead of the word “God,” for example “blessing, love, spirit, essence, being, light…” The reason for this substitution of words is that the use of the word “God” will often bring people back to the theistic being of God depicted in the Bible; by losing the word, on the other hand, we avoid that sticky situation. Similar to Vosper’s aim to stop the tendency of the church submitting to TAWOGFAT, she also aims to avoid the notion of an authoritative figure by shying away from the traditional religious language that may connote such a reality.

Despite Vosper’s position that the figure of Jesus only provides a narrow religious foundation for the modern person because of the problem of the Bible, she still gives some importance to the account of Jesus in the Bible. At times Vosper depicts Jesus as following a similar trajectory to the path Vosper commends, for instance, by fighting his way against the legalistic practices in which the Jewish relationship with God was embedded. It seems, however, that Jesus’ progressive desire for liberation and progress against the structures of his time is the only value Vosper really appeals to, other than the sheer fact of his humanity. Although Jesus does have value for us in his progressive habits, Jesus himself has only relative importance for Vosper; for her the stories of Jesus found in the Bible are on par with any other person’s story, art expression, literature, or even aspects of popular culture. The onus is on the individual person to decide which of these things have value. The challenge for Vosper is that when people decide what they do value, even if it is the values of progressive Christianity, the temptation is often to follow that decision with another to dogmatize the value, to give it an authoritative status. Vosper warns against this, insisting that what is primary is always the individual’s own decision.

Overall Vosper’s attitude toward God, Jesus and religion is a broad coloring of modernist

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61 Vosper, *With or Without God*, 236.
64 Vosper, *With or Without God*, 239.
65 Vosper, *With or Without God*, 234.
ideas, though tinged occasionally with a postmodern gloss. She often paints religion with a reductionist brush; for example, she states, “[t]hat’s what the roots of religion were all about — reinforcing your affiliation with your tribe….“\textsuperscript{66} Rounding out her book, Vosper becomes increasingly clear about some of her opinions towards the idea of the supernatural. Vosper states, “there are no supernatural beings, forces, or energies necessary for or even mindful of our survival.”\textsuperscript{67} Her modernism surfaces again when she expresses that “all religious, philosophical and ideological understandings must be challenged by their adherents so that we might all move into a place where foundational beliefs are shared and held in common, reviewed and revised as necessary, challenged and changed when appropriate.”\textsuperscript{68} This approach is then capped with a hopeful utopian ideal. “Rather than mocking or even tolerating the faiths and ideological positions of others, we will be delighted by the kaleidoscopic beauty of the ways in which different lives, experiences, understandings, and traditions have sought to express what for them is of the utmost worth, holy, and sacred.”\textsuperscript{69}

Up to the last section of the text, Vosper’s argument is dedicated to diagnosing the problem with the church and Christianity as a whole. The final section, entitled “Toolbox,” provides ideas and suggested resources for those who are looking to engage in a progressive Christianity and non-theistic celebratory services.\textsuperscript{70} Vosper discusses a number of liturgical elements such as prayer and language, often giving examples of theistic versus non-theistic liturgy which can be used.\textsuperscript{71} One key thing to note is that Vosper does recognize that what one person feels gives them spiritual growth may not work for another. She places this statement in a discussion about personal versus communal spiritual practice, stating: “[o]ur only responsibility in the exploration of our private faith lives is to our own spiritual growth. As soon as we join with someone else, however, we must be reciprocally cognizant of those things that work for the other and

\textsuperscript{66} Vosper, \textit{With or Without God}, 309.
\textsuperscript{67} Vosper, \textit{With or Without God}, 316.
\textsuperscript{68} Vosper, \textit{With or Without God}, 316.
\textsuperscript{69} Vosper, \textit{With or Without God}, 316.
\textsuperscript{70} Vosper, \textit{With or Without God}, 318.
\textsuperscript{71} This thesis will focus on only two topics highlighted by Vosper because the majority of the issues are not directly relevant and are beyond the scope of the general discussion.
the reality that works for us might not stimulate them spiritually in the least.”

To make sure that there is no conflict of private spiritual constructions, Vosper suggests neutering the language used in communal events of spiritual practice, making it both gender neutral and spiritually neutral. Similarly, with the concept of God removed, and the authority of the Bible removed, new symbols and readings will need to be introduced, looking to a democratic vote to decide what is valid for the spiritual practice.

Vosper still sees the value of symbols, but uses the term more in what could be said to be a low church liturgical sense of sign, which is a representation of something else, rather than as a symbol in which the sign participates in the reality of the object or event it represents.

It is unclear whether Vosper intended to switch the meaning of these liturgical words but it would follow close to her theology. With transcendence removed from the equation, it is more challenging to sustain the concept of a symbol (e.g., of the eucharist as related to a reality outside of itself, i.e., to Christ in his risen ministry as prophet, priest and king) than the concept of a sign.

Vosper’s *With or Without God* was possibly written as a way for Vosper to sort out her own ideas, as well as to influence others. Certainly, confusion is in evidence: the text is riddled with broad generalizations, and generic definitions, as evidenced by the superficiality of her discussion of theodicy.

However, what it does provide is a good foundation for our exploration of Vosper’s beliefs. The Christian God, and indeed the concept of a god in general, in Vosper’s opinion are no longer valid ideas for a modern society. Those who seek a religious or spiritual life, freed from these concepts, are those who are progressive and healthy and have, in her view, a future in terms of

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73 Vosper, *With or Without God*, 322.
75 See Vosper, *With or Without God*, 29-30, 246 and the related discussion above. See also her discussion of the sacraments within the Roman Catholic and Orthodox churches in Vosper, *With or Without God*, 109-10 wherein she overgeneralizes the nuances of two separate sacraments (Eucharist and Confession) to the point where, one could argue that, she has ceased to describe the beliefs of these traditions (a discussion of the actual belief systems of these traditions is beyond the scope of this thesis; those wishing to investigate further may find assistance via Roman Catholic Archdiocese of Toronto, *Sacraments*, accessed April 25, 2019: https://www.archtoronto.org/our-catholic-faith/sacraments-and-sacramentals). She even goes so far as to claim that the authority of scripture “is secondary, if not meaningless to them.” Vosper, *With or Without God*, 109.
denominational survival.

2.2 Vosper’s Answers for Essential Agreement

Vosper’s theological position is obviously a controversial one, and it is hardly surprising that she came onto the U.C.C.’s radar as potentially falling short in her duties and beliefs as a minister in their ranks, prompting the Toronto Conference Ministry Personnel Committee to review Vosper’s suitableness for ministry in the U.C.C. In preparation for this interview, Vosper had written responses asked of candidates for Ordination in the U.C.C. so that she could defend her right to maintain her ministry. The process used a section of questions which are asked of all candidates on their entry into ministry to determine Vosper’s continuing suitability. According to Vosper, the questions she was given at her hearing were not the ones that she expected (i.e. she claims she “wasn’t asked the questions asked of all candidates”), which were the questions asked of her in her Ordination and cultivated from the 1968 “New Creed.” Instead Vosper says she was asked questions taken from the U.C.C.’s earliest doctrinal document, the Basis of Union. It is worth noting that the current questions asked of all U.C.C. ministers at the time of Ordination are those that were asked of Vosper and derived from the Basis of Union. As a result of preparing both sets of answers, however, Vosper has made public both sets of responses, the response to questions based on the New Creed being posted to her Facebook account, which Vosper linked from her website, and her response to the Basis of Union questions being posted directly to Vosper’s website. The value of these responses is that they are not generalized answers to what progressive Christianity is or should be, as can be found in her writing elsewhere, but rather personal answers Vosper

77 The Basis of Union is a document which outlines the commonly held beliefs among the unionist churches that led to the U.C.C., see “Basis of Union,” Resources, United Church of Canada, accessed May 18, 2018: https://www.united-church.ca/sites/default/files/resources/basis-of-union.pdf. See also Appendix B.
prepared for use in a formal, quasi-legal setting about her own beliefs. Both will be reviewed, starting with the response to the New Creed, and moving on to the response to questions about the Basis of Union, which was, we recall, what was actually discussed in the meeting in question.

The New Creed questions asked in the process of ordination take the form of vows, in which the presider asks a question and the candidates respond with “I do” or “I will.” Obviously, these required answers do not provide much in the way of insight into Vosper’s own thinking. There is accordingly not as much substance to the theological responses given with this first stage of the analysis; however, the questions asked will give a baseline of what the U.C.C. is looking for their ministers to believe. Vosper lists seven questions as the questions asked of her at her 1993 Ordination.

There are three main issues that arise from reviewing these questions. First, had the process actually asked Vosper for a discursive answer to these ordination questions, it is uncertain how she would have responded, but possible outcomes can be determined using her book, With or Without God. Looking at presider question one, for instance, the last sentence asks, “I ask you therefore, do you believe in God who created and is creating, who has come in Jesus, the Word made flesh, to reconcile and make new, and who works in us and others by the Holy Spirit?” The position offered in Vosper’s work displays a strong belief that the idea of God has always been deeply problematic, and more specifically that the idea of God is outdated for our time. Therefore, the idea of a creating God, a notion which not exclusively but directly comes from Judeo-Christian theology, would seem at odds with Vosper’s convictions, though it might be possible to argue that the term “God” could, at the least, be interpreted in the light of Vosper’s core values, such as love, or the alternate definition of the divine as a metaphor for the relationships

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80 See Appendix A.
81 These questions have been restructured as in United Church of Canada, The Manual, 2019.
82 See Appendix C for this list.
83 These possible outcomes are not claiming what Vosper believes, rather they are restating Vosper’s works in relation to the relevant questions.
84 Vosper, With or Without God, 4.
that exist among people who practice inclusion and justice.\textsuperscript{85} The question itself does, however, employ some Trinitarian language, and therefore requires a response to those terms, but these are concepts that Vosper claims to be an accidental creation of the church in history rather than a theological reality.\textsuperscript{86} Also, in the New Creed, God is depicted as an interventionist God who has come to the world in the flesh in Jesus. Vosper, however, has denied that the concept of an interventionist God is any longer viable, and presents Jesus as only human and on a par with other persons in history.\textsuperscript{87} Even if each of the persons of the Trinity were to be conceived as representative of one of the core values which Vosper does believe in, the language used in this question concerning God’s reign, judgment, forgiveness and blessings still depicts an active interventionist God, not a symbolic name that might be given to a humane core value.

The second issue that arises is from the presider’s second question, “Do you believe that God is calling you to the ordained ministry of Word, Sacrament and Pastoral Care and do you accept this call?” There tends to be an assumption that a person does not merely decide to enter ministry but that there is an active call from God (and the Church) to this office. This again appears to presuppose that the idea that there is a transcendent deity who thus summons people is a coherent one. Some may consider the call to be a personal conviction or desire, but considering the context of question one, it seems unlikely that question two can be interpreted as not talking about an interventionist God as well.

The third and last issue to be discussed is from question four, “Will you endeavor to teach and preach the Word of God and to administer the sacraments, that the reconciling love of Christ may be known and received?” This may be the most significant because of Vosper’s general claim that there is no literal supernatural, since if this is the case, then every claim concerning an action of God in the ministry of Word and sacrament has to be instantly set aside. Also, Vosper has indicated that the Bible has no intrinsic authority other than what humanity has given it, and that she therefore sets the Bible on a level

\textsuperscript{85} Vosper, \textit{With or Without God}, 250.
\textsuperscript{86} Vosper, \textit{With or Without God}, 232.
\textsuperscript{87} Vosper, \textit{With or Without God}, 155.
equivalent to all other art and literature.\textsuperscript{88} If we followed Vosper’s prescription and removed the word “God” and the belief that scripture holds authority, in short, is it possible to teach the “Word of God” with what remains? On the basis of Vosper’s publications, a case could be made that she should not have answered in the affirmative in any discursive way. This is certainly the case if we are to take her text \textit{With or Without God} as genuinely representative of her beliefs at the time.

The next set of questions, relating to interpretation of the Basis of Union, are the questions that Vosper prepared for her hearing, and so have far greater importance for our purposes. With these questions there is no question as to what Vosper’s responses would be because she not only gave these answers to the committee in question, but posted her full answers on her website. The first question is as follows, “do you believe in God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit?” Vosper’s response begins,

I[f] by “God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit”[…] you expressly mean the Trinitarian God, composed of three persons equal in essence, a being who presides over Earth from another realm, a supernatural one, from which it has the power to intervene in the natural world — capriciously or by design — by responding to our prayerful requests, or altering our minds and so, too, our actions, or intervening in the natural world with or without provocation or invitation in order to alter weather patterns, health, the accumulation or loss of wealth, the circumstances of birth including geography — a predictor of health and access to food and water — gender, sexuality, mental capacity, or beauty — all predictors of the power status and ease with which individuals will live their lives, then, no, I do not believe in that at all. Neither do I believe in a god of no substance who exists beyond the universe yet contains it, interpenetrating it in some incomprehensible way for some incomprehensible purpose.\textsuperscript{89}

Vosper continues in this response to affirm many ideas that are presented in her book. She affirms that she sees no evidence of gods and that the idea is not fitting to contemporary life and scientific understanding. Also, the maintaining of this idea of god shuns the work of countless theologians who, she claims, state that the doctrine of the

\textsuperscript{88} The discussion of what should normatively be considered the “Word” of God is beyond the scope of this thesis. However, Christians in general would overwhelmingly associate that Word with the broad biblical message about God’s saving purpose among his chosen people and in Jesus, since it is this to which the Bible bears witness.

\textsuperscript{89} Vosper, “My Answers to the Questions of Ordination.”
Trinity is “unworthy of our intellectual consideration, let alone our allegiance.” As an aside, we may note here the fact that Vosper overlooks the massive attention actually given to trinitarian theology in the past century by theologians as diverse as Karl Barth and Rosemary Ruether, but there is no scope here to explore this side of the question. Suffice it to say that Vosper’s response is rather one-sided. Vosper does offer one reason to maintain Trinitarian definitions but shows little solidarity with it:

[t]o my mind, the only fathomable reason that we might consider holding to the doctrine of the Trinity[…] is the maintenance of our membership in the World Council of Churches and I consider the work of ministry with individuals and communities of transformation more integral to the work of the church than I do membership in an organization.

Vosper goes on to state that even if there was evidence that she felt proved the existence of a god or gods, she would not be inclined to worship such a being or beings, stating, “the evidence of the cruel and capricious realities of disparity, tragedy, illness, and anguish in the world, and the truth that our world and our experience of it is wrapped not only in beauty but also in excruciating pain, would prevent me from worshipping it or pledging my allegiance to it, no matter the cost.” This statement suggests that even if there were room for the conclusion that Vosper’s position is not atheistic but rather a form of agnostic conviction, that agnosticism would still be characterized by a distain for any possible deity.

Further to this first question, Vosper offers what she does believe. Vosper spells out again similar values that she holds as important over traditional views of God which assume that these values are intrinsically connected to a divine being. She argues, “there are no moral codes that have been formed by the mind of a god. … [W]e have created … morality that we have the responsibility to review and revise as we each see necessary for our personal wholeness and, I hope, social cohesion which is so integral to our well-

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90 Vosper, “My Answers to the Questions of Ordination.”
91 Vosper, “My Answers to the Questions of Ordination.” The W.C.C. is an ecumenical organization founded in 1948 in Amsterdam as a fellowship of churches which accept Jesus Christ as God and Saviour.
92 Vosper, “My Answers to the Questions of Ordination.”
being, our future as a species....”93 As seen already from her writings, Vosper again gives a list of values she does believe in, which include but are not limited to: love, truth, courage, justice, and compassion. One value that Vosper deviates from is, “Hope, as the promise of something we cannot assure.”94 Rather, Vosper chooses more proactive idealism than hope, and claims that she would rather,

accompany, to name, to comfort, to acknowledge, to embrace, to lament, to encourage, to convict, to trust again.[...] I will not offer hope to mollify or comfort when to do so does not alleviate pain or suffering, does not create right relationship, does not forestall death, but only pretends all these things might be achieved and so anesthetizes us to their reality with an illusion that comforts we who extend it more than those to whom we dispense it. I do not offer an empty hope and would not wish one offered me.95

The second question Vosper answers is, “do you commit yourself anew to God?” Vosper simply responds, “If by ‘God’ ... you expressly mean the Trinitarian God identified above, then, no, I do not.”96 Vosper maintains that when gods and supernatural beliefs of human creation are replaced with reason and science people will still need to find a value system. Vosper believes values such as the ones previously listed can provide a focal point for people to balance their personal and communal lives. This work is what Vosper considers herself committed to, as this is something that, “transcend[s] our personal interests and needs and which help[s] us envision a better world. This is the historic work of the United Church which drew me to leadership within it.”97

The next question is, “do you believe that God is calling you to the ordained ministry of Word, Sacrament, and Pastoral Care, and do you accept this call?” Here again, Vosper denounces the presence of a transcendent being stating, “in gods who can intervene in the natural world; therefore, I cannot believe that there is something we could define as a ‘call’ from any god to us to direct us to act in any way.”98 Vosper clarifies this further.

93 Vosper, “My Answers to the Questions of Ordination.”
94 Vosper, “My Answers to the Questions of Ordination.”
95 Vosper, “My Answers to the Questions of Ordination.”
96 Vosper, “My Answers to the Questions of Ordination.”
97 Vosper, “My Answers to the Questions of Ordination.”
98 Vosper, “My Answers to the Questions of Ordination.”
First, she addresses a calling to the ministry of the Word. Vosper states that if by use of the term “word,” the question implies “the Bible as the sole source or the primary source from which I am to draw wisdom for myself or those to and with whom I minister or that our ethical and moral choices must be grounded in its content, then no….”\(^9\) What Vosper does understand is that the wisdom of humanity is recorded in history in documents; however, some of what is recorded in the Bible does not meet her or her church’s (West Hill United) standards, which means that acceptable passages to be used in preaching from the Bible would have to represent one of the core values Vosper designates, in a context that would be fitting of liberal church denominations. Secondly, Vosper addresses the question of the sacraments, stating that she does not believe that she can “change ordinary items into signs of God’s grace, requirements for full leadership, or acceptance to membership in community…”\(^10\) She explicitly adds that she does not “accept a call to that ministry.”\(^11\) Vosper gives the indication that she believes that there are moments in life that are better executed with community and that these events offer meaning. Regarding what the U.C.C. considers to be sacramental, i.e., Baptism and Eucharist, she offers brief summaries on their value, but as expected removes any reference to divine realities or to the grace of a transcendent God. She thus states:

> the symbolic ritual of marking a child with water is a parent’s opportunity to articulate the qualities of character they commit to instill in their child. It is the community’s opportunity to embrace and celebrate the possibilities inherent in each new life and to pledge themselves to the support of keeping those possibilities large…[T]he symbolic ritual of breaking bread is a community’s opportunity to “re-member” (intentional hyphenation) itself and its commitments to one another.\(^12\)

The traditional sacraments thus have value for the community, but what Vosper’s answers imply is that they cannot in the strict sense be means of grace in any classical theological sense of the term.

Vosper adopts a similar approach to pastoral care and ordination in her next two

\(^9\) Vosper, “My Answers to the Questions of Ordination.”
\(^10\) Vosper, “My Answers to the Questions of Ordination.”
\(^11\) Vosper, “My Answers to the Questions of Ordination.”
\(^12\) Vosper, “My Answers to the Questions of Ordination.”
responses, to the effect that she is in favor of the humanistic elements of what the church already has in its structures, but that she cannot align herself with the theological idea of pastoral care that is in any way “undergirded by the Holy Spirit or that presumes to guide those under care toward greater discernment of God’s plan for their lives…” or that ordination implies to be “set apart by being provided extraordinary and spiritual gifts that allow for the discernment of a divine plan or message in an ancient text…”  

There is one final question Vosper was asked, namely, “Are you willing to exercise your ministry in accordance with the scriptures, in continuity with the faith of the Church, and subject to the oversight and the discipline of the United Church of Canada?” Vosper’s response in regard to scripture was to point out her view that following scripture is a misguided ambition: “Within the context of a community that sets for itself the work of engaging in contemporary issues with courage, clarity, and compassion, most scripture is obscure at best, most often irrelevant, and at its worst, dangerously prone to misguiding those studying it.”  

Given that such difficulties must, in Vosper’s view, be implicit in any ministry “in accordance with the scriptures,” she stated that she “cannot say that I understand what exercising my ministry in accordance with the scriptures means.” At the same time, however, she maintained her willingness to work within the structure of the U.C.C. “even as I invite those who love this church, as I do, to continue to evolve its practices and polity as new realities and challenges emerge.” This was, to say the least, an uncompromising answer, but it illustrates both sides of Vosper’s overall position well. On the one side, she is extremely hostile to theological traditionalism; on the other, she is committed to the present and future life and work of the church.

To this point, our discussion has reviewed what Vosper has said in her book *With or Without God* and her answers to the questions of ordination reviewed at her hearing. The following is an attempt to summarize her beliefs in five concise statements:

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103 Vosper, “My Answers to the Questions of Ordination.”
104 Vosper, “My Answers to the Questions of Ordination.”
105 Vosper, “My Answers to the Questions of Ordination.”
106 Vosper, “My Answers to the Questions of Ordination.”
1) There is no proof that a god or gods exist.

2) Science and secularism have given humanity alternatives to the god myths.

3) There is no authority in the Bible, a god called “God,” or church doctrines other than what we choose to give them.

4) The church needs to remove usage of god language and any language that may be gender and spiritually exclusive.

5) Humans can still act religiously and communally by celebrating intrinsic moral values, such as love.

3 Vosper’s Claim

Vosper’s work as examined thus far references several of the so called “elephants in the room” that she likes to address, and which she treats in ways favorable to her version of Liberal Protestantism. Additionally, her church and work methods have deviated from the common practice and essential beliefs of the U.C.C. and raised a certain controversy in church circles. Yet, this is not the only reason Vosper has hit the headlines lately. As has already been noted, Vosper’s notoriety exponentially increased in church circles following an interview given in March of 2016 on the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation’s flagship television news program, The National. The National described the U.C.C. as a liberal denomination that has always been on the front line of progressive Christianity, citing its proactive approaches to women’s ordination and gay marriage. It depicted Vosper as an extension of that progression in the church’s overall tendency, a woman ahead of her time now trying to “irritate” the church into the twenty-first century. In the interview, Vosper reiterated many of the same concepts that had long appeared in

107 Liberal Protestantism is a theological movement that first arose in the nineteenth century and that responds in the modern intellectual context to trends such as the rise of evolutionary science and the development of biblical criticism. According to Alister E. McGrath, Historical Theology: An Introduction to the History of Christian Thought (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013), Liberal Protestantism “sought to anchor … faith in common human experience and interpret it in ways that made sense within the modern worldview.” The U.C.C. stands solidly in the Liberal Protestant tradition.

108 The National, “Gretta Vosper, Atheist Minister.”
her books and her ordination responses. Two examples included the claim that a “daddy” 
God who intervenes in the world does not exist, and that the real value of church lies in 
building healthy communities. When asked, “how many ministers in the United Church 
are like you?”109 Vosper responded with, “Well I couldn’t say, I don’t know … but I 
think that I know that the Principal at Emmanuel College [Mark Toulouse, who was 
Principal of Emmanuel College, the U.C.C. seminary in Toronto, from 2009 through 
2017] felt that it would be at least upwards of fifty percent of the clergy in United Church 
who don’t believe in a theistic supernatural God.”110 Vosper’s quick reference to such a 
figure’s estimations put the U.C.C. on the hot seat, both from outside church membership 
and from inside.111 From the outside, people began to see the U.C.C. as the church that 
doesn’t believe in God, while, as we shall see next, internally there was likewise 
considerable disquiet.112

Internally in U.C.C. circles, sufficient controversy arose from the CBC interview for the 
Rev. Richard Bott113 to weigh in, conducting a survey trying to get to the bottom of what 
U.C.C. ministers do or do not believe in this respect. During the process of putting the 
survey together, Botts contacted Vosper and asked her some questions:

I’m in the midst of a discussion about some of your thoughts on atheist 
ministry personnel in the [U.C.C.] — and we’re wondering if you could 
clarify what percentage of ministry personnel you believe are atheist, and 
how you’ve come up with that number? (Anecdotal reporting, survey, 
whatever evidence you would have for that claim would be helpful!)

The other question that has come up is how you are defining “atheist 
clergy” in that context. For example, would someone who has process

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109 *The National*, “Gretta Vosper, Atheist Minister.”
110 *The National*, “Gretta Vosper, Atheist Minister.”
111 Vosper later stated that the individual in question, Mark Toulouse, had since specified that he had in 
mind, “non traditional, not non-theistic” patterns of belief. Vosper reported that she does not “consider 
those two things to be different.” Gretta Vosper, “Do You Still Belong in This UCC?”, *Gretta Vosper: 
Minister. Author. Atheist* (September 2016), accessed April 25, 2019: https://www.grettavosper.ca/do-you-
still-belong-in-this-ucc/ .
112 Douglas Todd, “Instead of Gretta Vosper’s atheism, clergy choose alternative views” *Vancouver Sun* 
(June, 2016), accessed March 1, 2017: http://vancouversun.com/opinion/columnists/douglas-todd-instead-
113 As of 2018 Rev. Richard Bott was appointed to the position of Moderator of the U.C.C. as noted by 
Todd, “Liberal United Church of Canada elects Moderator from Vancouver.”
theology as core, be considered “atheist” by your definition?\footnote{Gretta Vosper, “How Many Atheists?” Gretta Vosper: Minister, Author, Atheist (April 2016), accessed March 1, 2017: http://www.grettavosper.ca/how-many-atheists/. Process theology and philosophy are collectively referred to as process thought. Process thought maintains that God can not only affect but be affected by temporal and finite processes, which is a contradiction to classical forms of theism which view God as eternal, unchanging, and unaffected by the world.}

In short, 1) how do you know at least upward of 50% are atheists, and 2) how would you define atheism? In her interview with the CBC, Vosper had said that she could not say and did not know, but as we have seen, referenced Mark Toulouse.\footnote{Gretta Vosper, “Richard Bott,” Gretta Vosper: Minister, Author, Atheist (September 2016), accessed March 1, 2017: http://www.grettavosper.ca/tag/richard-bott/.} Vosper also indicated that her estimation of the population of atheists came from her interactions with other ministers in the church, stating “almost every United Church clergy person who has spoken to me about their beliefs either identifies as non-theist, […] or has told me ‘I don’t believe in the god you don’t believe in’….There are a very few who have corresponded [with Vosper] with theistic beliefs.”\footnote{Vosper, “How Many Atheists?”} When it comes to deciding to define who would be considered atheist or not, Vosper says, “I think anyone who completes the phrase, ‘When I use the word ‘god’, I mean…’ without using the words theistic, supernatural, divine, being, or some arrangement or combination of those words or ones like them is not a theist. Whether they call themselves atheists or not is none of my concern….”\footnote{Vosper, “How Many Atheists?”}

This very loose definition of what is to be considered atheism or theism becomes a point of debate between Vosper and Bott. The overall outcome of Bott’s survey and Vosper’s critique of it will be discussed in further detail in chapter two when Vosper’s theological ideas are traced through the U.C.C. and in relation to the views of major Liberal Protestant theologians. What can be taken from this debate between Vosper and Bott at this point, however, is that Vosper does not believe that she is alone in the U.C.C. With her tag line noted in the CBC interview, Vosper believes that she is “irritating the church into the twenty-first century.” Vosper clearly believes that her position is not only representative of others in the U.C.C., but that it is also a forecast for the future church as a whole.
Chapter 2: Tracing Vosper’s Convictions

In the first chapter, the broad scope of Gretta Vosper’s theological convictions was discussed. I proposed five key points to her theological vision, in an effort to summarize the main goals of her arguments. This chapter will demonstrate where these ideas might have been generated within the United Church of Canada in the context of larger Christian theological movements in recent times. To keep discussion to manageable limits (avoiding, for example, the historical genesis of Liberal Protestantism in the early nineteenth century), attention will be concentrated so far as possible on theological movements having their origins in the 1960s, an era that shaped the U.C.C. in profound ways. For the sake of ease, the five key points abstracted from Vosper will be broken down into two main areas of discussion. In the first, we will be looking at the topic of atheism and transcendence, which will address Vosper’s disposition toward there being no proof of a god’s existence, that science and secularism have given alternatives to the god myths, and that there can be no special authority given to God, church doctrine, or the Bible. Secondly, we will turn to issues concerning the use of inclusive language, the criticism and removal of archaic theological language, and the affirmation of intrinsic moral values. These will be discussed in relation to the U.C.C.’s New Curriculum, and some major developments in the topic of language adopted by many of those within the U.C.C.

One potential criticism of this treatment might be that it ignores the major influence of feminist theology in the theology of the U.C.C. and therefore as an influence on Vosper. However, though it would be possible to pursue this line of reasoning, a causal connection between the two is far from clear. Although a range of themes in Vosper’s theology (e.g., social inclusion) can be linked to feminism, the truth is that theological feminism is only infrequently referenced in Vosper’s publications, and does not appear in her publications as a major argument in favor of atheism. The reason is most likely that Christian feminism has not, on the whole, assumed an atheistic standpoint, either within
the U.C.C. or beyond it. The argument of this thesis, by contrast, turns on Vosper’s contention that her atheism is a product of her life in the U.C.C. and of her formal education. It may be that her atheism coheres with her understanding of gender issues and with certain aspects of feminist theology. However, Vosper’s claim is not that feminism itself leads to her atheistic commitment, but that wider aspects of human thought and experience in the modern age, coupled with particular theological trends to which we will draw attention, leads to that conclusion. Furthermore, if this thesis were to expand to provide a full account of feminist theology, the question arises why it would not also be fitting to include liberation theology as a whole, as it too has had a large influence on the U.C.C. Thus, we would need to reference such movements as Latin liberation theology, black liberation theologies, womanist theologies, mujerista theologies, Native American liberation theologies, LGBTQ+ liberation theologies, and ecojustice theologies. Since none of these theologies require Vosper’s atheism, however, they can be left aside.

In a final discussion in this chapter, the end results from Vosper’s claims will be reviewed in the light of this more wide-ranging treatment. This will demonstrate the extent to which Vosper’s beliefs and claims are not unique to her, or to the U.C.C., but rather a product of the U.C.C. and of the theological movements of the 1960s.

1 Atheism and Transcendence

We can begin with some definitions. First of all, there is a level of ambiguity to the term “atheism.” This ambiguity can cause some difficulty between users of the term and their interpreters, as will be seen in the fuller review of Vosper’s claim of non-theism in the U.C.C. Although Vosper maintained that many ministers “don’t believe in a theistic supernatural God” in her The National interview, which could also be related to the term “non-theistic,” this section will focus on what the specific concept of “atheism” means in understanding Vosper and her claims. To determine what is meant by atheism, the definition of theism must first be determined. The common definition would be something as follows, “belief in the existence of God or gods, as beings existing in some

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119 The National, “Gretta Vosper, Atheist Minister.”
transcendent relation to the visible world of everyday reality.”\textsuperscript{120} The issue with this definition is that it is bound to the individual meanings of both the word “existence” and the idea of “God/gods.”\textsuperscript{121} Since the focus of this thesis is on Vosper, a minister in a Christian denomination we will omit the discussion around gods, for it is less pertinent to the conversation.

First, the question of existence can be addressed. It should also be noted that it has long been acknowledged within Christian theology that God does not “exist” in the sense that God’s existence is not the same as the existence of everything else known in the universe. Since God is not the same as the universe, God can be said not to exist as it exists; to this extent, we may say, God’s existence falls in between the concept of being as conventionally understood and nonbeing.\textsuperscript{122} This idea of God’s being as set beyond our grasp of reality can be a source of trouble because it would imply, on these terms, that some atheists could believe in a God, but just one very far removed from existence as we understand it, in the infinity of transcendence. Atheism, as we are using the term here, however, is a more radically negative idea, since such belief in the existence of a God, no matter how far removed, does imply that the concept of God is not merely figurative. One might say here that in some sense God is more than existent, rather than less. This is clearly not the same as the strictly anti-realist view of God taken by Vosper.\textsuperscript{123}

Theism, for its part, can also be problematic because it can imply two things, especially in the realm of Christianity: 1) a faith in God and 2) a belief in the existence of a God. The first would presumably be reliant on the second. However, it is possible to believe in God and not have faith in God. For example, Deism is often described as having a belief in a God who exists and is responsible for the creation of the universe but, beyond that

\textsuperscript{121} Bullivant, “Defining ‘Atheism.’” A detailed account of the semantics is beyond the scope of this thesis; however, a brief review is warranted to give context to the discussions surrounding Vosper.
\textsuperscript{123} Bullivant, “Defining ‘Atheism.’” In the same way, one may understand how people see Santa Claus as a figurative of the true meaning of the Christmas/Holiday Season; therefore a person can believe in Santa without thinking that Santa is literally flying around the world in a single night each December 24th.
initial act of creation, does not interfere with the created world, including and perhaps especially in any work of salvation. In this case one could argue that one could believe in the existence of a God, but live without faith, because faith would imply some commitment to the revelation of an interdependent relationship with God, or an interventionist role on God’s part. The God that Vosper addresses negatively in her work is what the Oxford Handbook to Atheism describes as the “Judeo-Christian God,” or the “God of Classical Theism.” Vosper does not, however, claim a form of Deism, and instead voices a strong objection both to the existence of God as defined in classical theism, and to classical Christian understandings of the God of salvation as encountered in the structures of Christology and trinitarian theology. Therefore, we can assume that the atheism Vosper describes herself as committed to has reference to both.

To better understand Vosper’s atheism, we should next look at the “a” in “atheism.” Returning to the Oxford Handbook to Atheism, in its account of the privative prefix “a,” the starting point is that the “a” can be seen to signify an absence, so that then atheism is an absence of a belief in the existence of God. In the case of a term like “anaerobic respiration,” which is respiration that occurs in the absence of oxygen, one cannot assume that just because there is a lack of oxygen, that there is a preference against, or a rejection of oxygen. Therefore, the “a” should be assumed to imply solely a lack of belief not a rejection of belief, although the latter cannot be ruled out. Atheism as a term could be understood as an umbrella over both ideas of absence (what the Oxford Handbook terms “negative atheism”) and rejection (“positive atheism”). The question remains, which form of atheism is Vosper’s?

To answer this question, it is best to expand on where Vosper’s theological education,

124 This is an over-simplification of Deism but is merely an illustration of the possible variations of theism.
125 Bullivant, “Defining ‘Atheism.’”
126 Bullivant, “Defining ‘Atheism.’” In Greek, such usage of a- (or an-) is known as the alpha privative, a usage which has come down to us as represented in words such as amoral, asexual, anarchy, and anaerobic.
127 Bullivant, “Defining ‘Atheism.’” This can be a point of tension for the atheist because absence often implies deficiency as well, so that the person would be lacking is something that ought to be there. Therefore, when using the term atheism in reference to absence or “negative atheism,” it should be understood as a neutral term not implying any beneficial or detrimental effect due to the atheism.
which fostered her atheism, would have sourced its usage of atheistic terms. To do this we will look at two main topics: on the one hand, there is the “Death of God” movement, which will also necessitate a brief review of one of the major authors of the time, Paul Tillich; on the other, there is the question of the varied educational, theological, and liturgical developments during the 1960s in the U.C.C. By evaluating these, Vosper’s pathway to atheism and her atheist position will be better understood as a product of her time and, to an extent, of her church affiliation.

In addition to theism, transcendence is also a term which has been utilized for this thesis. The basic definition of transcendence as traditionally understood by theologians is to have the quality of exceeding usual limits, extending not only beyond the limits of ordinary experience, or beyond all possible experience, but also beyond ordinary being.\(^\text{129}\) In traditional Christian understanding, God is transcendent, and is as such inconceivable, so that we can only know “what he is not, and how other beings stand in relation to him.”\(^\text{130}\) The concept of transcendence, however, is complex. For it is not only God who is transcendent, but there is a whole unseen world, since, according to the Nicene Creed, God is Creator not only of what is seen, but also of what is unseen — and traditional Christianity has a lively sense of the many realities that belong to the unseen realm. On the strictly theological level, furthermore, transcendence is also strongly and paradoxically allied in Christian thought with immanence, for the simple reason that it is precisely on the basis of God’s transcendence that God can be present in the world and to people in a way that surpasses the capacity of one creature to be present to another. God is, for instance, not limited by space, and so can be present to all things without being anywhere in particular, so that it is God’s exceeding of the limits of finitude that makes it possible for God to be available to those in need.

When Vosper critiques the notion of a “supernatural theistic God,” she is also critiquing such concepts of metaphysical divine transcendence. There is, for Vosper, no such thing as a God who transcends the limits of finitude. The term “God” refers purely to a human


\(^{130}\) Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, 1a, q.3.
idea, and it is, as such, something purely this-worldly and therefore metaphysically non-
transcendent. She is, however, equally critical of other aspects of transcendence as
traditionally defined, most obviously, perhaps, insofar as it relates to ideas of an afterlife,
and to the idea that humans are more than the body, or to ideas of angels and the like. It
will be important to recognize as we proceed, however, that the critique of transcendence
in the modern theologies to which Vosper appeals is allied with changes in modern
philosophy, e.g., in the case of Tillich, with ideas drawn from Existentialism. Vosper is
not, however, particularly interested in technical questions surrounding the interpretation
of modern philosophy, and so our discussion of the detail of these claims will not need to
be especially close.

1.1 God is Dead Theology and Time Magazine

We may begin with a generic observation, which is that Vosper is not unique as a
Christian in endorsing atheism. Indeed, a major movement in the theology of the 1960s
stands in obvious parallel to Vosper’s project: the God is Dead theology.\footnote{131}

The topic of God being dead has many implications and origins. There are many major
characters in the theological, philosophical, and historical background that could be
studied in this field, stretching on some accounts as far back as Plato, and in the modern
era, to sources as diverse as the modern science of nature, the evils of war, or the
philosophy of Nietzsche.\footnote{132} Such an exhaustive treatment is clearly beyond the scope of
this study. Given our focus for the present on developments in the 1960s, however, a
convenient place to begin might be with an episode in which this topic hit the newsstands
when \textit{Time} magazine in October of 1965 began to share the Death of God movement
found in theological circles with its readership. In April 1966, the magazine even marked

\footnote{131}The theologians referenced elsewhere in this section are included due to Vosper’s reference to their
works in \textit{With or Without God}. The exceptions are the Death of God theologians Thomas Altizer, Paul van
Buren, and Gabriel Vahanian, who are introduced here mainly by way of commentary, due to
commonalities between their ideas and Vosper’s basic contention.

\footnote{132}Duane Armitage, \textit{Heidegger and the Death of God: Between Plato and Nietzsche} (Cham, Switzerland:
Palgrave Macmillian, 2017). This title is used to show that the concept of death of God can be linked to
different forms of thought and is not unique to the modern age. A full account of this text would be beyond
the scope of this thesis. The main ideas highlighted will, however, be explored by reference to the work of
Paul Tillich and his concept of “Ultimate Concern.”
its cover with a black page with the words, “Is God Dead?” in a stark red cascading down the front. Looking at the 1965 article, a piece which was written for the lay reader, we find a short but informative review of the movement. In fact, looking at the key points highlighted from those involved in the movement, it almost looks like a summary of Gretta Vosper’s position. Below is a summary of the article and these key points which match Vosper so well.133

*Time*’s treatment of the God is Dead movement is useful for us, however, for one particular reason, which is that it reflects what was happening in the culture of the period in a way that a survey of academic theology *per se* cannot, and this is important because it is the culture as much or more than the theology that impacted the U.C.C. *Time* treats the death of God as if it were a recent historical event, in the sense that the cultural belief in God had ceased historically: “God has died, in our time, in our history, in our existence.”134 The movement is not just committed to the claim that the image of an interventionist God is no longer relevant, but rather, “that it is no longer possible to think about or believe in a transcendent God who acts in human history, and that Christianity will have to survive, if at all, without him.”135 *Time* describes this movement as an American phenomenon, but claims that it plays to the ideas of “European thinkers” such as Søren Kierkegaard and Dietrich Bonhoeffer.136 Though it should be said in retrospect that these specific associations can be disputed, the article depicts these theologians in a similar light to Vosper, as thinkers “trying to redefine other tenets of a Christianity

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133 “Theology: The God is Dead Movement,” *Time* (October 22, 1965), accessed May 15, 2018. http://content.time.com/time/subscriber/article/0,33009,941410-1,00.html. This article will be discussed ahead of a formal academic publication on the God is Dead movement, because it is an example of readily available public sources on the topic. Many people in the U.C.C. at the time would have been influenced by the movement, especially those that could reach pop-culture newsstands; therefore, this article is an insight to what people generally believed the God is Dead movement to be about.


136 Kierkegaard discusses similar ideas to Paul Tillich to the extent that both see organized Christianity as being on the brink of idolatry by trying to contain the definition of God in a rigid system of thought. See below. However, Kierkegaard is generally understood to have defended a robust view of divine transcendence than Tillich, given the former’s account of the “infinite qualitative difference” between God and humanity, and the latter’s view of God as an idea arising fundamentally in existential self-consciousness.
without a Creator,” and as insisting that “the church needs to develop a ‘nonreligious interpretation of Biblical concepts’ and of a secular world ‘come of age’ that no longer finds God necessary as a hypothesis to explain the sun and stars or as an answer to man’s anxiety.”

Clearly, what has transpired in the U.C.C. generally in the last fifty-three years, and the case and claims of Vosper, seem less strange when set against this background. Similarly to Vosper, the death of God theologian Thomas Altizer is noted as expressing the view that, “the Christian should welcome the total secularization of the modern world, on the grounds that it is only in the midst of the radically profane that man will again be able to recapture an understanding of the sacred.” Similarly, just as Vosper recommends the shift from a focus on God in worship to a focus on human ideals and values, Altizer’s contemporary Paul van Buren is noted in the article as having explored ways to reinterpret Christian doctrine as expressions of the human imagination rather than of any metaphysical reality existing beyond this world. Religion here becomes an expression of purely human experiences, so that the strictly divine aspects can be left behind. A claim by another of the central 1960s death of God thinkers, Gabriel Vahanian, is referenced as well, who believes,

that the church’s concept of God today is the product of the encounter between primitive Christianity and Greek philosophy, an idol that is no longer relevant to secular culture and has been either neutralized by overexposure or rejected entirely. Thus, he declares, God is dead, and will remain so until the church becomes secular enough in structure and thought to proclaim him anew in ways that will fulfill the cultural needs of the times. Since the spirit of the times is irrevocably secular—with all notions of transcendence and otherworldliness rejected….

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139 “Theology: The God is Dead Movement,” *Time*, 1.


Paul Tillich is referenced as affirming the movement in general: “I say yes to this movement insofar as it points to something above the symbolic language concerning God.” But *Time* also depicts Tillich as saying “no” to the movement, insofar as he simultaneously claims that the Death of God theologians should not abandon all symbolic language about God. The *Time* article does not merely show the arguments of the movement but also some of the critiques of it made at the time. Alongside Tillich’s criticism, *Time* also quotes Daniel Day Williams as having pointed to an incoherence in the death of God theology, by summing it up in the following way: “There is no God, and Jesus is his only begotten son.” *Time* concludes, “Many ministers, moreover, complain that the death-of-God thinkers reduce Christianity to just another kind of humanism with a Jesus-inspired morality.”

What is perhaps most important about this 1965 *Time* article is the fact that it shows how far something analogous to Vosper’s progressive Christianity had penetrated the North American culture, and the culture of the churches, long before Vosper emerged on the scene as a controversial figure in Canadian Christianity. We can identify here many of the same themes that Vosper has expressed in her work: the idea that the modern age no longer has a use for a God or an idea of a God, the claim that the language of God is misleading and should be re-evaluated, and the need for a shift from the divine to a more humanist approach. It is reasonable to conclude that Vosper appears in this light not to be an especially original thinker, but one situated merely on the God is Dead movement bandwagon.

### 1.2 Paul Tillich

We turn now from the importance of the Death of God movement in 1960s culture to theology proper, beginning with our most substantial source, Paul Tillich, who was arguably the most important single theological influence in North American Liberal Protestantism during this period (the only other viable contender for the distinction being

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142 “Theology: The God is Dead Movement,” *Time*, 3.
143 “Theology: The God is Dead Movement,” *Time*, 3.
144 “Theology: The God is Dead Movement,” *Time*, 3.
Rudolf Bultmann, who was, however, not resident on the continent). Tillich is a more important source than the Death of God theologians for our purposes, since certain of his key ideas are referenced by Vosper. Although Vosper references a wide range of authors, the foundation of her removal of God in her beliefs can be directly traced back to Tillich’s concept of “ground of all being” which was “the first broadly accepted, non-theistic image of God and continues to be widely used today.”

Tillich was born August 20, 1886, in Starzeddel, Brandenburg, Germany, and died October 22, 1965, in Chicago, after a long career spent in the United States. Tillich’s work overall represents an effort to bring together traditional Christian thought with modern philosophy and culture, and his publications were influential in both academic and lay circles. Arguably, his major academic accomplishment was his three volume *Systematic Theology*, which is a detailed examination of the substance and implications of Christian faith along the lines indicated.

Tillich spent his childhood in Schöniess, east of the Elbe, where his father was a minister and diocesan superintendent in the Prussian Territorial Church. Later Tillich’s father would transfer to Berlin, thus relocating Tillich to more vibrant city life. Tillich was thus influenced both by his theologically conservative father, and by his adolescent experience of metropolitan life in Berlin, with its robust call for a freedom-fueled existence. This would prove to be fodder for three of the major themes in Tillich’s thought: the understanding of autonomy, heteronomy and theonomy — self-rule, alien-rule, and divine-rule, respectively. According to Brennan Hill, Tillich would be influenced by the

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145 Vosper, *With or Without God*, 40. Also see Paul Tillich, *The Shaking of the Foundations* (New York: Scribner, 1948), 57 as referenced in Vosper, *With or Without God*. An example of this direct link from Tillich to Vosper, is evidenced in Vosper’s statement that Tillich influenced Robinson and that Robinson’s pondering of Tillich’s “ground of all being” influenced U.C.C. leadership during the formation of the New Curriculum, which “had set the ground for the examination of the authority of scripture.” Vosper, *With or Without God*, 110.

146 These would include Paul Tillich, *The Courage To Be* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1952) and *Dynamics of Faith* (New York: Harper 1958, c1957), but it should be noted that a detailed account of Tillich’s works is beyond the scope of this thesis and that their mention here is for the sake of wider reference.


148 All biographical information is based on Wilhelm Pauck and Marion Pauck, *Paul Tillich: His Life and Thought* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2015).
work of Martin Kähler, who directed Tillich away from an obsession with historicity per se to questions of a more classical humanistic and theological import, and so both to philosophy and to the doctrine of justification.\textsuperscript{149} The latter is of special interest for our purposes, for Tillich expanded the doctrine, giving it wider scope. In its classic Lutheran sense, justification refers to how a sinful human can become just in the sight of God, the reference being to sin and salvation.\textsuperscript{150} Tillich, by contrast, is moved to refer it to all aspects of life, including intellectual matters. Therefore, a case can be built for the claim that a person who doubts God or who has no faith as being consumed by truth even as they fear discovering it, based on the same logic of the triumph of grace over human inability as one finds in classic Lutheran accounts of justification.\textsuperscript{151} One implication of this is that it would not be necessary for people to believe or have faith in God for salvation, because God would ultimately correct that defect. The universalizing tendency in Tillich’s approach meant that sin and redemption from sin become for Tillich a cosmic event, which includes all of existence.

At the end of Tillich’s studies, he was ordained as a Lutheran cleric, and he went on to serve as a military chaplain during World War I. The war influenced Tillich, not only from the point of view of the sheer horrors of the trenches, but from the point of view of the cultural uncertainty it unleashed, the way it questioned the stability of nineteenth century humanism and the idea of autonomy. It begged the question: was Western civilization at the end of an age? He responded to this initially by joining the Religious Socialist Movement. Religious Socialists, after all, believed that this end of an age was necessary, given the fact of social and economic inequality, so that the crisis of the post-

\textsuperscript{149} First as constructed by St. Paul (in the conventional interpretation), developed by St. Augustine, and later reiterated by Martin Luther; cf. Brennan Hill, “Paul Tillich’s Protestant Principle,” \textit{Melita Theologica} 37 (2) (1986), 61.


War era provided an opportunity for new social reconstruction.152

In the post-war time of Tillich’s life, he began a teaching career at the Universities of Berlin, Marburg, Dresden, Leipzig, and Frankfurt. During this time, he wrote extensively, attempting to conduct an analysis of religion, culture, the meaning of history, and how they connect to contemporary social issues.153 Tillich was an early critic of Hitler and the Nazi movement and as a result was banned from the German universities in 1933. Following this, Tillich left Germany and joined the faculty at Union Theological Seminary in New York. This would be the start of Tillich’s long contribution to American theology, at Union Seminary (1933-55), Harvard University (1955-62), and the University of Chicago (1962-65).

Tillich’s principal work would be Systematic Theology, which was the result of a lifetime of thought. Systematic Theology is constructed in five parts, which highlight many questions, such as: the powers and limits of humanity’s reason in revelation; the nature of being and revealing God as the ground of being; and New Being made in Jesus Christ.154 Many of Tillich’s followers utilized his works to argue for radical approaches to the God question. Despite their efforts, however, the death of God as advocated in the 1960s would be a misleading conclusion to draw from Tillich’s work. Those who cite Tillich in advocating the “God is dead” slogan overlook the fact that Tillich’s main emphasis is positive and constructive rather than negative. For Tillich, as one writer nicely puts it, “the disappearance of an inadequate concept of God was the beginning of a grander vision of God.”155 To arrive at this goal, he would use a range of intellectual resources, from Kierkegaardian Existentialism and Heidegger’s philosophy of Being in particular, to

152 Siegfried, “The Significance of Paul Tillich's Theology for the German Situation,” in The Theology of Paul Tillich, eds. Kegley and Bretall, 68-85; as cited in Hill, Paul Tillich’s Protestant Principle, 61.
153 His work, *Das System der Wissenschaften nach Gegenständen und Methoden* (“The System of the Sciences According to Their Subjects and Methods”), (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1923), was Tillich’s first attempt to create an understanding of humanity’s spiritual endeavors. The full context is beyond the scope of this argument, but the work offers insight into the starting point of Tillich’s overall vision.
154 Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1967). The account offered here will highlight only those aspects of Tillich’s theology that contribute in some way to the Death of God theology — and those aspects that underlie his criticisms of the movement.
broadly Freudian approaches to the subconscious, to an analysis of art and of human culture. In Tillich’s theology, indeed, there is a profound sense that the culture of “secularity” as imagined by Death of God theologians such as Altizer, Vahanian or van Buren (and, we may add, Vosper) does not really exist, since all culture rests on a depth dimension that is unavoidably religious in character, and since the religious for Tillich always borders on the question of Being.

Tillich was an integral figure in the theological development of his time both in Germany and the United States. A review of Tillich’s works leave one unclear as to whether he can be viewed as a spokesman for the deconstruction of Christian culture or as a systematic theologian who demonstrated the value of Christian faith to modern critics. He is, however, undeniably a forerunner of the contemporary culture which has been a driving force in undermining traditional beliefs in the existence of God and faith. I would argue to the contrary that a more accurate view of Tillich would be as a theologian standing between the boundaries of a heritage of Christianity and the secularization of the new age.

Tillich is, however, a good representation of the time in history which influenced Gretta Vosper, because at the end of his career people still argued which side of the atheistic fence Tillich stood on. This perhaps means that Tillich’s own work contains both sides of the argument, but more importantly, it also means that there is at least an ambiguity in the interpretation of Tillich concerning whether a Christianity with or without God is possible. As we have seen, whether one can have a Christian church without God is a major question arising also in relation to Vosper’s ideas and work. By looking at Tillich, meantime, we can also simultaneously look at both sides of the theological influences of the 1960s which inspired many changes in the U.C.C. and its theology — a train of thought particularly confirmed by Vosper’s own numerous references to Tillich’s thought.

1.2.1 Ultimate Concern

In our effort to determine something of the historical trajectory of the theological ideas represented in Vosper’s work, we will now look in more detail at Tillich’s understanding
of God as a theological middle ground in relation to the Death of God movement. As noted, Tillich spoke of God as the “ground of being.” It would seem reasonable for us at least to review this foundational principle of Tillich’s; however, since this thesis is focused not only on Vosper’s non-belief in God, but also on how the Church should change in relation to her understanding, we can limit discussion in what would otherwise seem a massive exercise by looking at how Tillich’s view of God might affect the self-understanding of the Christian and in particular the Christian church. To best navigate this, the text *Ultimate Concern: Tillich in Dialogue* has been selected to narrow the discussion of both his “ground of all being” concept and his related concept of “ultimate concern,” the former being Tillich’s most concise description of what God is, and the latter being humanity’s interaction with said ground of being.\(^{156}\) One advantage of using this text is that *Ultimate Concern* is a verbatim of a series of seminars held at the University of California in 1963. By looking at this discussion we thus gain some grasp of the extent to which concepts of the death of God were being circulated within university and seminary contexts in the 1960s. Beyond this, however, Vosper explicitly notes the influence of the Death of God movement on the U.C.C. in *With or Without God*, while also drawing freely in her argument on ideas gleaned from the theology of Tillich.\(^{157}\) By the time Vosper entered seminary, these ideas were a formal part of theological history, and her interest in them would shape her thinking, most probably as a theological student but much more obviously and publicly in later years as a U.C.C. minister. The review of Tillich that follows will begin by summarizing aspects of the context of the work in Tillich’s overall theological vision, and then turn to *Ultimate Concern*, before finally interjecting direct comparisons to Vosper’s *With or Without God*.

Tillich was concerned in general with how theologians of his time often lacked adequate depth in their treatments of Existentialism.\(^{158}\) Tied to this issue of Existentialism, Tillich also felt that theologians should make greater efforts to address contemporary

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\(^{156}\) Tillich and Brown, *Ultimate Concern: Tillich in Dialogue*.

\(^{157}\) According to Vosper, *With or Without God*, 96, the U.C.C.’s New Creed (discussed above), written in 1968, was a direct response to the Death of God movement.

\(^{158}\) Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, I:3-4.
problems.\textsuperscript{159} In essence Tillich looked to bridge the gulf between theology and philosophy, religion and culture. He started with an analytical diagnosis of humanity’s estrangement from transcendence due to humanity’s finitude and the idolatrous tendency we have when confronted with existence and our contexts.\textsuperscript{160} From this analysis, Tillich formulated two key concepts in his theological works, which as we have seen are “ground of being” and “ultimate concern”. These theological names are conceived as answers to existential, philosophical questions. Tillich thus conceives of God, as “ground of being”, or “Being-Itself,” as he sometimes puts it, as a concept arising in a correlation made between theology and philosophy. The idea, however, also helps Tillich to distinguish between the concept of God and the everyday concept of Being: God is not “a” being, in the sense that finite objects have being, nor is God a member of a generic class of “beings.” In the strict sense, God is indefinable and any finite creature’s attempt to define God as a “being” can only be idolatrous in light of God’s true being which is Being-Itself.

If God is understood as Tillich presents the case, then God is Being-Itself, and is as such unconditional, and precedes all thing created.\textsuperscript{161} Thus looking at the biblical account of creation, and the later doctrine of creation “out of nothing,” imposes on us the demand to distinguish between God and the world. \textit{Creatio ex nihilo} is, in the words of one commentator, “interpreted by Tillich to mean that there is no substance, divine or otherwise, from which finite beings receive their being; they receive it through the Word and Will of God and hence there is no substantial participation of man in God.”\textsuperscript{162} This view hinges on the concept of God as Being-Itself, rather than more simplistic theistic notions of a personified God dwelling in the heavens with angels, as one being among many. As a result, Tillich goes further to reject any Idealistic “emphasis in ontology on … the identity of finite and infinite, and on the Absolute Mind thinking itself in the finite, with the result that God is deprived of his creative Word and the distance between God

\textsuperscript{159} Tillich, \textit{Systematic Theology}, III:4-5.
\textsuperscript{161} Tillich and Brown, \textit{Ultimate Concern: Tillich in Dialogue}.
\textsuperscript{162} Smith, “Tillich, Being and the Biblical Religion,” 410.
and creatures is removed.”

On the subjective side of the matter, “ultimate concern” is how Tillich describes faith and, indirectly, religion as well; for Tillich, each person will knowingly or unknowingly experience ultimate concern. Ultimate concern is something that a person will take with the utmost unconditional seriousness — for example, love, loyalty, science, knowledge, or nationalism. This ultimate concern can be found in many forms of expression: art, philosophy, religion, and even in personal ambition. It is something that grasps the individual fully, and by no means can that person simply choose otherwise; often they would even die for their ultimate concern. There is a flip side to this ultimate concern, however, in that some objects or ideas that are merely representations of the ultimate can take on the role of the truly ultimate despite the representation or expression only being finite. For example, Tillich describes a situation where “boys are ruined” because of their tendency to make their mothers their ultimate concern. The appropriate ultimate concern which may have led to this situation could be love, compassion, family, kindness, or motherly care. A person can be grasped by this concept and thus seek it, look to express it, or share it. However, when the instrument by which this ultimate is expressed, in this case the mother, is understood to be ultimate in itself, then there is a kind of idolatry. Tillich says the “mother cannot help but be a very high symbol of concern, but the moment she is made a matter of ultimate concern — or deified (it is usually unconscious, of course) — the consequences are always destructive.” This example of idolatry is not limited to simple finite objects like a person or idea but extends also to religion as a whole. Tillich sees religion itself as one of the great threats to religious life and as a major contributor to idolatry; as an Existentialist, we may say that he warns against confusing Being-itself with the being of beings (broadly speaking, Tillich at this point is Heideggerian). Or, to put the point more concretely, since religious systems over time become rigid, they have a propensity to suppress the transcendent principles which first inspired them. Tillich feels that rigid dogmatic and systematic ideas

165 Tillich and Brown, Ultimate Concern: Tillich in Dialogue, 24-25.
166 Tillich and Brown, Ultimate Concern: Tillich in Dialogue, 24-25.
prevent religion from mediating genuine existential awareness of the deeper meaning of religious rituals and symbolic tools, so that they are mistaken as the thing itself rather than as mere means.\footnote{167}

At this point, there are certain affinities between Tillich’s overall theology and the ecclesial concerns that, on a rather different intellectual level, preoccupy Vosper. Tradition has a tendency to falsely reify religious rituals, symbols and tools. Vosper voices her concern by describing the shackles that “TAWOGFAT” brings to church life, and Tillich expresses his concern about idolatry misdirecting religion from its appropriate course. Unlike Vosper, however, who appears to leave the value of Christian traditions, the Bible, and Christology to individual opinion but in the end holds it to have the same value as any other story or example of religious mythology, Tillich has much greater regard for the variety of the Christian tradition and offers a more affirming approach to the ultimate within the Christian tradition. For example, in addressing the issue of the historical Jesus versus the Jesus that is presented in the Gospels, Tillich states:

if we were able to read the original police registers of Nazareth and found that there was neither a couple called Mary and Joseph, nor a man called Jesus, we should then go to some other city. The personal reality behind the gospel story is convincing. It shines through. And without this personal reality Christianity would not have existed for more than a year, or would not have come into existence at all, no matter what stories were told. But this was the great event that produced the transformation of reality. And if you yourself are transformed by it, you witness to the reality of what happened. That is the proof.\footnote{168}

Here we see again the influence of Martin Kähler on Tillich’s thought.\footnote{169} The point, however, is that the Biblical account offers the reader an access point to both a monumental change in human history and, in particular, to a religious experience that points to the ultimate. The Bible, Jesus, and the gospels are more than a story, they are non-negotiable as sources of transformative experience, an experience which echoes

\footnote{167 Tillich and Brown, \textit{Ultimate Concern: Tillich in Dialogue}, 3.}
\footnote{168 Tillich and Brown, \textit{Ultimate Concern: Tillich in Dialogue}, 146-147.}
\footnote{169 Martin Kähler, \textit{The So-called Historical Jesus and the Historic, Biblical Christ} (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1970 [1892]).}
through the ages because of the sheer ability of the sources to shine through and shed light on human existence. In addition, the story of Jesus’ pathway to the cross also has significance for Tillich. In the midst of a longer conversation about quasi-religion in Communism and Fascism, Tillich makes this point about Christology:

in Christianity, in the symbol of the cross, there is the fundamental revelation that he who was supposed to bring the new aeon, the new reality, the new being, the eschatological fulfillment, the Kingdom of God — all this — in order to achieve it had to sacrifice himself, his individual character, as a bearer of the ultimate…. Jesus sacrifices himself as Jesus to himself as Christ. It is by this intricate form that I believe we have to interpret the symbol of the cross.¹⁷⁰

Although Tillich’s respect of the Christian tradition is not limited to the examples that have been provided, the last example given will show a major deviation between him and Vosper.

Tillich affirms that Christianity as a whole, despite the tendencies of some of its authoritarian expressions, contains crucial resources for an internal criticism of idolatries of structure and symbol.¹⁷¹ The implication is that such inherent criticism, as it takes place within Christianity, points to the ultimate, to God as Being-itself, while simultaneously discouraging idolatrous tendencies. This does not mean every Christian, church, or interpretation will be free of idolatry, of course, rather that there is always hope within Christianity for it to function as it was originally intended — which is to be a symbol of the ultimate. One might say that it naturally tries to create a balance between institutional life, liberation and reformation at this point.

There is also a clear similarity in Tillich’s expression of what he believes people’s

¹⁷⁰ Tillich and Brown, *Ultimate Concern: Tillich in Dialogue*, 76. A point which needs to be addressed is that an interpreter of Tillich may look at this statement and assume it is atheistic in nature because Jesus is depicted as a human who decided to bear the ultimate. However, this would be too simple. First, if Jesus as human was to bear the ultimate, by Tillich’s logic the ultimate would have taken hold of Jesus, the ultimate would have been Jesus’ Ultimate Concern, which he would not have decided upon but have been gripped by. Second, Tillich uses the term symbol rather than sign. Symbols participate in the object of which they are a sign, for Tillich. The symbol of the cross thus would participate in a transcendent or ultimate reality; for Tillich this would likely be the “Ground of All Being.” This again makes Tillich’s leanings toward atheistic or theistic understanding all the more complex to disentangle.

experiences of the ultimate manifest as (i.e. love, loyalty, science, etc.) to what Vosper has developed in her understanding of core human values. However, there is also a major difference between them, for Vosper does not link her core values to a larger philosophical concept of the ground of being, nor does she relate the ground of being to a connecting experience of ultimate concern; rather, her core values seem to be purely human. One is tempted at this point to say that Vosper’s theology, by laying so much store by these human capacities and habits, falls under Tillich’s condemnation of making an idolatrous ultimate of the purely relative. However, Vosper is not a particularly sophisticated philosophical theologian, and is certainly not Tillich’s equal in this respect. Hence, there are many questions that remain unanswered by Vosper, and it is hard to tell if she does that intentionally or just due to lack of consideration. For example, do these core human values have any universal application, does Vosper believe that they hold value to creatures other than humans, animals, insects, plants, or even extra-terrestrials (for example, if there is life on other planets, does she believe these values to be present there because they would form everywhere through evolutionary processes, or are these core values a fluke of nature?). The reason these questions are so important is because, if we look at the ideas of “ultimate concern” and the “ground of being” expressed in Tillich’s theology, we see that he perceives these values or expressions of ultimate concern as having a transcendent dimension. Using the prosaic example of trees, Tillich states:

For instance, even if suddenly a scourge should cause all trees to disappear, the tree, or the power of becoming a tree, would still be there; and given the right conditions, living trees might come into existence again. Here you have a clear differentiation between essence and existence, which are two types of being. And then there is of course that being which is beyond essence and existence, which, in the tradition of the classical theology of all centuries, we call God — or, if you prefer, “being itself” or “ground of being.” And this “being” does not merely exist and is not merely essential but transcends that differentiation, which otherwise belongs to everything finite.¹⁷²

What we see here is that, for all his criticism of traditional theological ontology, Tillich is

still capable of speaking of God’s essence and existence as one, in terms that, thus far at least, even Thomas Aquinas could recognize. For Tillich there is a systemic potentiality in God as the ground of being that clearly transcends the empirical order of nature and ordinary experience. Vosper, by contrast, does not seem to express any sort of understanding or acknowledgement of this, meaning that her atheism is much more radical and far-reaching, possibly because it is more simplistic and less carefully considered.

If the main differences between the thought processes of Tillich and Vosper lie in their differing appreciations of Christianity in history and of tradition, on the one hand, and in their divergent sourcing of the values that define a spiritual and religious life, on the other, then still the question remains: is one more correct than the other? I would suggest that Vosper indirectly opens herself up to two major criticisms and concerns in With or Without God. First, Vosper brings the Bible and the Christian tradition onto an even playing field with the rest of human literature and cultural traditions. In doing so she is participating in the criticism within Christianity which Tillich to an extent affirms, but at the same time, Vosper opens the door to all other expressions to be affirmed as having the same value. The problem here is that, despite the value of Vosper’s recognition that the Judeo-Christian scriptures and traditions are axiomatically products of human history and experience, there is a weight to these traditions that many other pieces of literature or similar anthologies, for example, would be hard-pressed to match. For example, the Bible alone acts in the capacity of a small library of a wide range of writing styles which have spoken to history, mythology, historical rhetoric, community disputes, biographical works, lineage, and apocalyptic literature, just to name a few. There are also centuries upon centuries of commentaries, theological, philosophical, liturgical, literary, historical, various other fields of research and critiques, along with over two millennia of tradition and practice to build on. It would be a grand surprise to speak to an issue in Christian thought or practice that has not been evaluated extensively at some point in history. The same cannot be said of everything that would be invited into spiritual life if the door was

open to anything to be held as having the same weight and importance as the Bible and the whole of Christian tradition.\textsuperscript{174} Even internally, when comparing the New Testament with the literature of the early church in the later second century (Justin Martyr, for example), we can only be struck by the qualitative difference in sheer profundity between the two sources.

Furthermore, Tillich’s opinion that Christianity has a level of self-criticism written into its fabric may not be true of all items brought to the table through Vosper’s open door. Even if what is brought does exhibit characteristics of ultimate concern or of a universal human value, it may not contain resources for any strong self-critique, making it more amenable to idolatrous dangers. There would need to be stern evaluations of all such things, whereas one is entitled to ask on what basis one could make the hard decisions required of the church, based on a theology like Vosper’s. Tillich points to the potential dangers faced in his own time as follows: “fascism is a demonization of nationalism, as Communism is a demonization of socialism, and scientism is a demonization of humanism. It prevents intelligent dialogue with them. There is also demonization of religions. For example, the church of the Inquisition was a demonization of Christianity.”\textsuperscript{175} Tillich admittedly argued that all ideals and expressions of the ultimate are liable to become debased but what should be recognized is that the value of the Christian tradition still holds for Tillich because of its long tradition of theological self-critique, as opposed to other more superficial forms of thought which prove unable to hold up under scrutiny.

The second area of critique Vosper opens herself up to is the simple question what constitutes an expression of the human core values of which she speaks, and what would they look like if executed by individuals and communities? One is tempted to respond that they might look very like the sensibilities of any modern liberal democratic group, which suggests an uncomfortable level of cultural specificity, and very possibly entails a

\textsuperscript{174} The only thing that may hold a similar weight would be other spiritual, religious, and/or philosophical ideas, which then fall under a similar burden of proof. Therefore, Vosper could say that the Christian Church should open their spiritual reflections up to other similarly weighted traditions. However, colonialism and globalization have already set that process in motion. A full discussion on this topic is beyond the scope of this paper but does leave room for more consideration in the future.

\textsuperscript{175} Tillich and Brown, \textit{Ultimate Concern: Tillich in Dialogue}, 23.
certain sense of Western cultural superiority, as if to be a Christian were, in the end of the
day, merely to be born a Canadian. To take a hypothetical situation, if a number of
Vosper’s followers were to decide to come together in worship and discussion centered
around the core values of humans, and decide for a time to look at the core value of love,
there might be multiple challenges that the group would face that are endemic in
institutional religion — what prayers, for instance, can be used, or what will the pattern
of leadership be? Is love in and of itself a sufficient basis for making decisions about such
things? Regardless, the group in question looks at love, which seems simple enough until
one recognizes that the word carries a lot of weight to it, that there are many different
definitions and categories of love. If we open a discussion of how to love, for instance,
and pragmatic questions arose, there would be bound to arise differences of opinion
concerning not only how to love but whom to love. For example, if Vosper’s group came
together to discuss the issue of abortion, there might well be some individuals who
believed that an expression of love would best be directed toward the pregnant woman
who is debating having an abortion. Others might well see love as better directed towards
the developing fetus which cannot speak for itself. This is also not so simple a situation
as might allow the group’s members to agree to disagree, because if one expression is
executed it would inevitably infringe upon the expression of love the opposition would
see as ideal. Even if the entire group could come to an agreement concerning what
concrete love should look like in such a situation, would they then need to monitor that
within the group, as a means of preserving group identity, for instance? Would there not
inevitably be those, whether meeting with the group or walking by its doors during its
meetings, who would refuse to work with these very beliefs about the supposed core
value on which we all agree, the value called love? Would there not, therefore, need to be
some sort of regulation, some systematic conception, or dogmatic expression about the
correct course of human love, in order for an actual group to hold together? Would this
group support other organizations, charities, political parties, etc. which shared its
position, or would the group have to refuse to affiliate so as to maintain itself or to keep
up open discussion?

As social and finite beings, in other words, we find that there is a desire to harden our
borders and align ourselves with some more or less rigid processes to protect what we
believe to be most accurate and truthful. This is, of course, the very curse that Tillich sees threatening religion, so that in this sense, religion is its own threat. Even by stripping away what Vosper calls “TAWOGFAT” and all the shackles of the church, if Vosper’s analysis of existence is correct and Christianity and its traditions are all a product of human life and experience, then so are these shackles, and that means that her own prescription for the problems of religious life would inevitably be dragging such shackles along with it because it would also be a human creation. Structure similar to the TAWOGFAT — and thus shackles — would be inevitable, which would imply that the actual objection that Vosper demonstrates towards Christianity and to U.C.C. traditions result from certain of the inevitable social traits of humanity, rather than from the values and beliefs that may or may not be associated with Christian faith in God.

Such limitations aside, what this discussion has shown is that Vosper’s position as outlined in our first chapter was not a spontaneous creation, emerging as something entirely original in her thought and practice, but rather, that her ideas are consistent with a certain trajectory undertaken by theology in recent times. This period saw the emergence of many thinkers, like Tillich, who also questioned “TAWOGFAT” as Vosper does, and who questioned or expanded the definition of theism to include aspects, at least, of atheism. Vosper has undoubtedly carried that agenda forward and made her own version of it; the main difference is that Vosper has taken it in a rather popular, radical and philosophically unsophisticated direction, and that she is doing this openly from her pulpit, thus causing disquiet within the U.C.C.

To round out this discussion, I will offer a brief comparative review of some of the other theologians whom Vosper cites as influences, and who speak to similar issues. Again, though no complete account can be offered within present constraints, it is important that we round out the picture so as to locate Vosper in an appropriate context.

1.3 Other Sources

It would be a grave misconception to think that Tillich was solely responsible for influencing the Death of God movement or influencing Vosper. Nor, indeed, were Tillich’s own ideas of “ground of being” or “ultimate concern” completely unique and
forged in a vacuum. For example, multiple theologians have given different expressions to the same basic concept. For instance, Jacob Waschenfelder cites the following sources: “ground of being” (Tillich), “the encompassing Spirit” (Borg), “the spirit that infuses all of life” (McLennan), “the wonder of Being” (Holloway), the “soul of the universe” (Hartshorne, cited by Griffin), the “depth of life” (Spong), or “the Spirit inherent in all things” (Laughlin).  

Turning again to Vosper’s wider inspirations, in her publications Vosper references other theological influences, such as her friend and colleague Bishop John Shelby Spong, ahead of Tillich. However, Tillich was chosen as a basic source for this chapter not only because his ideas are cited by Vosper, but also because his work was so influential in North American Liberal Protestantism generally, and because it also clearly influenced writers who themselves directly influenced Vosper. To demonstrate this, I will highlight briefly two of Vosper’s common theological references in her works, John A. T. Robinson and John Selby Spong himself.

1.3.1 John A. T. Robinson

The Anglican theologian Trevor Hart notes that John Robinson (1919-1983) is perhaps best conceived as an agent provocateur in his studies of theology and ecclesiology, in that he saw himself as a “radical,” but Robinson’s theology grew in popularity from his work in the 1960s. Robinson’s first book from 1950, *In the End, God*, painted a picture of universalism in Christianity, but building still on relatively traditional motifs in

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177 For example, see Vosper, *With or Without God*, 23-24, 39, 40, 43, 110, 204-5, 233, 235 (regarding Robinson), 21, 43, 85, 87, 96, 131, 138, 184-5, 266 (regarding Spong).

soteriology:

Christ, in Origen’s old words, remains on the cross so long as one sinner remains in hell. That is not speculation: it is a statement grounded in the very necessity of God’s nature in a universe of love there can be no heaven which tolerates a chamber of horrors, no hell for any which does not at the same time make it hell for God. 179

Shifting focus, Robinson would look at the *parousia* with his next text *Jesus and His Coming*, but he would make his name best known with the third major publication, *Honest to God*, which marked a turn in Robinson’s theology to a much more radical stance. 180 Here Robinson critiqued concepts like the concept of a personal God, the virgin birth, and the Second Coming. 181 This sparked awareness of his radical theology in society, and indeed, *Honest to God* became a popular piece which introduced a large church and popular readership to what Robinson believed to be the intellectual benefits of broadening modern religion by introducing elements of what later came to be known as a non-realist theology, 182 with a focus on problems of eschatology. 183 *Honest to God* received so much attention that it was reviewed in a *New York Times* Book Review as a work that actually “made theological discussion for the first time seem interesting and important to the contemporary layman.” 184 Robinson’s position was the rather


181 “John Arthur Thomas Robinson,” *Contemporary Authors Online*.

182 See Don Cupitt, *Is Nothing Sacred? The Non-Realist Philosophy of Religion* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2002), who defines the non-realist theist as identifying God as “a guiding spiritual ideal, a symbol of the ultimate unity of our values […] we cannot give any coherent account of God as a supposed objectively-existing being, and we cannot prove God’s existence. We have only this life, and only our human language about God, to go on. We are not and will never be in a position to compare our talk of God with God absolutely […]. So we should give up the old metaphorical dogmas completely, remembering that we have no absolute knowledge. […] Religion is simply a lot of stories and symbols, values and practices, out of which you must now evolve your own religious life.” 47.

183 Hart, “In the End God,” 356. Again, a full treatment of Robinson’s thought is beyond the scope of this thesis; however, a basic definition of non-realist theology would involve the idea that the “believer” recognizes that humanity cannot and will not ever produce objective evidence of an all powerful creator God/gods, but in that recognition one can still choose to live as if that reality were true because they recognize a benefit to living in such a manner (i.e. for ethics, morality, or community).

184 “John Arthur Thomas Robinson,” *Contemporary Authors Online*. 
Bultmannian one that religion needs to be “demythologized,” and in the process made more personal, in keeping with modern sensibilities. As a result, people must realize that what is called “God” is in fact something radically immanent, something we find present within each other, something that we discern in meaningful human relationships. This presence, whether recognized or not as God by the individual, is the ultimate reality of life. To this extent, the rejection of traditional theism and related old conceptions of God in Honest to God are not a rejection of God himself; in non-realist fashion, rather, it seems almost that one instead lives up to the expectations of a hypothetical God who would wish for mankind to grow up and develop a more sophisticated belief system.

The reason this book would have been so significant for many clergy and lay members of the U.C.C. is that it had such an influence, one that reached well beyond the borders of a normal text of theology. It reached not just the Church of England or academia but a much broader spectrum of church-goers, extending into the secular public. Though not all welcomed Robinson’s thoughts, and though not all who welcomed Robinson’s ideas necessarily understood them well, many in more liberal denominations welcomed Robinson’s work as a step towards a reformation of theological thinking for those who had become disenfranchised with the “old ways.”

Robinson felt that as his career as a churchman and as a theological thinker progressed, he began to lose more and more of what he would consider “right-wing” theology, believing in “less and less.” In a clear nod to Tillich, among other radicals of the day, Robinson expressed his understanding of God as an “ultimate reality” rather than as any supreme personal being. Robinson further echoed something of the voice of the great critics of religion, such as Feuerbach, Nietzsche, and Marx, when he insisted that the

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186 “John Arthur Thomas Robinson,” Contemporary Authors Online.
187 “John Arthur Thomas Robinson,” Contemporary Authors Online.
188 It should be noted in this context that Robinson was a New Testament scholar and so a historian in the first instance, so that his theological writing was, strictly speaking, ancillary to his main work. He also served briefly as a Church of England Bishop in the 1960s but returned to the academy (Cambridge).
perception of a “‘supreme Person in heaven’ is ‘the great enemy of man’s coming of age’.” Without getting into too much detail about the nuances of Robinson’s argument in *Honest to God*, one can readily see the affinities between Robinson’s position and the view taken in Vosper’s letter as highlighted in Chapter One, in which Vosper responds to Paterson’s address by denying that God is “a supernatural being whose purposes can be divined” and called it a belief that “has led to innumerable tragedies throughout the timeline of human history and will continue to do so until it fades from our ravaged memory.” It is for this reason that she appeals to Robinson’s theology repeatedly.

1.3.2  *John Shelby Spong*

John Shelby Spong is a bishop, author, and controversial figure in the Episcopal Church U.S.A., as well as in contemporary Christianity generally. Spong is outspoken about subjects like homosexuality and traditional theism, and makes efforts to combat racism, sexism, and anti-Semitism. Spong has produced more than fifteen volumes on socio-religious topics. A few key publications will be noted to highlight some of the influential texts that would have inspired Vosper and others among the U.C.C. clergy. Spong’s *Liberating the Gospels: Reading the Bible with Jewish Eyes* popularizes the view that Christians should interpret the Gospels as Jewish texts, which (given that this is a central strand in all modern New Testament scholarship) many critics claimed as “neither new nor exciting.” The tone of the text, however, which indicated that viewing the Gospels as Jewish texts would increase their worth to Christianity, did inspire some controversy. Later Spong published *Why Christianity Must Change or Die: A Bishop Speaks to Believers in Exile.* In this more important work, Spong claims that Christians are

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192 Milne, “Unsuitable”.
193 All references to Spong’s biography and works have been taken from the following source unless otherwise stated: “John Shelby Spong,” *Contemporary Authors Online*. (Detroit, MI: Gale, 2013), Literature Resource Center, accessed November 9, 2018: http://link.galegroup.com.proxy1.lib.uwo.ca/apps/doc/H1000093892/LitRC?u=lond95336&sid=LitRC&xid=b5d9e9ef.
becoming alienated from conventional Christianity and argues for a concept of Christ as a model human rather than as the incarnation of the Second Person of the Trinity. This is presented as an answer to this alienation, since the traditional views taken in Christian faith can no longer be maintained, nor can they convince if they are mistakenly proclaimed. The Bishop’s Voice: Selected Essays, 1979-1999, essays from a monthly column Spong had written over these years, introduces much more overtly Spong’s stance concerning inclusion within the church. A final text of Spong’s, New World: Why Traditional Faith is Dying & How a New Faith is Being Born, argues for a modernized church and a new Christianity to do away with myths and doctrines, which Spong believes affirm patriarchal religion. Spong instead promotes love and freedom in faith alongside modern concepts such as science. He places a large emphasis on moving to a concept of God as accessible and accepting of all instead of as a fierce and sovereign lawgiver. Spong believes that the idea of an all-accepting and loving God is a far more attractive model for the faith than an all-powerful and threatening one.

With Spong’s extensive publications, there are in principle a plethora of other theological points to press upon, but the crucial conclusion is already established: here we can see much of the language and attitude that has already been encountered in Vosper, so that it is hardly surprising that Vosper cites Spong extensively. Vosper’s thoughts do not, in other words, stand in a vacuum but rather arise in a larger context. Vosper, for instance, discusses her realization of God being merely experiential, and her having done away with God speech herself as ultimately unnecessary.

Looking at Tillich, Robinson and Spong as influences on Vosper’s atheism and theological position not only reinforces her argument about her theology as belonging to a larger Liberal Protestant movement that has been in existence and development for decades, and as actually being a product of the U.C.C., which has long drawn upon such sources. The fact that Vosper’s presence and voice in the U.C.C. has been so shocking to the church as a whole shows that the U.C.C.’s united front on the Vosper question will

197 Spong, A New Christianity.
inevitably seem unrealistic if it asks us to believe that a fifty-plus year trend which has been in both academic and pop-cultural circulation is genuinely something new and unheard of before our day.

1.4 The United Church History

So far, this thesis has shown something of Vosper’s convictions and has made a case for where some of these convictions might have their intellectual origins — with the reconception of God as ultimate concern in Tillich; with theologians and authors of the 1960s such as John Robinson; with the Death of God movement that, Vosper claims, impacted the United Church; and with a theology such as Spong’s that has a socially progressive edge. But in fact, Vosper does not actually claim that her atheism was born of any of these theological times or movements in and of themselves. Rather she claims that her atheism is the product of her life within the U.C.C.\textsuperscript{198} Therefore, to do justice to the case, it is necessary to chart how the U.C.C. developed from its origin to the time of the 1960s, when these authors and ideas began to develop, and then briefly to examine its progress to Vosper today. Though no complete account is possible here, a brief survey is needed, and conveniently, due to the U.C.C.’s relatively young age, this can be done to some considerable degree in a short expanse.

Approaching the origin story of the U.C.C. means also approaching the foundations of Canadian culture, since nationalism is tied to the U.C.C. story. As a result, Vosper’s understanding of the U.C.C. may also represent a possible understanding Vosper or others like her would have of Canada and its identity. This might help to explain why Vosper might believe that the U.C.C. and its clergy would be more non-theistic and secular than they are. We can even see this error at the academic level, as noted by Michael Depland in a publication of essays written by members of the Canadian Society for the Study of Religion. Depland noted that within the community of historians who study the origins of Canada, there is a tendency to emphasize Canada’s “non-religious

\textsuperscript{198} Johnston, “Q&A: Gretta Vosper, the United Church minister who doesn’t believe in God.” See also The National, “Gretta Vosper, Atheist Minister”.
For Depland and John Webster Grant, this understanding the origins of Canada is frankly unbalanced; they argue that Canada’s national identity contains massive influences from Christianity. As we will see later, this insight will lend itself to our understanding of the development of the U.C.C. itself, as the U.C.C. was developed from three main Protestant denominations, changing the religious landscape across the country (and indeed, beyond it in the original case of Newfoundland) by way of a union.

1.4.1 Religious Establishment

As it was being colonized, Canada was also subject to Christianization; multiple strategies were used which will be briefly highlighted. The first strategy was religious establishment, a transplantation of the Christendom model from Europe, so that the church would be supported by the official establishment on the soils of Canada. Though practice varied through time and between regions, the idea was that, as within Europe, a society with proper respect for Christianity as the “highest and purest representative” of its culture was to be desired. The church itself was seen as a kind of parallel society to the secular state, but subsisting at a higher level of endeavour in the direct service of God, so that such a “highest society” should be transferred to new colonies. These societies were distinguishable but not separate; both the state and the church were alike: “alike sacred, alike Christian ... the harmonious operation of a single enterprise.” This pattern came to expression in the colonial establishment, where it was monopolized by two main traditions: the French Catholic and the English Anglican. French Catholic priests first attempted this as early as the 1530s. Efforts intended at conversion of the Indigenous peoples (then called Amerindian, and many other ignorant and derogatory names which affirmed discrimination and displacements of people) were aimed in the minds of the

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201 Grant, “Religion and the Quest,” 10.

202 Grant, “Religion and the Quest,” 9-10.

203 Grant, “Religion and the Quest,” 10-11.

204 Terrence Murphy, A Concise History of Christianity in Canada (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1996), 1-2.
colonizers at the establishment of a harmonious social enterprise in which church and state might stand together in the new territories, just as they did in the old world.\textsuperscript{205} By the mid-eighteenth century, British expansion grew as the French lost possession of the colonies to the English, triggering the partial deconstruction of much of the French religious establishment. As a result, the Anglican Church became legally established in the Atlantic Provinces and Upper Canada.\textsuperscript{206} With the cohabitation of both English and French people within the same geographical areas, identity became linked with ethnicity, religion and culture, rather than the state.\textsuperscript{207} The American Revolution altered the demographics by up to thirty-six thousand English Protestant Loyalists, dividing Canada into Upper Canada for the English population and Lower Canada for the French population.\textsuperscript{208} These English-speaking immigrants brought Methodist, Presbyterian, Baptist, and even Lutheran sympathies with them. This caused increasing pressure to deconstruct the previous establishment, which formally happened in 1854,\textsuperscript{209} aiming at two key issues: the institutions of higher education and the Clergy Reserves.\textsuperscript{210} The resulting disestablishment — made possible, in some ways, by similar movements in the United Kingdom at that time — created more equality for denominations within Canada; however, without support from the established churches in Europe and/or the state, denominations would struggle to survive.\textsuperscript{211} This struggle would lead to the discussion of a union between denominations which will be addressed later.

1.4.2 Mission Drives

According to Grant, the second strategy was the missionary drive. This strategy was not limited to a single denomination: rather, it was a common idea that Christians were obligated to “extend the sway of Christ over every part of the world and over every

\textsuperscript{206} Choquette, \textit{Canada’s Religions}, 162-163.
\textsuperscript{207} Megan Ashcroft, “Social Drama and Sentiments of Affinity and Estrangement in the Construction of Canadian Identity: The Formation of the United Church of Canada” (M.A. Thesis; Regina: University of Regina, 2010), 9.
\textsuperscript{208} Murphy, \textit{A Concise History}, 75-76; see also Choquette, \textit{Canada’s Religions}, 158.
\textsuperscript{209} N. K. Clifford, \textit{The Resistance to Church Union in Canada 1904-1939} (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1985), 236; see also Grant, “Religion and the Quest,” 12.
\textsuperscript{210} Murphy, \textit{A Concise History}, 285.
\textsuperscript{211} Grant, “Religion and the Quest,” 18.
segment of life both personal and social.”

As in the United States, Canadian Protestants took to millennial ambitions, preparing for the reign of Christ by strengthening the nation in the organization of campaigns for the sanctification of society. By the nineteenth century, it was common to have large movements directed towards women, youth, volunteer groups, and mission bands. The missionary drive was something that shaped a unique characteristic of Canada’s identity, emerging as a restless “quest” grounded in “the missionary impulse to never leave well-enough alone.”

Grant suggests that this characteristic of 19th century Canadian religion encouraged Canada’s much later role in fostering domestic social justice, foreign aid, and international peace keeping. A similar connection could be seen between Canada’s habit to “never leave well-enough alone” and the U.C.C.’s continual ambition to be front of the line for liberation and social justice issues in Canada and its interactions globally.

1.4.3 Secularization

The final strategy was less of a strategy and more a result, nor was secularization precisely what was intended. Rather, the goal was to foster equality against the restrictions of establishment. The increased diversity in higher education, as noted, and a large variety of immigrants introducing new perspectives, pushed against traditional Victorian-era ways of thinking. The churches no longer had a fixed role defined by previous expectation, and this caused some uncertainty. In addition, with the growth of industrialization and urbanization, church establishments found it increasingly difficult to maintain, let alone develop, via traditional pastoral approaches. A different agenda was forced upon them in response to these new challenges, which took the form of an increased attention to social concerns.

According to Grant, the responses to these changes took a number of forms. First, some

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212 Grant, “Religion and the Quest,” 13.
214 Grant, “Religion and the Quest,”16. This is unlike the United States, where the religious identity was configured with ideas of being a State uniquely blessed by the God of the Enlightenment, or with ideas of Manifest Destiny.
215 Grant, “Religion and the Quest,” 16.
216 Grant, “Religion and the Quest,” 16.
217 Grant, “Religion and the Quest,” 17.
groups opposed immigration, trying to maintain an idealism for the status quo in their rural life. Second, some sought to establish a strong Christian presence in targeted areas (i.e. slum areas and larger cities); the result was social programs for young people and immigrants to Canada. Third, churches began to co-operate in their efforts to combat social evils or what was called unrighteousness in society, as a result of which Christian advocacy for the formation of unions and co-operatives began. Included in this was the formation of the U.C.C.\textsuperscript{218} At this point the U.C.C.’s origin story takes much of its shape not from a particular theological drive but from ambitions that echo the voice of the larger nation. It started with a more evangelical history but over time this would switch focus from spreading the gospel to encouraging social justice and becoming an inclusive welcoming environment. The formation of the union that the U.C.C. represents is thus a reflection of wider themes shaping the Canadian religious climate.

1.4.4 \textit{Major Themes in Rhetoric}

Several movements within academia cultivated rhetoric within Christianity as well as the overall national identity of Canada. The main influences were: evolution, liberal theology, the social gospel, and the idea of muscular Christianity.\textsuperscript{219} To begin with, therefore, the influence of Darwin’s theory of evolution also sparked the development of Social Darwinism, the idea that Darwin’s theory could be applied to societal structures, towards the end of the 19\textsuperscript{th} century.\textsuperscript{220} The introduction of this theory changed the dynamic of religious discourse, moving the ecclesial conversation from static concepts to a more dynamic and fluid system or body of social thought.\textsuperscript{221} This fluid understanding allowed churches to change the focus of their missions from conversion to reaching an evolutionary breakthrough, with this in some cases being understood as an eschaton or

\textsuperscript{218} Grant, “Religion and the Quest,” 17.
\textsuperscript{219} This does not imply a full review of each of these influences, that measure of detail would be beyond the scope of this thesis. Rather the point is to offer a general trajectory of the area leading to the formation of the U.C.C. and its characteristics which will either be determined to support Vosper’s claim or not.
fulfillment of the kingdom of God within and for Canada.\textsuperscript{222} This language, which relates, of course, to varieties of 19\textsuperscript{th} century Liberal theology, also resonates within the work of a man like John Shelby Spong.

As Liberal theologies developed in this period, they sought an accommodation with developing scientific thought, which drew focus away from the supernatural to a present, this-worldly and proactive faith which was centered on the experience of individuals.\textsuperscript{223} A new development from this Liberal theology was that God was more often seen as imminent in world history, and therefore the cultivation of faith should also cultivate all elements of life, meaning the efforts of a faithful life could be salvific within society and this action would be an obligation of one’s faith.\textsuperscript{224} This caused shifts in denominations’ understandings of their ecclesial duties and theologies; for example, for the Methodists, receiving grace through conversion was of high importance, but in the light of liberal theology, such grace must have social rather than purely otherworldly importance, and its expression therefore needs to be mundane, in areas such as education. Therefore, conversion and private religious experience were no longer the only way to speak of the life of grace, which tended in the direction of building up society.\textsuperscript{225}

Towards the end of the 19\textsuperscript{th} century, the development of the social gospel added new emphasis on a more present, this-worldly account of Christian faith, in which conversion, Bible-reading, prayer, etc., were not as important as cultivating an approach to faith which looks to an improvement of the whole of society.\textsuperscript{226} Within Canada, this would lead to the development of unique organizations and forms of co-operation, allowing churches to re-engage with society in new ways. Mixed with the growth of these programs in North America, organizations such as the YMCA, Bible societies, Temperance movements and Lord’s Day Alliance would try to support community

\textsuperscript{223} Semple, The Lord’s Dominion, 264-266.
\textsuperscript{224} Semple, The Lord’s Dominion, 265-266.
\textsuperscript{225} Semple, The Lord’s Dominion, 265-266.
building and societal opportunities.\textsuperscript{227} Many of these groups were non-denominational, which was as vital to their success as their ministries were to the working poor they served.\textsuperscript{228} This fostered a certain openness across denominational borders, and this is something that clearly influences the U.C.C.’s formation.\textsuperscript{229}

Finally, what is often called “muscular Christianity” permeated this time period so that, in its various expressions, it must be judged to have had an important influence also. Muscular Christianity is associated with a number of movements, including initiatives undertaken by liberal Christians typically favoring the dignity and rights of individuals, and by Christian Socialists, who characteristically sought collective improvements in housing, health and the workplace especially.\textsuperscript{230} In mid-nineteenth century Europe, a discontentment with standard gender roles arose, resulting in both men and women seeking a better understanding of what it meant to be a man or woman.\textsuperscript{231} Muscular Christianity was concerned about both men and women, but mostly directed its attention to males, and centered around not only the importance of biblical study and prayer but also social responsibility and even attention to one’s outward appearance and social etiquette.\textsuperscript{232} Such concerns coincided with the social gospel well, and as a result broad movements that dealt with health, fitness, and hygiene appeared across Canada.\textsuperscript{233} The physical body became a focus in these movements as much as the spiritual, the claim being that whole people need to be cared for by the churches and not just one part of people. This focus, as much as it sought roots in biblical sources and sought expression in Christian education, brought the focus ever more on the individuals’ experience as an embodied being, and on the material conditions of life as critical to faith. However, in

\textsuperscript{227} Allen, \textit{The Social Passion}, 15; see also Choquette, \textit{Canada’s Religions}, 336.
\textsuperscript{229} This cooperation between denominations promoted closer relationships among the union churches of the later U.C.C.
\textsuperscript{230} Donald E. Hall, ed., \textit{Muscular Christianity: Embodying the Victorian Age} (Cambridge University Press, 1994), 17.
\textsuperscript{231} Hall, \textit{Muscular Christianity}, 20-21.
\textsuperscript{233} Katherine Ashenburg, \textit{The Dirt on Clean: An Unsanitized History} (Toronto: A. A. Knopf Canada, 2007), 59.
doing this, it is interesting and important to note that these movements also encouraged men to be mindful of the evils of pleasure. Sport and sportsmanship, for example, rather than alcohol and women, were presented as appropriately Christian aspirations to young men.\textsuperscript{234} It was an ideal that embodied Christian character and manliness in Christ.\textsuperscript{235} The efforts of the social gospel and of muscular Christianity included these late Victorian ideals, and they surfaced in Canada through organizations such as the E.Y.M.I. and the Y.M.C.A.\textsuperscript{236} Such a version of Christianity also resonates with social Darwinism, linking the strength of manhood in Christ with equality as seen in fair play to the overall success of the state through the survival of the fittest.\textsuperscript{237}

All of these movements encouraged a shift from an emphasis on conversion and the hope of heaven to the social question, seeing faith as a physical as well as a spiritual matter. What faith in Christ and Christianity mean needs to be embodied in concrete life. If society is suffering through poverty, for instance, then society is weak and indeed sinful because it is not embodying Christ and the evolution Christ would expect from society. This changed salvation from being perceived in terms of a personal conversion to a broader phenomenon related immediately to the state’s success, with each member’s well-being in all aspects coming to be understood as a reflection of that success.

1.4.5 United Church Union

The U.C.C. was formed by majority populations of each of the Presbyterian Church, the Methodist Church of Canada, and the Congregationalists, with the Presbyterians being the largest in population.\textsuperscript{238} According to one writer, the Presbyterians’ bottom-up

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{237} Don Morrow and Kevin B. Wamsley, \textit{Sport in Canada: A History} (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 2005), 172.
\item \textsuperscript{238} Choquette, \textit{Canada’s Religions}, 217.
\end{itemize}
governance polity meant that they lacked sufficient central authority to oversee change.\textsuperscript{239} The hardships of Canada’s landscape nevertheless forced the varied forms of Canadian Presbyterianism in existence by the early 19\textsuperscript{th} century to seek unions with other Presbyterians due to limited resources, so that by 1875, most Presbyterian Churches in Canada were united.\textsuperscript{240} The Methodist Church in Canada was similarly formed by unions of smaller groups including the Wesleyans, the Primitive Methodists, and the Bible Christians.\textsuperscript{241} The Methodists had, however, an evangelistic circuit riding system and a much more top-down style of church government, which arguably better equipped them to adapt to Canadian challenges.\textsuperscript{242} By 1884, the Methodists united to form the Methodist Church of Canada, due to financial concerns and a lack of ministers.\textsuperscript{243} Congregationalists, the smallest denomination to enter the U.C.C., practiced autonomy of congregations with a simplicity of worship.\textsuperscript{244} The Congregationalists had difficulty due to their emphasis on congregational independence, however their ambition for evangelism moved to unite them in 1904.\textsuperscript{245}

The union of these denominations into the U.C.C. took twenty-two years, from the initial suggestion of union by Presbyterian fraternal delegate William Patrick in 1902 at the Methodist General Council.\textsuperscript{246} The Methodists, due to their hierarchical polity, reacted well to the suggestion and quickly initiated discussion with the Presbyterians.\textsuperscript{247} The notion of union was not unheard of and inter-denominational co-operation was already common in the country with such organizations as the Y.M.C.A., Bible Societies, and

\textsuperscript{239} Ephraim Scott, \textit{Church Union and the Presbyterian Church in Canada} (Montreal: John Lovell & Son Publishers, 1928), 21.
\textsuperscript{240} Scott, \textit{Church Union}, 39; see also Murphy, \textit{A Concise History}, 267-268.
\textsuperscript{241} Semple, \textit{The Lord’s Dominion}, 18.
\textsuperscript{242} Scott, \textit{Church Union}, 150.
\textsuperscript{243} Semple, \textit{The Lord’s Dominion}, 183.
\textsuperscript{244} Richard E. Wentz, \textit{American Religious Traditions: The Shaping of Religion in the United States} (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003), 92.
\textsuperscript{246} Clifford, \textit{The Resistance to Church Union}, 13. Many Presbyterians felt Patrick had deviated from his role as a delegate and that his suggestion for union was not his to give.
\textsuperscript{247} Ashcroft, “Social Drama and Sentiments,” 27.
interdenominational lobby groups for social issues.\textsuperscript{248}

The union, despite some resistance, would take form in 1925 with the U.C.C. Basis of Union. S. D. Chown, a primary witness to the union stated that, “ecclesiastical statesmen felt, that the Church of Christ was in a position of trusteeship for Christianizing the nation and evolving the highest type of civilization possible with the new opportunity presented to Canada.”\textsuperscript{249} Here we see not only the influence of the various movements just surveyed, but we also begin to see an emphasis on inclusivity in relation to the entire nation, formulated around the practical and social expression of Christian belief rather than on the basis of the historic, dogmatic divisions of the founding denominations. This ambition to “Christianize the nation” under one Christian ecclesiastical banner was a vital step in the rhetoric of unity and amounted to a new belief that narrow denominationalism would have to be rejected if the missional goals of the gospel are to be fulfilled.\textsuperscript{250}

This relativization of what might otherwise have divided in favor of what can unite was also, in my opinion, a reflection of Canada’s continuing story. Over time Canada would be expressed as a mosaic, where people can come and not lose their former identities, unlike the United States which is often referred to as a melting pot, and in which a strong, uniting national mythology persists. The Basis of Union of the U.C.C. highlighted the commonly held substance of Christian faith,\textsuperscript{251} a sort of lowest common denominator, like the Lima Text of the World Council of Churches produced in 1982, but otherwise left room for local and regional theological opinion.\textsuperscript{252} The Basis of Union also, of course, included church polity regarding the ministry and administration of the new

\textsuperscript{248} Ashcroft, “Social Drama and Sentiments,” 23; see also Choquette, \textit{Canada’s Religions}, 336.
\textsuperscript{249} S. D. Chown, \textit{The Story of Church Union in Canada} (Toronto: The Ryerson Press, 1930), 12.
\textsuperscript{250} Chown, \textit{The Story of Church Union}, 18.
\textsuperscript{251} “Basis of Union,” \textit{Resources}, see also Appendix B.
United Church. Here again, however, there was no central control. At the time, entrance into ministry started at the congregational level so that congregations made recommendations to the local governing bodies. It would be no surprise that as new ministers came in, their theology would to a great extent reflect the assumptions of their local areas and congregations, and the original denomination from which they came, rather than that of the overall U.C.C. itself, this being very minimal in any case. This would continue for some decades, but a profound shift began in the 1960s which would shake the core foundations of what it meant to be a Christian or to believe in God, and when a stronger centralizing tendency began to make itself felt in U.C.C. polity.

As a result, however, Canada and the U.C.C. in its earliest expression became a mosaic, or a combination of many, often apparently conflicting ideas: it could be at once theological and secular, so that its theology at a distance can seem eclectic in nature. In my experience, like Canada, the U.C.C. is recognized as being broadly friendly, polite, and always willing to help, with a strong tendency to being socially and politically left-of-centre. But to repeat Grant’s argument on this point, these tendencies actually stem from the missional experience of the churches in Canada’s past, from the idea that Canada cannot “leave well enough alone.” I would argue that the formation of the U.C.C. itself was an affirmation and solidification of this identity, and that this identity therefore shaped the U.C.C. Though the unionists at the time could not have predicted how it would all unfold, in 1923 E. Lloyd Morrow wrote:

> It falls to Canadians to build up a Church, and at last a single church, that shall be a true and living Body of Christ. This church will diffuse its own life and grace throughout this land and its people, absorbing it into itself and being absorbed into it — until at last there shall be in this abounding country a nation at which men looking shall say: That nation is the Body of Christ; in that country the word is truly become flesh; that people is Jesus of Nazareth.  

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1.5 The 1960s and the New Curriculum

To summarize, at its earliest stages of formation, the U.C.C. developed out of

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253 Morrow, *Sport in Canada*, 60.
unique circumstances because it had formed from the pragmatic goals of mission, mutual support and survival, and from the desire for a national Christendom, mixed with and filtered through the lenses of Victorian movements which highlighted both social evolution in “civilization” and personal growth in that context. The U.C.C. was developing a unique recipe for its theological and ecumenical self-understanding. Given the approach taken in the lowest common denominator polity of the Basis of Union, however, the U.C.C. was bound to get complex in its development as times moved on.

The U.C.C. held a relatively stable course nevertheless until the 1960s, which was, of course, within the lifespan of many of its founders. Throughout the 1950s, furthermore, many people sought normalcy following the chaos of WWII and the Cold War, and they turned to the church as a reliable buttress for the progressive and aspirational status quo in Canadian life at the time, resulting in a boost of attendance by the 1960s. The 1960s brought challenges for the U.C.C. to contend with, including new patterns of postwar immigration causing wider ethnic diversity, a new and strident youth culture, the sexual revolution, and changing demands upon its services. The government, for its part, embarked in the 1960s on a dramatic expansion of public services, so that, “education, health care, and social welfare … presented a significant challenge to the existing order,” all of which were largely church domains until this point.

Further to the earlier point that the U.C.C. and Canada developed in parallel, in 1967, to prepare for Canada’s centennial celebrations, the Canadian Interfaith Conference (CIC) was formed. The CIC “was an attempt to draw on a lowest common religious denominator—one that emphasized such state-friendly ideals as loyalty, love of neighbor, and generosity of spirit—in order to stabilize and

legitimize the Canadian nation.”

Seaton noted how, “the strong links forged in the 1960s between the interests of national unity and the importance of ‘lowest common denominator’ religion have contributed to a mindset amongst mainline Protestants that values faith expressions that are invisible, indistinguishable from the markers of good citizenship.” At this point, however, the U.C.C. was experiencing a new reality, for nationalism and a clearly Christian identity no longer so obviously cohered. Thus, though notions of strong nationalism were being echoed and church attendance was high, which would make it appear as if the unionist ambitions were being realized in the postwar glow, the specifically Christian character of both the Church and the state were no longer so clear.

As has already been noted, since the U.C.C. was now entering its fourth decade, the last of the ministry personnel involved in pre-unionist church life began to retire and die. The old expectations, rooted in a theology and an ecclesial and social experience from a different era, were no longer the norm. Following the 1960s, the U.C.C. would see three major new influences come to bear on its clergy. These influences were: the New Curriculum, the New Evangelism, and the Death of God movement, all of which melded with theological trends in academia. The latter we have discussed in detail, but the two former trends will be addressed at least briefly, to give a fuller understanding.

1.5.1 New Curriculum and New Evangelism

The New Curriculum (N.C.) was a 1964 reorientation of the U.C.C.’s Christian education resources. It itself represented a lowest common denominator approach, we might say, in that it embraced a mediating position of listening to rather than proselytization of the world and was designed to appeal “to neither

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257 Miedema, “For Canada’s Sake,” 77.
conservative evangelicals nor a younger generation of more radical liberals.”

By the mid-1960s an increasing division between evangelicals and liberals in the U.C.C. was becoming apparent and the N.C. was a testament to those differences. The N.C. regarded scripture with high regard but respected and acknowledged other sources of wisdom as well. A shift in the education of clergy was occurring at the same time as a result of which trends like the demythologization debate in modern biblical scholarship began hitting churchgoers, sometimes as a grave shock. The N.C. affirmed this change in principle, declaring that “[modern] biblical scholarship is necessary to help us to rightly understand Biblical truth.” As discussed, on a broader level, modern theological scholarship at the time was also deconstructing older views of God, Christ and salvation, and thus directly or indirectly encouraging a new spectrum of belief in the U.C.C., including non-theistic, agnostic, and atheistic views.

The New Evangelism developed as a response to the U.C.C.’s failings with diakonia ministries. As a result, many expressions of this movement developed: bi-vocational ministry, community assistance programs, community service organizations, teen clubs, counselling services, pub theology, Christian ashrams and small group ministries, and work with sex workers or addicts. The church renewed its calling in such service in the world, which of course echoed the rhetoric of its formation. In the words of one commentator at the time, this would offer the Church nothing less than “the golden opportunity to shed all connection with the power structure and return to the clean, uncluttered,

260 Airhart, “A Church with the Soul of a Nation,” 171.
265 Board of Evangelism and Social Service of the United Church of Canada, Why the Sea Is Boiling Hot: A Symposium on the Church and the World (Toronto: Ryerson Press, 1965), 42.
uncompromising and selfless ideals of the early Christian martyrs, but in undated fashion.”  However, the particular direction this could be taken is important to note. Since the U.C.C. wished to enter the public sphere, “churchy” words such as “immanent,” “justification,” “sanctification,” “atonement,” “witness,” and “substitutionary sacrifice” were targeted by secularist theological critics. This process has been something that has been continually done in the U.C.C. in the decades that followed, and there is also a strong effort within Sunday services to make language more secular and more continually inclusive as well.

Following the 1960s, it could fairly be argued that the U.C.C. simply took its unionist national liberation ideals and divided them between a modernist but “churchy,” yet theologically non-evangelical approach, and a secular, “non-churchy” evangelistic outreach. As a result, the U.C.C. created the perfect Christian institution to foster the presence of an overtly atheistic minister in its ranks. At this point I believe it is only fair to affirm one of Vosper’s basic claims, that the U.C.C. is itself the institution from which her distinctive atheism was born.

From the point of view of the U.C.C. theological conservative, we have here, in short, a perfect storm of influences, some of which Vosper has referenced directly and others which have been demonstrated to influence the U.C.C. and the overall theological trends of academia which formulated a mere twenty to thirty years prior to Vosper’s theological education. By the time Vosper entered seminary, the ideas, expectations and practices surveyed would not any longer have been the wild university dreams of the ambitious and radical youth of the 1960s, but rather the ideas implicitly assumed and explicitly spoken by Vosper’s mentors, and likely many of the ministers she would have worked with and

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studied with in supervisory contexts. Vosper cannot be said to be the surprise monster at the U.C.C.’s gate; rather she is more like Frankenstein’s monster, a product of her creator, the U.C.C.

2 Bott’s Rebuke and Vosper’s Defense

Now that it has been established that Vosper’s atheism was a product of the U.C.C.’s long journey and have a better understanding of how the U.C.C. itself fits into Vosper’s atheism and her claims, it is appropriate to return to the media debate between Vosper and Bott. As referenced previously, when asked, “how many ministers in the United Church are like you?” Vosper responded with, “well I couldn’t say, I don’t know … but I think that I know that the Principal at Emmanuel College felt that it would be at least upwards of fifty percent of the clergy in United Church who don’t believe in a theistic supernatural God.” Bott countered this claim with questions which can be summarized as follows: 1) how do you know at least upward of 50% are atheists, and 2) how would you define atheism?

Bott took these questions into his own hands as well and circulated a survey in response to Vosper’s claim and in hopes of better understanding how the U.C.C. on a congregational level understands God. The survey itself was never formally published but some of the findings and statistics were released in media sources. The Vancouver Sun reported that 1,353 ministry personnel participated in the survey. “While how they believe and what they believe is wide and varied, almost 95 per cent of the United Church ministers who responded to the online survey were clear — they do believe in God,” Bott says. In addition, his survey found that “a large number, almost 80 per cent, affirm belief in a ‘supernatural, theistic God.'”

At this point there is considerable unclarity, even if it is clear that Vosper’s theology does not arise within a vacuum. Bott himself acknowledges the methodological imperfections

268 The National, “Gretta Vosper, Atheist Minister.”
269 The National, “Gretta Vosper, Atheist Minister.”
270 Todd, “Instead of Gretta Vosper’s Atheism, Clergy Choose Alternative Views.”
271 Todd, “Instead of Gretta Vosper’s Atheism, Clergy Choose Alternative Views.”
of his survey, reflecting as it does a cross-section of U.C.C. clergy, and constituting as it does a non-professional poll. However, it is difficult to resist the implication that the results do seem to push back against the claims of Vosper, by suggesting that the U.C.C. may not be as equally balanced between non-theists and theists as she imagines. The article continued to provide some of the percentages of theistic definitions that U.C.C. clergy affirmed. The first notes panentheism which, according to the article, Bott understands to mean “that God participates with all that exists. When changes happen in creation, changes happen in God. I see God in a dance with creation.” For the purposes of the survey options of theistic definitions, this was defined as “I believe in the existence of god/God, and that God/god is greater than the universe, includes and interpenetrates it.” 51 percent of participants affirmed this as the closest to their theological understanding, which is unsurprising as one or other version of panentheism has been common in theological circles in North America for some time (e.g., it is a prominent view that recurs in the theology/science debate). Coming in at a close second, however, was classic theism, which Bott defines for the survey as “I believe in one god/God as the creator and ruler of the universe, and further believe that God/god reveals godself/Godsself through supernatural revelation.” This definition was affirmed by no less than 34 percent. Deism also was affirmed by an additional 2.3 percent. The sum-total of these three groupings is 87-88 percent. The remaining percentages comprise views of God as Metaphor (2.1%), followed by Agnosticism (1.2%), and Atheism (0.7%).

Vosper responded to Bott’s survey via her blog, holding to her statements “well I couldn’t say, I don’t know,” but insisted that the U.C.C. people she speaks with generally have non-theistic beliefs. Regarding clergy, she believes that most U.C.C. ministers would have a similar education to her own and thus few would actually come out of that

272 Note that in reporting the statistics and definitions of the article and of Richard Bott’s survey does mean that this thesis affirms the numbers or definitions, but rather is relaying the understanding of both Bott and the media source as an important factor to be considered in assessing the Vosper case.
273 Todd, “Instead of Gretta Vosper’s Atheism, Clergy Choose Alternative Views.”
274 Todd, “Instead of Gretta Vosper’s Atheism, Clergy Choose Alternative Views.”
with a classical understanding of the God and the Bible. The shift in the argument goes from whether clergy are non-theistic, or atheistic, to classically theistic. If the latter is the case, then Vosper would be correct as the U.C.C. only seems to hold thirty-four percent of clergy who would adhere to a classical definition, such as a strongly trinitarian position, or a theology based primarily on concepts of revelation. However, the bigger importance of the results of this survey, despite some of it methodological imperfections, is that, “A majority of the respondents (almost 95%) affirmed a belief in God, with a large number (almost 80%) affirming a belief in a supernatural, theistic God.” It seems that despite Vosper’s belief that the U.C.C. is a church that supported and fostered her atheism, atheism is not as widespread as she anticipated. The influences of the U.C.C.’s formation and the radical changes of the 1960s and other theologians’ influence did mean that atheism could be fostered, to be sure, but does not mean this is of the general belief of the church. If the U.C.C. ever wished to conduct a full audit of their clergy to conclusively determine what the average beliefs were, they may find that Bott’s information was skewed. However, looking at some of the closing issues regarding Vosper’s suitability for ministry, that may be a moot point.

With Vosper’s voice in the U.C.C.’s ear, a few final discussion questions remain: (1) What will happen with Gretta Vosper? (2) Is there a place for theism and transcendence in the U.C.C. and is there a target demographic who may still find theism and transcendence to be valuable? (3) What might the U.C.C. look like as it enters a post-Vosper age? We turn to these questions in the next chapter.

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275 An examination of theism and theology teachings in the U.C.C. seminary was beyond the scope of this thesis but would offer future opportunities for U.C.C. investigation and evaluation.

276 Those this is not to exclude the possibility that those who opted for Panentheism could not also support a trinitarian understanding or a revelation heavy theology. Indeed, many varieties of contemporary panentheism explicitly endorse a Trinitarian theology.

Chapter 3: What to do with a Vosper?

To this point, we have reviewed the theological influences which inspire Vosper, deriving not least from trends in theology and theological education that emerged in the twentieth century, and that have been clearly reflected in developments in the U.C.C. in recent decades. What has become clear is that Vosper is right to claim that she is not, in fact, unique in her beliefs in the U.C.C. context. Though Vosper’s off-hand claims concerning half of the U.C.C. clergy being non-theistic is undoubtedly an overestimation, she nevertheless makes an important and revealing point. This raises questions about the theological future of the U.C.C., and about how the influences which inspired Vosper may also shape important aspects of the development of the U.C.C. for years to come.

Though no full response to the challenge represented by Vosper’s claims to the U.C.C. can be developed within current constraints, three questions will briefly be considered in this concluding chapter, which may not only offer insight, but also help to shape further research in the future. First, the obvious question arises, what will happen to Gretta Vosper? Second, and more importantly, is there still a place for theism and transcendence in the U.C.C., and is there still a target demographic who may still find theism and transcendence to be valuable? Third, what might the U.C.C. look like as it enters what we may here call the “post-Vosper” age?

1 What will happen with Gretta Vosper?

Based on the settlement of issues between West Hill United Church and Gretta Vosper as noted in Chapter 1, it would appear that nothing formal will happen to jeopardize Vosper’s ordination or her “call” to West Hill United Church. At this point there would be no course of discipline from these initial issues raised in Spring of 2015, as a statement released by the U.C.C. in November of 2018 stated that the matter had been settled between all parties: Vosper, Toronto Conference and West Hill United Church.278 This, of course, does not mean that other complaints or issues from different tiers of the

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U.C.C. could not arise in the future. However, unless some further issue arises, it would be surprising if more disciplinary measures against Vosper were to come from any national level of the U.C.C.

The day following the U.C.C. formal statement, Moderator Rt. Rev. Richard Bott released a statement offering reflective insights in what was, one has to assume, an attempt to clarify the confusing settlement. Assuming the General Council of the U.C.C. does not make a formal procedural issue out of Vosper’s worship conduct or doctrine that prompts some further clarity, however, uncertainty remains. Bott’s statement, for its part, actually seems very confusing for the reader. First, he begins by noting the word of his predecessor, quoting the view that, “at the heart of the concerns being raised is a tension between two core values, both of which are central to our identity as The United Church. The first is our faith in God. The second is our commitment to being an open and inclusive church.” The resulting “dance,” as Bott notes, is something the U.C.C. will have to continue to negotiate. This is perhaps clear enough. However, Bott further says that, “it is clear that as a denomination we believe in God: Creator, Christ, and Spirit and that that belief leads us deeper into the Holy Mystery that is God…” In spite of the de-escalation of the issues around Vosper, in other words, the claim is that the United Church is not making any commitment to being non-theistic. Rather, it would seem that, in order to be inclusive, its relationships with non-theistic clergy and members will need to be embraced as a new frontier for the denomination.

Far from the issue being settled, however, there are still many important unanswered questions that must now inevitably arise. I would personally highlight two: first, since Vosper was deemed unsuitable for ministry but not removed from her position, does this set a theological and/or employment precedent; and second, if the U.C.C. were to deem a candidate as unsuitable for ordination based on the candidate not being in “essential agreement” with the U.C.C.’s core beliefs, could the U.C.C. be held as discriminatory against said candidate? In short, if Vosper’s known breach of essential agreement has

been dealt with in this manner, must the same practice not also apply to any other person in ministry? Such questions presently seem to be shaking both clergy and lay members of the U.C.C.. The requisite polity by which these questions could be answered is beyond the scope of this thesis but what is clear is that further research around the U.C.C.‘s theology and practice in relation to non-theistic Christianity is warranted.

2 Is there a place for theism and transcendence in the U.C.C. and is there a target demographic who may still find theism and transcendence to be valuable?

Greater attention can be given to this second main question. It does appear that an effort was made via the Moderator’s statement to assure U.C.C. members that belief in a transcendent, trinitarian God is still one of the core beliefs of the U.C.C.. Additionally, Bott’s unpublished surveys indicate that transcendence still holds a core place in the thinking of most U.C.C. clergy about God. However, questions remain concerning whether traditional theism has a future in the U.C.C., and whether Vosper is merely a representative of a small minority, or if her beliefs are the beginning of a growing threat to the traditional understandings of the U.C.C.

Within the limits of this thesis, only a partial response to these questions is possible as the level of intensive surveying of clergy and lay members that would need to be conducted to give the best insight on the impact of the Vosper controversy is beyond the scope of our argument. A more modest goal is therefore in view. We will review statistics from Canada and the United States offering insight into the beliefs and opinions concerning transcendence and religion generally held by the two generations that will soon be the dominant age bracket of the membership of the U.C.C. As the Greatest Generation and the Baby Boomers age out of the church, it will be Generation X and the Millennials who will take their place.280 Though no full-scale treatment of this question will be attempted, the goal will be to see, so far as we are able, how young people from these demographic

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groups who are encountered by Christian leaders might best be addressed — so as to answer the question whether or not Vosper’s position is likely to appeal to them, and so be workable in the 21st century. In what follows, accordingly, certain of the values of these two generations will be evaluated in comparison to the general summary offered of Vosper’s beliefs. This should provide a framework for gaining at least some insight into whether the theology represented by Vosper will have much sway among the next generation of U.C.C. churchgoers.

2.1 Theological Trends

Looking at the overall decline of Christianity, especially in Protestant churches, in the recent Canadian context may give the superficial impression that Vosper is on to something. According to a study of Canadian attitudes to religion completed by the Angus Reid Institute in 2017, the favorability of Christianity dropped from 74% to 68% between 2009 and 2017. This does not, however, mean that theism is in decline, as other religions that hold theistic beliefs such as Islam have increased in their favorability during the same period.

Although there has been a decrease in favorability for Christianity, rates of church attendance have remained constant, if not increased, in conservative churches. According to an article by the journalist Kate Shellnutt published in the popular magazine, Christianity Today, there has been a decrease of approximately 50% in membership in mainline Christian denominations in Canada collectively over the past 50 years. Shellnutt quotes the Canadian Religion scholar David Haskell to the effect that, “if we are talking solely about which belief system is more likely to lead to numerical growth among Protestant churches, the evidence suggests conservative Protestant theology is the

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283 Kate Shellnutt, “Even in Canada.”
284 David M. Haskell is an associate professor with Wilfred Laurier University who also specializes in digital media and journalism, and religion and culture.
clear winner.” Haskell’s quote was sought out due to an academic paper in which Haskell, together with Kevin Flatt and Stephanie Burgoyne, looked at the traits of growing and declining mainline Protestant church attendees and clergy, the results of which confirmed the conventional view that it is in fact the more conservative Protestant churches that have seen growth and that the demographics of conservative and liberal Protestants are clearly different. The survey found that churches that were declining in numbers were made up of a more elderly population, had fewer singles, and had more widowed congregants. The survey also showed that greater frequency of Bible reading and personal prayer within a congregational membership corresponded with growth of the church population as churches practicing both at a higher frequency had a better rate of growth in their congregations. The religious beliefs of participants were also gauged via a series of statements, showing that participants who attended churches which were experiencing growth showed a greater affinity for theological conservatism, at least on some measures. Two interesting statements which suggest this are the following: “Jesus rose from the dead with a real flesh and blood body, leaving behind an empty tomb”; and “Believing Christians have access to real, supernatural power in this life that is not available to non-believers.” In both cases those who affirmed these statements characteristically belonged to churches with higher growth rates, with 92% percent of congregations that demonstrated growth affirming the former statement, and 77% affirming the latter.

Immigration to Canada from the global south is sometimes thought to explain these

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289 Haskell, et al., “Theology Matters,” 518, 522-3. Haskell provides the following indications of theological conservatism: a belief in the literal physical resurrection of Jesus, disagreement that all major religions are equally good in helping people find ultimate truth, or a belief in spiritual warfare, and a literal belief in traditional Christian doctrines.

numbers. According to an article by Hiemstra and Stiller which charts a wider series of surveys produced not only by the Angus Reid Institute but a collection of other studies from varying sources conducted since the 1980s reveals that immigration may have helped maintain the population in both Orthodox and Evangelical churches.\textsuperscript{291} However, Haskell, Flatt and Burgoyne dispute this by comparing the ethnicity of the increasing (conservative) and decreasing church populations; their results showed only a marginal (1.4\%) deviance toward the conservative churches in relation to ethnicity.\textsuperscript{292}

The trend here seems to imply that more theologically conservative churches have more success maintaining and growing attendance. Since this chapter will focus on both Generation X and Millennials, it would be useful to review a bit more on how those demographics approach both conservative values within politics, which are often linked with more traditional religious beliefs (although not all conservative people are inherently religious or believe in God), and the focus topics of this paper: theism and transcendence.

2.2 Political Trends

Since there is often a link between political conservatism and the religious right, it might be useful to review the results of voting in recent Canadian elections. Here, however, the results appear to be mixed. In the 2015 Canadian Federal election, the number of Millennials who voted for the Conservative Party was much lower than the victorious Liberal Party, with 45\% of people aged 18 to 25 voting for the Liberal Party and only 20\% for the Conservatives.\textsuperscript{293} This would seem to confirm the general sense that Millennials are not prone either to support more conservative values, or the religious right. However, the 2018 Ontario Provincial election, which had one of the highest turnout rates of recent times, both in general and by Millennials, suggests that this conclusion may be open to question. Though there does not seem to be a published study


\textsuperscript{292} This percentage was based on a 69.9\% and 71.3\% Caucasian rate. This study would also imply that the conservative churches seem to hold a slightly higher diversity rate based on ethnicity.

of the percentage of Millennials’ support for the Ontario Progressive Conservative Party in the 2018 election, the result of the election was a massive Progressive Conservative majority, which might suggest that the ground here is less consistently Liberal-leaning than many suppose.

It is, of course, difficult to draw firm conclusions from such broad generalizations. However, a more interesting conclusion arises from a comparison of voting intention reports from 2014 versus 2018 for Ontario based on gender and age, in which there is a considerable swing in evidence towards the Progressive Conservatives for those 18-35 years of age. In the 2014 report, the intention for votes towards Conservative party for those 25 years of age or younger were 27% Conservative, 24% Liberal, 23% NDP and 15% Green Party. In the raw numbers that matter in any first-past-the-post electoral system, the data showed the Conservatives holding a lead among the youngest voters (18-24). In 2014, this was in sharp contrast with the next age bracket, 25-34, where Conservatives stood 12% lower than the Liberal Party in voting intention, and 15% lower than the NDP. Comparative data from the 2018 election is not available, as the 2018 EKOS polls treated 18-34 year-olds as a single group. However, here both the Liberal and Green Parties lost intentional voters, dropping 5% and 12% respectively, while the NDP and the Progressive Conservative party grew 15% and 14% respectively, with the Conservative party maintaining an overall lead. It is striking that in this respect, those aged 18-34 comprised the only demographic other than 65+ which showed a preference toward the Progressive Conservative Party of Ontario.294

What is clearer in current research is that outside of Canada, and specifically in the United States, there are trends implying that Millennials are becoming more inclined toward conservative values. Jean Twenge, a Professor of Psychology at San Diego State

University, was quoted in a 2016 article saying that, “[h]igh school seniors are more likely to identify as political conservatives now compared to 10 years ago. Most surprisingly, more identify as conservatives now compared to the 1980s, presumably the era of the young conservative…. That goes against the common view of millennials as very liberal.” Twenge is making reference to a paper entitled, “More Polarized but More Independent: Political Party Identification and Ideological Self-Categorization Among U.S. Adults, College Students, and Late Adolescents, 1970-2015,” in which the authors note that although the Millennials may be identifying themselves as conservative in higher numbers than in recent decades, this does not mean that they hold exactly the same conservative values as previous generations. Twenge’s paper, being representative of the United States, is not the only source indicating that millennials hold more conservative values. A paper from the British Journal of Political Science describes how the two generations that came of age in 1979 and 2010 are respectively more right-wing or conservative than the preceding generation. These two publications offer a glimpse of a change in how Generation X and the Millennial generations situate themselves politically in contexts analogous to Canada. However, as we shall see, that political conservativism within the younger generations can be coupled with a tendency toward belief in the supernatural, suggesting that younger people are increasingly comfortable with ideas about realities existing beyond the empirically measurable world according to science.

2.3 Transcendent and Paranormal Beliefs

In 1996 the Angus Reid Group released a survey on belief in ghosts across 1,502
Canadians. The question, “do you believe in ghosts?” resulted in the finding that ‘one in four (25%) surveyed Canadians said ‘yes’ while three in four (73%) said they do not believe in ghosts.”

Even back in 1996, however, people aged 18 to 34, who are part of the Generation X demographic, had a higher belief in ghosts at 35%, as compared to those over the age of 35 who were only at 11%. In 2006 a media-based survey was conducted that showed 47% of the Canadians surveyed believed in ghosts.

Another decade on, a Project Canada Survey in partnership with the Angus Reid Group was produced in 2018, showing that Millennials had the highest rate of belief in life after death, at 70%, as compared to the three previous generations (Generation X at 66%, Baby Boomers at 65%, and pre-Boomers at 59%). Though these results are not based on the same surveys, the results are nevertheless interesting as they suggest a clear tendency towards belief in the supernatural or paranormal. Similarly, though somewhat paradoxically, Millennials are more likely to believe in Hell but are rated lower when it comes to a belief in Heaven. The National Post notes Reginald Bibby as saying that this shift towards belief the afterlife is due to the pop-culture of the newer generations, which is a driver of spiritual belief. He also adds the interesting observation that the real divide is not so much between the Millennials and everyone else, but rather that it is the Baby Boomers who are the outliers: “Boomers had a mostly secular pop-culture, and got the afterlife message in church. So, as they grew up and church attendance collapsed, there was little left to keep the belief alive.”

This trend is also seen in the United States, which does make sense when one considers how much pop-culture influence the United States holds over Canada. A 2018 survey

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299 Angus Reid Group, “Canadians’ Stated Belief in ‘Ghosts’,” 2.
301 A professor in the Department of Sociology at the University of Lethbridge, Reginald Bibby monitors social trends in Canada via national surveys of adults and youth and has gathered much historic data on religious trends.
from Chapman University demonstrated that 58% of Americans surveyed believe that a place can be haunted by spirits. Simultaneously, the study showed that over 30% of Americans believe in ancient advanced civilizations, such as the mythology of Atlantis (sitting at 57%), or in aliens (at 41%). The survey also noted that only 24.1% of people have no paranormal beliefs at all.

Bibby’s comment about the pop-culture influence on the Canadian Millennials’ belief in the paranormal makes sense as, if a country like the United States had a high demographic that believed in paranormal realities, it would only be logical for the media industry to gear their production to that belief.

The obvious question which arises is this: Did the media influence the trend in beliefs or did the demographics of belief influence the media? For the purpose of this thesis, the tentative view can be that the answer is most likely somewhere in between. I would suggest that since Generation X and Millennials did not grow up in the church as commonly as Baby Boomers did, cultural expectations surrounding spirituality, the supernatural, and transcendence were not so often associated with childhood experiences of institutional religion. However, these two generations also did not experience a generational exodus from the church and therefore, to them, ideas and mysteries that are often associated with church are not necessarily taboo. Mystery in spirituality and the like were, to them, now areas for exploration with even children’s novels depicting wizards, ghosts, monsters, and fairies, and with common cultural attitudes to science and technology being coupled with the stories of science fiction, aliens, mutant heroes, and so on. The unseen thus became a wonderful adventure and a way to tell moralistic stories of epic battles between good and evil. Transcendence has thus slowly found its way back into the vocabulary and art expressions of Generation X and Millennials.

2.4 The Future of the U.C.C.

It is difficult to say whether the U.C.C. will look to the trends discussed above to make decisions about how to approach the next generation of churchgoers. Changed attitudes toward the transcendent, the supernatural, and God are most likely to process naturally as new clergy from the younger generations hold increasing authority. It is perfectly
possible that a natural progression toward a more conservative theological outlook can also be expected to flow from this. There is already clear evidence from some contexts that Generation X and Millennials are more politically conservative than the Baby Boomers; beyond this, however, they appear clearly to be more positively inclined to the supernatural than the generation prior. On one level, this seems promising for the future of the U.C.C., and indeed the churches generally though, admittedly, the church faces deep challenges in this area, since there are many more people from these generations who are “unchurched” than “churched.”

The challenge faced may be summarized as follows. Many of the younger generations (i.e. Millennials and younger) may be more inclined to transcendence but, as they have been disengaged from institutional religion for at least one generation, the fact of the matter is that they (especially Millennials) are now commonly receiving their “religious” ideas more from pop-culture than from the church. They are very often, as it is said, “spiritual but not religious,” and indeed appear in many cases to be indifferent to the church per se. In a way, Vosper’s disposition to weigh anything as equal to the Bible and the teachings of Jesus is quite embedded in the outlook of the Millennial generation, with the crucial difference that Vosper regards the whole in a non-theistic way whereas the young appear to be much more receptive to ideas about transcendent or unseen reality.

Whether one or the other is better is another debate altogether. I believe, however, that it is possible for church leaders to hope that the future will see an increased openness towards church in Millennials, in particular, as they approach the age of familiar ceremonies such as weddings, baptisms, and funerals. Also, I would argue that it is important that we learn from conservative churches which maintain their numbers ahead of liberal churches like the U.C.C. due to a conservative commitment to evangelism. It is likely that the conservative churches are presently more proactively pulling in the younger demographic by taking advantage of the characteristics and beliefs of Generation X and the Millennials. If they are to survive, the mainline churches will need to do the same.

Although Vosper’s insights are undoubtedly represented among the next generation of
possible churchgoers in Canada, in other words, it is much more likely that a church in which evangelism, somewhat more conservative values, and above all, a belief in a reality that transcends the empirical world would be more attractive to this generation. It follows that, if it is to be part of the mainstream rather than merely survive, the U.C.C. will need to adapt to this new situation. The U.C.C.’s tendency toward prioritizing social justice, anti-racism, and inclusion of the LGBT+ community, alongside political accountability, and a certain openness to eclectic expressions of belief, would work well with such an approach and help it to speak well to the Millennial generation as a whole. The future is thus not all bleak. However, if the U.C.C. would like to reach out to younger generations, it needs also to delve into its more overtly evangelistic heritage so as to rediscover and share what its belief in a transcendent God is all about.

3 What might the U.C.C. look like as it enters a post-Vosper age?

The question that many people in the U.C.C. have asked to date might be put as follows: what will the U.C.C. look like in an era of clergy like Vosper? This chapter has suggested, however, that this may be the wrong question since, in a profound sense, Vosper’s theology seems to be somewhat outdated in relation to the inclinations of the younger generations. In order to move on to advance this conclusion, we may summarize the argument of the thesis as a whole as follows:

1. The U.C.C.’s recent history provided the context for a perfect storm to foster atheism within its clergy. However, despite that storm, there were certain gains made, and in the meantime, for all its theological weaknesses, the U.C.C. has, on the whole, maintained belief in a transcendent God.

2. Following the 1960s there was a decrease in church attendance, with the alienation of the Baby Boomers and the older portion of Generation X from the church. This seemed to coincide with a decreased belief in transcendence and in theism. Being in this age demographic, Vosper seems to fit the broad trend of her generation.
3. Most of Generation X and the Millennial generation, however, did not witness the alienation experienced by the Baby Boomers and the older portion of Generation X from church, and did not take on taboos against transcendence, theism, or associated ideas such as that of an afterlife. This allowed these generations to develop a clear sense of Mystery and of its personal importance.

4. An increase in conservative values, belief in the supernatural, and a pop-culture that affirms elements of transcendence among the younger generation has created a context in which there is a value for personal spirituality and belief in a reality existing beyond empirical data.

5. A major hurdle that stands between the younger generations and the U.C.C. is that Generation X and Millennials no longer have cultural familiarity with Christian faith or the church.

6. Therefore, if historically Liberal Protestant churches like the U.C.C. wish to take advantage of changing demographics, they need to make peace with and find themselves comfortable with a version of evangelicalism.

To develop the final, all-important point, we need to reflect on how a commitment to what I will describe as a “liberal evangelicalism” can help shape the future of the U.C.C., considering what we have argued about the next generation of churchgoers. By “liberal evangelicalism,” I mean a commitment to bringing people to Christian faith in God, but to a faith that is defined generously and that is open to new, inclusive and pluralist insight, while also being concretely committed to personal spiritual formation and to the common good in the social and political sense. As we shall see, such evangelicalism has existed in the U.C.C.’s past and might well be rediscovered as a central concern of the U.C.C. in the future.

Barna Group C.E.O. David Kinnaman is cited in a media article from Welch College as maintaining that many of the millennials who have never been or are no longer associated with a church in the U.S. are opposed to the church for two interesting reasons. Those who left churches did so because they were given “little intergenerational mentoring,
little depth, substance and transcendence in the worship, preaching, teaching and other practices of the church.” Kinnaman argues that the church needs to reconsider how it makes disciples, recognize the calling and vocations of people, and hold a new vision for the world to “pass the faith to this and future generations.” Kinnaman seems to recognize that there is a need for the younger generation to approach moral issues and questions of transcendence in the light of the mystery of God which is something that the church can obviously offer.

At the same time, it has been argued that there is a common thread of belief underlying the outlook held by those in the younger generations who do have theistic belief. Christian Smith labels this emerging belief in the Millennial community as “moralistic therapeutic deism” (M.T.D.). Smith states that those subscribing to the M.T.D. belief system (“the M.T.D.s”) share a common view that there is a God who is “up there,” but generally the point of there being a God “up there” relates to personal and social morality, and particularly to the “therapeutic” benefits of belief. This common thread, it would appear, exists regardless of the denominational affiliation, community, or particular creed of the Millennial generation. In its most simple terms, the belief can be summed up as a conviction that good and kind people go to heaven when they die, regardless of their religion, and life is about attaining a subjective well-being without denigrating the good, while valuing the kindness one shows to others. This is interesting, since Millennials are often referred to as the “Me” generation, and are often stereotyped as narcissistic and ego-driven. However, as Smith notes, the M.T.D.s often

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303 “Don’t Get the Answers Wrong on Why Millennials are Leaving the Church,” Welch College (July 24, 2018), accessed January 12, 2019: https://welch.edu/dont-get-the-answers-wrong-on-why-millennials-are-leaving-the-church/?fbclid=IwAR1bwanv5px_jog3Ov6RwsWhl7P9find6550C1gxFjGweMe1vYnd20-d40ko; David Kinnaman is president of Barna Group, a leading research and communications company that works with churches, non-profits, and businesses ranging from film studios to financial services, which has directed interviews with nearly one million individuals and overseen hundreds of U.S. and global research studies.


306 Smith and Denton, Soul Searching, 164.

believe God is always there willing to help when called upon, so much so that, in Smith’s words, they effectively see God as a personal “Divine Butler and Cosmic Therapist.”

Theologically there is much in this outlook that is questionable and that needs to be enriched. That God is thus placed at our disposal rather than we at God’s, for instance, is one of the major points at which the theologian might well demur. However, we may also judge that it is certain that this simplistic “butler therapist” theology will be challenged as life goes on and so change with age as the demographic approaches the ceremonial or challenging elements of life where more substantial religious guidance is sure to be needed. However, the Liberal Protestant churches such as the U.C.C. which focus on kindness and social justice would offer a perfect fit for many of the M.T.D.s, assuming that Millennials with this disposition can be shown the usefulness of church membership in cultivating, deepening, and even Christianizing such spirituality.

John H. Young has noted that the older evangelism that existed in the history of the U.C.C. could in essence be one of the U.C.C.’s saving graces. In an important article, “Liberal Evangelicalism and the Formation of the United Church: A Usable Legacy for Our Future?” Young reviews the explanation as to why evangelicalism left the U.C.C.’s toolbelt in the first place, and finds the rationale wanting. Young believes, however, that such liberal evangelicalism can be a gift from the past to help renew the church. Like Kinnaman, Young notes that one of the elements of the evangelical past which could be redeveloped is “intentionality in Christian formation,” as something that engages not just a person’s individual formation, but also their formation into the denomination. Young believes that since secular society is so prominent a church must offer genuine and clearly identifiable resources to those who come to investigate what Christian faith is about. Amorphous good intentions will not suffice. Expanding upon

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308 Smith and Denton, *Soul Searching*, 165.
310 Young points to four contributing factors to the breakdown of liberal evangelicalism in the U.C.C.: (1) tension regarding what kind of moral and social reform should be sought; (2) disputes regarding the importance of evangelism vs. social service; (3) the rise of secularism; and (4) the rise of neo-orthodox theology.
311 Young, “Liberal Evangelicalism.”
this, I would add that the support offered to a Millennial would have to be at least equivalent to secular forms of self-help, including help with cultivating a good overall life experience. We need to remember that Millennials are frequently frustrated by major aspects of life experience, including in their prospects for marriage and children, in the cost of housing, and in employment precarity. Young points out that historically, liberal evangelicalism focused on a life of service in a society immersed in a Christian identity. In today’s context, this social identity has largely been lost, but the truth is that the service element can be utilized in a new context, so that Christians and the U.C.C. with them can have a continuing history of civic engagement in the expression of piety. I would suggest that Young’s assessment fits well with Smith and Denton’s definition of the M.T.D.s, and that the M.T.D.’s personal motivation toward kindness would mesh well with a rediscovery of the service history of U.C.C. evangelism.

In looking at the trends of both Generation X and the Millennials we see that there are similarities but also definite differences between the values of Vosper and the next generation of U.C.C. congregants. It would appear that with the shift towards somewhat more conservative values, an increased belief in the supernatural and transcendence, a need for — if not a desire to find — a system of formation, along with the underlying M.T.D. beliefs, could well be important if the U.C.C. wishes to approach the next stage in its development as a church post-Vosper. The argument of this thesis suggests that the church would be better served if its work and witness included a healthy appreciation of the importance of transcendence, coupled with a new evangelism consistent with the U.C.C.’s distinctive ethos, targeting the needs of the next generation, than it would be by a wholesale endorsement of what I have argued is Vosper’s rather outdated vision.

312 Young, “Liberal Evangelicalism,” 22.
313 Young, “Liberal Evangelicalism,” 22.
Conclusion

This thesis was written to serve multiple ends. First, it was conceived as a way to address the continuing controversy around the claims of Gretta Vosper about non-theism in the U.C.C., providing insight as to what Vosper herself believes as an atheist minister, and how that outlook developed. The treatment of sources of U.C.C. theology as basic to the North American mainstream as Paul Tillich provided a deeper appreciation of Vosper’s theological inspirations. Vosper does not stand alone, even if certain of the implications she has drawn from her beliefs make her a unique case. We have seen how theological and ecclesiological developments of the 1960s, furthermore, shaped not only Vosper’s eventual education in the U.C.C., but also the institutional U.C.C. of which she is a part. However, the thesis has also contended that the cultural winds have now changed to such an extent that a look at the future of the U.C.C. in light of trends seen with the up and coming generation is needed in order to develop a useful and realistic response to the Vosper controversy. It is inevitably younger people, the Generation X and Millennial Christians, who will soon become the driving force behind church life — even if this is in a numerically smaller church.

This thesis has argued that only some of the values which Vosper has championed have been adopted by the next generation. On the whole, however, and to the contrary, Vosper’s main project will fail them, given the increased interest in transcendence and the commitment to supernatural conceptions that are so pronounced in the cultural preferences of Generation X and Millennials. The conclusion must be that these characteristics of the coming church membership open a potential doorway for a church that for the most part continues to believe in God to rediscover what it believes and how it rightly lives and works, so as to engage a new generation of disciples.

This implies that the U.C.C. presently finds itself at a crossroads. One road ahead leads to a continuing expansion of its inclusivity to embrace the non-theistic standpoint. This, however, will likely have the effect of thinning the theological framework which binds it together and supports it to the extent that it is left with only a secular humanism to proclaim, or at best a God-option. It is far from clear that such a church would survive
demographically, and certainly recent experience has not been encouraging. A second road would lead to a kind of reformation in which lines were drawn in the sand and the inclusivity of atheism in the U.C.C. would be largely abandoned. Those entering into the ministry, and the existing clergy and their paid accountable staff, would here have to affirm a theological “essential agreement” with a theology conceived in terms of clearer boundaries. It is possible that such a church would survive, but it is also clear that it would involve abandoning much that is of value in the U.C.C. tradition of openness and inclusivity — values that are, we must remember, central to the outlook of the next generation of church members. A third road would be possible as well, the road of schism, in which the pro-theistic, and the theistic-optional demographics could separate into factions. This, of course, would likewise be an affront to the church’s name, and a sign of failure.

In this context, this thesis proposes a fourth option, or a fourth road if you like, which is the road of more profound theological and ecclesiological change — a change that becomes necessary in response to changing demographics. None of the other possible routes ahead have the advantages of this option which seeks to be open to the future and to be attentive to what is happening in the present. This proposal might seem like a pragmatic solution to some degree, a solution led not by theological principle so much as by culture and demographics, but with an aging population, do we have any choice? The next generation of U.C.C. Christians, comprising Generation X, the Millennials and, not least, the coming “IGen,” today’s technologically-connected children, will inherit a substantially vacant institution, and those of them who are U.C.C. members will be looking for new life. A liberal evangelism that is faithful to what is best in the past of the U.C.C., but that is also open to the “signs of the times” in the present, would be well-placed to offer new hope. Inevitably, the disposition of these next generations will shape what is to come in the U.C.C.. Contrary to Vosper’s claims, there is much evidence to suggest that an openness to transcendence and a willingness to speak meaningfully of the unseen as well as the seen will be a key part of whatever new life is to be found in that coming church.
Bibliography


Appendices

Appendix A: A New Creed (1968)

We are not alone,
    we live in God’s world.

We believe in God:
    who has created and is creating,
    who has come in Jesus,
        the Word made flesh,
        to reconcile and make new,
    who works in us and others
        by the Spirit.

We trust in God.

    We are called to be the Church:
        to celebrate God’s presence,
        to live with respect in Creation,
        to love and serve others,
        to seek justice and resist evil,
        to proclaim Jesus, crucified and risen,
            our judge and our hope.

In life, in death, in life beyond death,
    God is with us.
We are not alone.

    Thanks be to God.
Appendix B: The Basis of Union

General. -- 1. The name of the Church formed by the union of the Presbyterian, Methodist and Congregational Churches in Canada, shall be "The United Church of Canada." 2. It shall be the policy of The United Church to foster the spirit of unity in the hope that this sentiment of unity may in due time, so far as Canada is concerned, take shape in a Church which may fittingly be described as national.

Doctrine. -- We, the representatives of the Presbyterian, the Methodist, and the Congregational branches of the Church of Christ in Canada, do hereby set forth the substance of the Christian faith, as commonly held among us. In doing so, we build upon the foundation laid by the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ himself being the chief corner-stone. We affirm our belief in the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments as the primary source and ultimate standard of Christian faith and life. We acknowledge the teaching of the great creeds of the ancient Church. We further maintain our allegiance to the evangelical doctrines of the Reformation, as set forth in common in the doctrinal standards adopted by the Presbyterian Church in Canada, by the Congregational Union of Ontario and Quebec, and by the Methodist Church. We present the accompanying statement as a brief summary of our common faith and commend it to the studious attention of the members and adherents of the negotiating Churches, as in substance agreeable to the teaching of the Holy Scriptures.

Art. I. Of God. -- We believe in the one only living and true God, a Spirit infinite, eternal and unchangeable, in His being and perfections; the Lord Almighty, who is love, most just in all His ways, most glorious in holiness, unsearchable in wisdom, plenteous in mercy, full of compassion, abundant in goodness and truth. We worship Him in the unity of the Godhead and the mystery of the Holy Trinity, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, three persons of the same substance, equal in power and glory.

Art. II. Of Revelation. -- We believe that God has revealed Himself in nature, in history, and in the heart of man; that He has been graciously pleased to make clearer revelation of Himself to men of God who spoke as they were moved by the Holy Spirit; and that in the fulness of time He has perfectly revealed Himself in Jesus Christ, the Word made flesh, who is the brightness of the Father's glory and the express image of His person. We receive the Holy Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments, given by inspiration of God, as containing the only infallible rule of faith and life, a faithful record of God's gracious revelations, and as the sure witness to Christ.

Art. III. Of the Divine Purpose. -- We believe that the eternal, wise, holy, and loving purpose of God so embraces all events that, while the freedom of man is not taken away, nor is God the author of sin, yet in His providence He makes all things work together in the fulfilment of His sovereign design and the manifestation of His glory.

Art. IV. Of Creation and Providence. -- We believe that God is the creator, upholder and governor of all things; that He is above all His works and in them all; and that He made man in His own image, meet for fellowship with Him, free and able to choose between good and evil, and responsible to his Maker and Lord.
Art. V. Of the Sin of Man. -- We believe that our first parents, being tempted, chose evil, and so fell away from God and came under the power of sin, the penalty of which is eternal death; and that, by reason of this disobedience, all men are born with a sinful nature, that we have broken God's law and that no man can be saved but by His grace.

Art. VI. Of the Grace of God. -- We believe that God, out of His great love for the world, has given His only begotten Son to be the Saviour of sinners, and in the Gospel freely offers His all-sufficient salvation to all men. We believe also that God, in His own good pleasure, gave to His Son a people, an innumerable multitude, chosen in Christ unto holiness, service and salvation.

Art. VII. Of the Lord Jesus Christ. -- We believe in and confess the Lord Jesus Christ, the only Mediator between God and man, who, being the eternal Son of God, for us men and for our salvation became truly man, being conceived of the Holy Spirit and born of the Virgin Mary, yet without sin. Unto us He has revealed the Father, by His word and Spirit, making known the perfect will of God. For our redemption He fulfilled all righteousness, offered Himself a perfect sacrifice on the cross, satisfied Divine justice and made propitiation for the sins of the whole world. He rose from the dead and ascended into Heaven, where He ever intercedes for us. In the hearts of believers He abides forever as the indwelling Christ; above us and over us all He rules; wherefore, unto Him we render love, obedience and adoration as our Prophet, Priest and King.

Art. VIII. Of the Holy Spirit. -- We believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord and Giver of life, who proceeds from the Father and the Son, who moves upon the hearts of men to restrain them from evil and to incite them unto good, and whom the Father is ever willing to give unto all who ask Him. We believe that He has spoken by holy men of God in making known His truth to men for their salvation; that, through our exalted Saviour, He was sent forth with power to convict the world of sin, to enlighten men's minds in the knowledge of Christ, and to persuade and enable them to obey the call of the Gospel; and that He abides with the Church, dwelling in every believer as the spirit of truth, of power, of holiness, of comfort and of love.

Art. IX. Of Regeneration. -- We believe in the necessity of regeneration, whereby we are made new creatures in Christ Jesus by the Spirit of God, who imparts spiritual life by the gracious and mysterious operation of His power, using as the ordinary means the truths of His word and the ordinances of Divine appointment in ways agreeable to the nature of men.

Art. X. Of Faith and Repentance. -- We believe that faith in Christ is a saving grace whereby we receive Him, trust in Him and rest upon Him alone for salvation as He is offered to us in the Gospel, and that this saving faith is always accompanied by repentance, wherein we confess and forsake our sins with full purpose of and endeavor after a new obedience to God.

Art. XI. Of Justification and Sonship. -- We believe that God, on the sole ground of the perfect obedience and sacrifice of Christ, pardons those who by faith receive Him as their Saviour and Lord, accepts them as righteous, and bestows upon them the adoption of
sons, with a right to all the privileges therein implied, including a conscious assurance of their sonship.

Art. XII. Of Sanctification. -- We believe that those who are regenerated and justified grow in the likeness of Christ through fellowship with Him, the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, and obedience to the truth; that a holy life is the fruit and evidence of saving faith; and that the believer's hope of continuance in such a life is in the persevering grace of God. And we believe that in this growth in grace Christians may attain that maturity and full assurance of faith whereby the love of God is made perfect in us.

Art. XIII. Of Prayer. -- We believe that we are encouraged to draw near to God, our Heavenly Father, in the name of His Son, Jesus Christ, and on our own behalf and that of others to pour out our hearts humbly yet freely before Him, as becomes His beloved children, giving Him the honor and praise due His holy name, asking Him to glorify Himself on earth as in heaven, confessing unto Him our sins and seeking of Him every gift needful for this life and for our everlasting salvation. We believe also that, inasmuch as all true prayer is prompted by His Spirit, He will in response thereto grant us every blessing according to His unsearchable wisdom and the riches of His grace in Jesus Christ.

Art. XIV. Of the Law of God. -- We believe that the moral law of God, summarized in the Ten Commandments, testified to by the prophets and unfolded in the life and teachings of Jesus Christ, stands forever in truth and equity, and is not made void by faith, but on the contrary is established thereby. We believe that God requires of every man to do justly, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with God; and that only through this harmony with the will of God shall be fulfilled that brotherhood of man wherein the kingdom of God is to be made manifest.

Art. XV. Of the Church. -- We acknowledge one holy Catholic Church, the innumerable company of saints of every age and nation, who being united by the Holy Spirit to Christ their Head are one body in Him and have communion with their Lord and with one another. Further, we receive it as the will of Christ that His Church on earth should exist as a visible and sacred brotherhood, consisting of those who profess faith in Jesus Christ and obedience to Him, together with their children, and other baptized children, and organized for the confession of His name, for the public worship of God, for the administration of the sacraments, for the upbuilding of the saints, and for the universal propagation of the Gospel; and we acknowledge as a part, more or less pure, of this universal brotherhood, every particular Church throughout the world which professes this faith in Jesus Christ and obedience to Him as divine Lord and Saviour.

Art. XVI. Of the Sacraments. -- We acknowledge two sacraments, Baptism and the Lord's Supper, which were instituted by Christ, to be of perpetual obligation as signs and seals of the covenant ratified in His precious blood, as means of grace, by which, working in us, He doth not only quicken, but also strengthen and comfort our faith in Him, and as ordinances through the observance of which His Church is to confess her Lord and be visibly distinguished from the rest of the world.1. Baptism with water into the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit is the sacrament by which are signified
and sealed our union to Christ and participation in the blessings of the new covenant. The proper subjects of baptism are believers, and infants presented by their parents or guardians in the Christian faith. In the latter case, the parents or guardians should train up their children in the nurture and admonition of the Lord, and should expect that their children will, by the operation of the Holy Spirit, receive the benefits which the sacrament is designed and fitted to convey. The Church is under the most solemn obligation to provide for their Christian instruction.2. The Lord's Supper is the sacrament of communion with Christ and with His people, in which bread and wine are given and received in thankful remembrance of Him and His sacrifice on the cross; and they who in faith receive the same, after a spiritual manner, partake of the body and blood of the Lord Jesus Christ to their comfort, nourishment and growth in grace. All may be admitted to the Lord's Supper who make a credible profession of their faith in the Lord Jesus Christ and of obedience to His law.

Art. XVII. Of the Ministry. -- We believe that Jesus Christ, as the Supreme Head of the Church, has appointed therein a ministry of the word and sacraments, and calls men to this ministry; that the Church, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, recognizes and chooses those whom He calls, and should thereupon duly ordain them to the work of the ministry.

Art. XVIII. Of Church Order and Fellowship. -- We believe that the Supreme and only Head of the Church is the Lord Jesus Christ; that its worship, teaching, discipline and government should be administered according to His will by persons chosen for their fitness and duly set apart to their office, and that although the visible Church may contain unworthy members and is liable to err, yet believers ought not lightly to separate themselves from its communion, but are to live in fellowship with their brethren, which fellowship is to be extended, as God gives opportunity, to all who in every place call upon the name of the Lord Jesus.

Art. XIX. Of the Resurrection, the Last Judgment and the Future Life. -- We believe that there shall be a resurrection of the dead, both of the just and of the unjust, through the power of the Son of God, who shall come to judge the living and the dead; that the finally impenitent shall go away into eternal punishment and the righteous into His eternal.

Art. XX. Of Christian Service and the Final Triumph. -- We believe that it is our duty as disciples and servants of Christ, to further the extension of His kingdom, to do good unto all men, to maintain the public and private worship of God, to hallow the Lord's Day, to preserve the inviolability of marriage and the sanctity of the family, to uphold the just authority of the State, and so to live in all honesty, purity and charity that our lives shall testify of Christ. We joyfully receive the word of Christ, bidding His people go into all the world and make disciples of all nations, declaring unto them that God was in Christ reconciling the world unto Himself, and that He will have all men to be saved, and come to the knowledge of the truth. We confidently believe that by His power and grace all His enemies shall finally be overcome, and the kingdoms of this world be made the kingdom of our God and of His Christ.
Appendix C: Ordination Questions

[1] Presider: Within the ministry of the whole people of God, you are called to a ministry of Word and Sacrament and Pastoral Care. You are to exercise your ministry in accordance with the scriptures and in continuity with the faith of the Church. With God’s people, you are to discern the needs, concerns and hopes of the world and proclaim by word and deed the justice of God’s reign. You are to love and service the people among whom you work, caring alike for young and old, strong and weak, rich and poor. You are to teach and preach, to declare God’s judgment and forgiveness and announce God’s blessing in the assembly of the people, to lead in prayer and preside at the font of baptism and at the table of the Lord. You are to nourish, and be nourished by Christ’s people from the riches of God’s grace and, together with them, to glorify God in this life and in the life to come. I ask you therefore, do you believe in God who created and is creating, who has come in Jesus, the Word made flesh, to reconcile and make new, and who works in us and others by the Holy Spirit?

Candidates: I do.

[2] Presider: Do you believe that God is calling you to the ordained ministry of Word, Sacrament and Pastoral Care and do you accept this call?

Candidates: I do.

[3] Presider: Will you, with Christ’s people, be faithful in prayer and in the study of scripture, that you may know the mind of Christ?

Candidates: I will.

[4] Presider: Will you endeavor to teach and preach the Word of God and to administer the sacraments, that the reconciling love of Christ may be known and received?

Candidates: I will.

[5] Presider: Will you be faithful in the pastoral care of all whom you are called to serve, laboring together with them to build up the household of God?

Candidates: I will

[6] Presider: Are you willing to exercise your ministry in accordance

314 Numbers mine.
with the scriptures, in continuity with the faith of the Church, and subject to the oversight and discipline of the United Church of Canada?

Candidates: I will

[7] Presider: May God, who has given you the will to do these things, give you the grace and power to perform them.
Curriculum Vitae

Name: Jacob Alexander Shaw

EDUCATION

Master of Arts in Theology
Western University (Huron University College)
In Progress
London, Ontario

Master of Divinity
Queens University
November 2014
Kingston, Ontario

Bachelor of Theology
Western University (Huron University College)
June 2011
London, Ontario

ACADEMIC EXPERIENCE

Research Assistant
Western University (Huron University College)
London, Ontario
September 2016-July 2018