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Scott

An Interview with Nicola Young Jackson - Past President, International Humanist and Ethical Youth Organisation

October 8, 2016

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

If you do define as a progressive, how do you define this? How do you implement this in your own life?

I try to think about my actions and their effects. I try not to do things just because they are the 'done' thing. Actions can have wider consequences that are not always apparent until you look deeper. I put my conscience before my culture.

For example, I'm Jewish. Jewish people tend to circumcise their sons. Is it right my culture expects irreversible surgery, causing trauma to a defenseless baby by those that love him the most? In my opinion not.

Not enough people think about their actions. Humanism encourages this kind of action. It is surprising how much we agree on; when we put the onus on the individual to think about ethics and make decisions. There is a correlation with being vegetarian, because we consider the impacts. Is it right? Is it right to eat meat?

Did you grow up in a Judaism and then renounce the faith, or in an ethnically Jewish home and not have religion discussed in the home?

Neither, I grew up in a small village in Yorkshire. Virtually everyone is Christian, white and British. I was different. My mum is Jewish. She stopped practicing when she married my dad. My dad is and outspoken Atheist.

Aged 4, my parents sent me to school with a letter. They asked for me not to have to pray when everybody else did. So, I was marked as the non-religious kid. The only one in a school of 200.

Did this your impact relationships with friends?

Interestingly not, in some ways, it strengthened them. My best friend's dad was the vicar that visited my primary school. At that age, I didn't think anybody actually believed in God. It seemed like the thing to pretend to believe in.

I never thought people believed in Santa Claus or the Tooth fairy either. Even to a child, I thought religion and Christmas were a silly game of pretend. My best friend really does believe and that was a huge shock to me. When she met me, she couldn't believe people wouldn't believe in God. This lead to a lot of conversations. Almost 20 years later we are still debating, with no hard feelings. She even gave me the honor of being one of her bridesmaids.

You took on the role of leading IHEYO. What is IHEYO. How did you earn that role?

IHEYO is the International Humanist and Ethical Youth Organization. It is the umbrella organization for non-religious youth organizations in the world. IHEYO is for people aged 18-35. For instance, the British Humanist Association's youth wing is a member.

My first role was Secretary of the Atheist Society at my university. I later became involved in the AHS, which is the National Federation of Atheist, Humanist and Secularist Student Societies. I was also the Secretary for it.

Through it, I found out about IHEYO. A few years later, I was unwell. It was difficult for me to leave the house. A contact from the AHS told me, "IHEYO needs a Treasurer." It was perfect. I had always wanted a Treasurer role and I didn't need to leave the house to be a part of it.

When my 2-year term as Treasurer finished, I ran for President and served for another 2.

What have been the impacts of humanist organizations? What have you gained from them?

The personal and wider effect of humanist organizations is very big. For me, before university, I had never had any non-religious friends. Being involved in IHEYO was amazing. I have made friends all over the world. I loved all the human relationships with truly inspirational people.

Humanist organizations are important. They provide a space for people that do not have a belief in to be themselves. We have a specific worldview. It is difficult to go back. We are a huge force for good in the world. There are humanists in almost every country campaigning for positive change. For instance, in Ghana and Nigeria they campaign against witchcraft accusations.

In Nepal and Uganda, they have a huge focus on education and have humanist schools. In the Philippines they provide free healthcare and in India they campaign against false healers.

IHEYO has changed my worldview. Many people I've met through IHEYO have very different background to me, yet we often have more in common that I have with friends I grew up with. I discovered common humanist views.

I have been vegetarian since I was allowed (aged 16). Finally, I met other that are vegetarian for the same rational reasons as I. I get a huge sense of belonging from connecting with people who also ethically think about every decision in their lives. Now I have people I can discuss ethical dilemmas with. That's been big for me.

What is the importance of a socially progressive outlook?

It is important because if societies continue to do what they've always done, the damage continues. Social progressivism is the means to achieve utopia or true equality. I'm not saying we will reach it. I am saying it is something to aim for. There are things in this world we all don't like; we are the people seeking to change it. You need to be progressive and challenge things.

Where I grew up, it was racist, homophobic, and sexist. The corner shop had a racist nick-name, because the family that ran it aren't white. Being called 'gay' was an insult and boys were pressured to be macho and girls were expected to live for male attention. Challenging all viewpoints is important. Even things that on first examination seem innocuous, might not be after further thought. Such as the view that girls play with baby dolls and boys with lego.

It sounds small, but I see that as huge. It pushes unhealthy social ideals into children. Being a parent isn't exclusive to women. By saying babies are for girls, further down the line, are men going to take an equal share of child care?

Where do you see areas of regression through encroachment of religious institutions on state issues, individually or collectively, in the UK?

This is an interesting one. My experience of Christianity is very different than my father experience being a Christian in the 50s and 60s. He feels one in their right mind rejects evolution because, when he was growing up, Christians tended to accept it.

Whereas, for my generation, there's a huge influx of the Pentecostals, the Evangelicals, who believe in faith healings and the anti-science. We are going backwards there. People denying evolution. That's a real issue.

I see a convergence of political, religious and scientific issues. For example, the politicization of science and religion, where the political discourse involves theological and scientific content.

We have a lot of faith schools here in the UK. They are schools with a specific faith. All 3 I went to were Christian. I learned the Lord's Prayer off by heart and was taught that the bible was historical facts, backed up by science. When I went to school, schools, by law, could discriminate 50% of the schools' students.

Now, there is a proposal for 100% discrimination. I'm worried. There are zero Jewish schools, or Humanist schools in my area. I am currently looking for a family home here, with the plan of having a family, I have to look at primary schools and am afraid because I don't know how much schools will be put off accepting my children. Why? I am not a churchgoer.

Do you have any advice for humanists, secularists, agnostics, and so on, that might be going through similar tough considerations about their own future?

The British Humanist Association is a great organization. They do great work. It has full-time staff member that campaigns solely to end faith schools. This is such a huge thing. You should join the British Humanist Association and get in touch whenever you experience any form of discrimination due not being the 'right' religion.

Thank you for your time, Nicola.

Extended Interview with Pat O'Brien – Ex-President of Humanist Canada and the British Columbia Humanist Association

October 13, 2016

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

Pat O'Brien is a Canadian atheist, an activist, and ex-president of Humanist Canada and the British Columbia Humanist Association.

In terms of geography, culture, and language, where does your family background reside?

Vancouver B.C.

Your biographic information from the Center for Inquiry Canada (CFIC/CFI Canada) website describes brief personal information about the pivotal moment for your transformation into a skeptic mentality, as follows:

At the age of 8 when told “watched water never boils”, Pat put a pot of water on the stove and proved the adage wrong, thus began the life of a skeptic. Pat did not begin his official involvement in the secular/skeptical movement till 2001 when he was researching a documentary on Humanism.

What other pivotal moments in early life stimulated intellectual affirmation of skepticism?

I was raised a Catholic but from an early age I liked to ask questions and the church never seemed to have satisfactory answers. My education from grade 1 – 5 was in a Catholic school where we were taught by nuns and they did not have any answers either so it was a gradual realisation that the teaching of the church, since they could not be backed up by facts, must be in some way wrong.

What about other moments which piqued interest in humanism, secularism, and other “-isms” with relative correspondence, or reasonable conceptual overlap, with aspects of the skeptical worldview?

I was always a contrarian. I liked to take the “other” side of an argument because it seemed the best way to learn about the argument. I never took someone’s word for anything, I always wanted proof. This is the basis of scepticism and although I did not know it at the time, that is the first step towards atheism.

In an article entitled ‘Humanists see light at end of subway tunnel’, you defined humanism, as follows:

Humanism is neither a religion nor a theology and the fact that a person can live a moral life, without deferring to any deity, has been recognised and accepted by religious and secular communities.

Organisations such as American Humanist Association, for instance, defined humanism within the Humanist Manifesto, in one of its three forms, in a similar frame of reference. A suite of associations, societies, and organisations exist for the secular humanist community – which can create a chary sense in the less secular, less humanistic, and more religious – in British Columbia, other provinces, the territories, and the nation at large.

Of course, the major continental and international organisations for the secular humanist movement exist, too. These remain theories and collectives, though. What does humanism look like in one's real life to you – big and small aspects?

This will sound arrogant and is something I criticize the religious for but I believe that we are all Humanist at our core. I don't think people get their morality from religion, I think religion gets its morality from humans and our shared evolutionary past that imprinted morality not on our hearts but in our DNA.

So, to answer the question, Humanism is the articulation of that morality that is inherent in most of us (there will always be the Clifford Olsen's) and our shared humanity, our feeling of what is right and wrong is innate in us, in a naturalistic way. So unlike religion where one must constantly have their religious version of morality reinforced by prayer church attendance etc. we Humanists simply live a moral life without much thought to it most of the time.

What unique opportunities and representations exist for the sub-population of the “unaffiliated,” “no religious affiliation,” “no religion,” “none,” and so on, in British Columbia (B.C.), Canada?

I think we have a lot to offer the general public, mostly in the area of science and the discovery of the natural world and how that creates a most beautiful way of looking at the world. Some, like Oprah, think atheists can't have either awe or wonder. I think the opposite is true because we see things as they really are, not as we would like them to be.

The beauty of a rainbow is not enhanced by thinking a celestial painter did it, but by the understanding of light and refraction. To paraphrase one of the brightest physicists of the 20th century, Richard Feynman; is it not more awe inspiring to have a complete understanding of the way a phenomenon like a rainbow is created that to have an answer that is almost certainly wrong?

What instigated involvement with Dr. Robert Buckman for the filming, editing, and eventual production of Without God, The Story of Secular Humanism?

I was researching the documentary when I happened to come across the B.C. Humanist Association. I sent an email to the web site and got a reply from their board. I met with several of them who proved to be most helpful in the making of the film. It was one of them that suggested Rob. When I contacted him he was very excited about the project and jumped on immediately.

We decided that he would be an excellent on air narrator as he had a lot of experience in front of the camera and with that one of the most influential relationships of my life began.

What core message did Dr. Robert Buckman and yourself want to come across with, and what seemed to emerge from the viewership in reaction to, the final product of Without God, The Story of Secular Humanism?

We wanted to show two things, first of all, what exactly a humanist is and, more importantly, why we are not less moral than the religious. It is well known that atheists have a bad reputation and we wanted people to know that we are just like everyone else with the same basic hopes, dreams and sense of right and wrong.

You earned positions including “board of the B.C. Humanist Association (BCHA), President of BCHA and then on the board of Humanist Canada (HC), eventually taking over as President of HC.” HC, as an organisation, exists within the philosophy of “education, reason, and compassion.” With more depth, the organisation defines itself:

Founded in 1968, Humanist Canada has its roots in the former Humanist Fellowship of Montreal. This fellowship was an organisation of humanists that was founded in 1954 by Drs. R. K. Mishra, Ernest Poser, and Maria Jutta Cahn. Lord Bertrand Russell and Dr. Brock Chisholm were its first patrons.

As the past president of Humanist Canada, your insight, from experience, into the membership involvements and activities, organisational structure and internal dynamics, theory and practice, positions and tasks, internal humanist membership sustainability and national public outreach, seems deep, comprehensive, and relevant to me. How does one run a large organisation from the national scale?

You don't, you let it run itself. It has been said many times that trying to get Humanists to agree on something is like trying to herd cats. I learned early on that as a leader I could not rule from above, or make unilateral decisions. The membership is highly educated and smart they do not respond well to decrees or being told what to do or what position they should take on a matter so one learns to be inclusive, trying to reach consensus.

Without going into too much detail, the reason I resigned was because I felt in a particular circumstance unilateral action was the best course to take and still believe I made the right decision, but it lead to me being forced to resign. In the end, my decision was upheld.

You held the presidency of the BCHA too. How does one operate a provincial-scale organisation?

It is easier because you meet regularly with members, they know who you are and there tends to be more trust. Again though, the members are smart, skeptical people who will question everything so you have to not only know what you are talking about but must be willing to compromise.

All Humanist groups function democratically and all decisions must be discussed and voted on at least the board level. The other thing about running a local group is that it is easier to plan and hold events. Most of the work that gets done even in a national organisation is initiated and run by local groups.

What common problems emerge, and solutions require implementation, in the midst of leadership at the national and provincial magnitudes?

The biggest problem is fundraising. It is difficult to get Humanists to part with their money. We can't offer eternal salvation so when we do fundraise it has to be a specific initiative. Even then, most Humanist living in Canada do not feel the need to be out there advertising and being social activists, most are happy with weekly or monthly meetings where they discuss topics of interest. This does not require much money so the donations reflect this.

Your biographic information from CFI Canada concludes:

In the interim Pat was an ambassador for Atheist Alliance International, sitting briefly on their board. Pat is involved in many grassroots initiatives in his hometown of Vancouver where he has a successful career as a Props Master in the film and television industry. Pat is also an award winning documentary filmmaker.

What personal and social fulfillment, and duties, necessitate involvement with grassroots initiatives and ambassadorship?

I am someone who wants to make a difference in my community. I like being part of social change and I think we need more people like that who are willing to take on leadership roles to try and make our society better. I really do believe, and the evidence is on my side, that the world would be a better place with less religion.

My goal is not to stamp out religion but to show people there is an alternative to living a full rewarding life that does not include believing in the unbelievable and hopefully they will see us as a suitable alternative.

What does "Props Master in the film and television industry," personal career, implicate for you, e.g. tasks, responsibilities, projects involved in, capabilities and limitations, and so on?

My job is what I do so I can afford to do the things I really enjoy such as being part of the Humanist/Skeptical community (and playing golf). I am also very lucky to have a job I really like. It is very rewarding to know that my work entertains people and allows them an escape from their daily lives.

You work for CFI Canada. Another secular organisation, a registered educational charity, devoted to "educate and provide training to the public in the application of skeptical, secular, rational and humanistic enquiry through conferences, symposia, lectures, published works and the maintenance of a library."

Your core position exists within the board, as Board Vice-Chair. What conduct, duties, and responsibilities remain expected with this position within CFI Canada?

As the board member from BC I keep an eye on things in the west and try to engage the membership here. I also am the media representative in BC so if a story is in the news and they need the Humanist/Atheist side, I often will get the call. As Vice Chair, all that really means is that I take over the duties of the Chair if he or she is unavailable.

Your representation in the media emerges in numerous avenues internal and external, obscure and mainstream, pro and con, to CFI Canada, and Humanist Canada. What duties and responsibilities come from influencing the public mind through the media, especially whilst holding an important position in an organisation in the educational charity sector?

I think it is the most important thing I do. Communication is the key to understanding and I take my responsibility as a communicator very seriously. It sometimes means I have to tone down the message I would like to give, when one is on TV talking to the masses, one must be succinct and clear, without putting people off to the point where they turn the dial.

It is a fine line because to many religious types my very existence as an atheist is offensive to them. So my job is show them that I am a regular person with some (I hope) interesting things to say, and if I can educate one person or show one person a new way of looking at an issue then I call that a win.

Many, many organisations, formal and informal, with concomitant publications exist for the distribution of principles and values interrelated with critical thinking, humanism, naturalism, secularism. For example, the Committee for Scientific Investigation of Claims of the Paranormal (CSICOP, the old title)/The Committee for Skeptical Inquiry (CSI, the new title) publishes Skeptical Inquirer. What importance do flagship publications, such as Skeptical Inquirer, have for the “no religious affiliation” individuals and groups?

They are very important. It is vital that our point of view is out there in the public. Magazines, TV and radio programs are essential to both creating a sense of community and as a means of education, without being pedantic.

Exemplars manifest themselves under the umbrella of “no religious affiliation,” at least in standard interpretations such as a lack of formal religion. An array of unmentioned artists, columnists, scientists, and writers. What role do exemplars perform for these movements without direct religious affiliation?

Unfortunately we live in a world where the “cult of personality” influences many people. By creating our own “stars” we are better able to communicate our message. But when an existing star such as Ricky Gervais or Bill Nye take up the cause, people listen. Some in our community see this as a bit of a sell out. I disagree, as long as the message is consistent and not dumbed down, using famous people and TV and Movie stars is a very good way to give your message some credibility.

Apart from non-theistic – e.g. agnostic, atheistic, deistic, *und so weiter* – humanisms, plural manifestations, under the banner of Humanism, singular concept, some religious formulations ground themselves, in socio-cultural and ethical life, in belief systems translatable into humanism.

An argument articulated by Dr. Susan Hughson, another past president of the British Columbia Humanist Association, in conversation with David Berner about Judaism, which could extend to others, as noted. What relationship do religious belief systems connected to humanist proclivities have with the secular humanist movements in history?

For most of recorded history the concept of an atheist did not exist. It was taken for granted that there was an unseen world inhabited by goblins, ghosts, gods etc. It was not until relatively recently that the idea of a world view that carried no supernatural baggage was even possible. There were pockets of it, some Greek philosophers are a good example but mostly the world was made up of people who had some kind of supernatural belief.

So it was the religious, looking for something more, who began the slow intellectual march towards Humanism, Erasmus is a good example. Today he would be considered a religious person but in his day he had many ideas that did not endear him to either the Catholic or the burgeoning Protestant church. He is considered by many to be the founder of Humanism.

Today, most religious Humanists seem to come from the Jewish tradition. Jews have a history of doubt and questioning so this does not come as a surprise, in fact the Humanist Chaplaincy at Harvard University is almost exclusively the product of Jewish Humanists.

With respect to their positive or negative interrelationship, the theistic and non-theistic humanisms, how might their mutual futures turn out to you?

If you are talking about theistic Humanism, I find that a contradiction. I don't use the term as I think it has outlived its usefulness. Either you believe in God and are a theist or you do not and you are an atheist, many atheists adopt the Humanist worldview but Humanism and atheism do not necessarily go together. So I see a conflict between theists and Humanist and so the term Theistic Humanist is meaningless to me.

You noted, astutely, the separation of church and state in the United States of America, but not by necessity in Canada. Preaching the Word of Atheism notes the forceful nature of creationism into Canadian schools and bias against atheists in the family court system too. What remains the highest importance about this separation, the absolute division between church and state?

Religion is a personal matter as are family and personal relationships. In a free and democratic society, the only guarantee that you can keep your personal religious beliefs or your family structure or maintain the relationships that are important to you is by keeping government and by extension, laws out of those areas.

When someone tells me that their religion should inform how we are governed my first questions is, which of the thousands of versions of your religion do you want? Which interpretation of your scripture do you want to live under. Religion is something not even the religious can agree on how on earth could we form a societal structure that at its core is purely personal and introspective?

The only way to design a society and laws so as to serve the most number of people is to base them on the things we have in common, not those things that divide us and religion is the great divider. The problem we secularists face is that the religious have had it their way for thousands of years.

They do not want to give up any ground, this is understandable. But when someone asks for the same rights you have, it is not taking away your rights, many religious people see it this way and we need to fight this notion.

Dr. Carl Sagan gets quoted a lot. A great science communicator who carved the paths for numerous artists, fellow science communicators, professional scientists, and public intellectuals to express personal wonder for the universe.

One quote, attributed to him, became immortalised about extraordinary claims with the need for proportioned evidence, which states, “Extraordinary claims require extraordinary evidence,” even quoted in the CFI Canada updates, for instance. An adaptation from Marcello Truzzi’s quotation, which states, “An extraordinary claim requires extraordinary proof.”

You typed one coda sentence, and in other forms throughout the article On Atheists:

Claiming there is an unseen transcendental being who is outside space and time and created the entire universe is a pretty extraordinary claim so the evidence had better be pretty extraordinary.

What evidences and arguments make a transcendental being seem impossible, implausible, or unreasonable to you?

It is not the evidence or arguments for the existence of god that are unreasonable, it is the lack of evidence and sound argument that makes gods highly improbable. I have read dozens of books both for and against, seen dozens of hours of debates with brightest and the best of both sides and after all that I have yet to hear a convincing argument in favour of a god.

The arguments in favour of a god could fill an encyclopaedia and after all that human effort, no one has proved anything, every argument seems to end with “well ya gotta have faith”, that to me is an admission of defeat.

What evidences and arguments might make a transcendental entity or object with some, most, or all of the traditional “divine attributes” appear possible, plausible, or reasonable to you?

I have given this a lot of thought over the years and every bit of evidence that I can think of that might convince me that there is a god, I can think of a naturalistic explanation. In other words, I honestly cannot think of any evidence that could convince me. But that does not mean there isn't any, otherwise I am guilty of the argument from ignorance fallacy.

No, if there really is a god who literally created my mind, then that god would know exactly what kind of evidence could convince me. So, if there is a god, the evidence is trivial for it to produce belief. The fact that this evidence is not forthcoming gives me comfort that there is none. Of course the theists would say “Ya gotta have faith”, and that, QED, is the worst kind of evidence.

Interview with Reba Boyd Wooden -Executive Director of the Center for Inquiry-Indiana

October 21, 2016

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

Reba Boyd Wooden is Executive Director of Center for Inquiry Indiana. She started The Humanist Friendship Group of Central Indiana in 1999 which became the Center for Inquiry Community of Indiana in 2005. On April 1, 2007, Center for Inquiry Indiana opened on the Indianapolis downtown canal walk at 350 Canal – Walk, Suite A. Reba has a BA from University of Indianapolis with a major in Social Studies Education and a minor in Business Education, an MS from Butler University in History/Education, and an MS in Counselling and Counsellor Education from Indiana University.

In brief, what is your family story? What about your personal story?

I was born on September 21, 1940 in Daviess County Indiana to Lester and Opal (Burch) Boyd. I am the oldest of four children. I have two brothers and one sister. Norm Boyd recently retired as a senior vice president of AGO Corporation and lives in Atlanta, GA.

Janet Boyd Nowling is a retired teacher from Monroe County School Corporation and lives in Bloomington. Gib Boyd farmed the family land for several years and now is semiretired and is a real estate salesperson. He lives in Martinsville, IN.

My father was a farmer and active in civic affairs. His only elected office was as a county commissioner. He was very active in soil conservation projects such as the Prairie Creek watershed and served on the Indiana state conservation board where he was named Man of the Year one year.

My mother was a homemaker and teacher before and after raising her family. We lived with my grandmother, Elfa Bissey Burch, who was also a mother figure to me and had a great influence on my life.

In 1958, I graduated first in my class of 13 from Epsom High School (now consolidated with three other high schools into North Daviess High School). I was very active in 4-H club for ten years at the local and county level. I credit 4-H with developing my leadership skills. I am proud that my son, Jeffery Wooden, is now a member of the Indiana state 4-H board. It is a great organisation.

In the fall of 1958, I came to Indianapolis to attend Indiana Central College (now University of Indianapolis) where I majored in Social Studies education and minored in Business Education. I was secretary of my class my sophomore and senior years and was co-editor of the college yearbook my junior year.

I graduated in 1962 and got a job at Mooresville High School because I fit exactly what they needed—a half -time social studies teacher, half- time business teacher, and yearbook sponsor. I earned my MS from Butler University in History and Education in 1968.

In December of 1962, I married Nuel Wooden who at that time was a teacher in Perry Township School Corporation and later taught at University of Indianapolis. We divorced in 1992.

In 1966, I left my teaching job to have a family. My son, Jeffrey Wooden, was born on December 8, 1966. He is now Director of IT Business Services at Eli Lilly Company and has worked at Lilly since his college graduation from University of Indianapolis with a major in Computer Information Systems in 1989. He has two children and two stepchildren.

Michael Wooden is a senior at Ball State majoring in Digital Media/Video Production. Taylor Wooden graduated with the class of 2016 from Hamilton Southeastern High School and is freshman at Purdue University in the School of Agriculture. Ben Deo is a sophomore at HSE and Nick Deo is an eighth grader.

Ben plays violin in the school orchestra and runs cross country and track. Nick plays percussion in the band. My daughter-in-law, Holly Deo Wooden, is an account executive for Microsoft. She was recently a presenter at the Grace Hopper Celebration of Women in Computing.

My daughter, Cindi Wooden Esquinasi, was born on January 13, 1969. She graduated with an MS in Physical Therapy from University of Indianapolis in 1992 and works as a Physical Therapist doing home health in Seattle, WA.

She has three children. Sophia is a freshman in high school this year. She is a ballet dancer and has attended ballet camps in New York City and Portland, OR. Isaac is twelve years old and is on the top soccer team for his age group with Seattle United and was recently accepted into the Seattle Sounders Soccer Academy.

Ella is nine years old and also plays soccer and wants to be a politician when she grows up. My son-in-law, David Esquinasi, is also a physical therapist and works in an outpatient clinic for Swedish Hospital.

In 1974, I had the good fortune to be hired as a social studies teacher at Perry Meridian High School where I worked for thirty-one years, retiring in 2005. I taught US History and Psychology for 18 years and team-taught a course in current issues for gifted seniors for five of those years.

I was the coordinator of the Challenge Education program for six years which was a program to aid in the integration process with the beginning of court ordered busing of intercity students to our suburban school system.

Having earned my MS in Counseling and Counselor Education from Indiana University in 1990, I worked as a guidance counselor at PMHS from 1992 until my retirement in 2005. I have credit for 37 years in public education on teacher retirement.

My children were both competitive swimmers. So, I was a “swim mom.” I was on the board of Indianapolis Swim Club during that time and served as meet director for a few years and as president of the club one year.

In 1999, I founded Humanist Friendship Group of Central Indiana which became Center for Inquiry-Indiana in 2007. CFI-Indiana is the Indiana branch of an international organisation that seeks to foster a secular society based on science, reason, freedom of inquiry and humanist values. I now serve as executive director of the Indiana branch.

This branch has grown and has a centre in Indianapolis which provides many services to the people of Indiana, including English as a second language and opportunities for all ages to interact.

I developed and am the director of the Center for Inquiry Secular Celebrant program which certifies celebrants to perform marriages and memorial services. I was the lead plaintiff in a successful lawsuit for the right of secular people to solemnise marriages in Indiana

I have worked for LGBT rights and networked with those groups. Since their right to marry was upheld by the courts and I as a Secular Celebrant became legal to solemnise marriages in Indiana, I have solemnised a number of same sex marriages including the first same sex marriage solemnised by a Secular Celebrant.

I am president of Health, Access and Privacy Alliance (HAPA), an alliance made up of several not-for-profit organisations, including Muncie League of Women Voters and AAUW, working to improve access to healthcare and protect reproductive choice in Indiana. I chair the meetings and do advocacy work with the legislature.

I have been a member of the ACLU of Indiana Board of Directors for ten years and have participated in bringing information to school age children on Constitution Day.

I am an avid reader. I read mostly nonfiction—biographies, history and political science related topics. I enjoy doing the advocacy work to make this a better world and the many interesting people I have met through CFI, ACLU, and other organisations.

I work out with a personal trainer two mornings a week and try to stay healthy. I have hiked over 8,000 miles with Indianapolis Hiking Club in the past and try to do some walking on my own now but don't have time to make many of the official hikes. I have been a season ticket holder at Indiana Repertory Theatre for several years and enjoy the plays there.

You earned a BA (Social Studies Education and Business Education) from the University of Indianapolis and an MS (History/Education) from Butler University, and an MS (Counselling and Counsellor Education) from Indiana University. What were the main lessons and perspectives about the world gained from those academic qualifications?

My major history professor at University of Indianapolis, Dr. St. Clair was a great influence in exposing me to an in-depth view of history which widened my world view and started me on the road to progressive thought.

After 37 years in public education, you retired in 2005. What were some of the most memorable experiences that come to mind in that time?

The weekend retreat to Bradford Woods for the Challenge Education program was designed to aid in the desegregation process initiated by court ordered busing of students from Indianapolis Public Schools to Perry Meridian High School.

When I was asked to participate in the fall of 1985, I was so impressed with the program that I volunteered to be in charge of the program.

I developed a selection process by which students could apply and then I made the selections. Many more students applied each year than I could take to the retreat. I made selections to keep an equal balance of male/female, 9/10/11/12 grades, IPS students/Perry Township students.

After I made the selections, I divided them into groups also keeping the same balance. Once we arrived at Bradford Woods, Indiana University students took charge of the activities. I also asked for volunteer faculty members and assigned one or two faculty members to each group.

During the weekend, participants did team building activities such as the trust fall, ropes course, the wall, the DMZ, the amoeba, a night hike, and group discussions. Through these activities, students who might not have interacted at school became acquainted and formed friendships. Each group also developed a skit to perform in front of the entire retreat.

Some memorable moments included when an IPS student remarked on a night hike that he didn't know there were so many stars in the sky, when Isaac Booth was a small 9th grader and we used him to do the difficult moves on the DMZ activity (Isaac went on to play college football), and when Bob Dunn and Ron Bolyard sang "Baby Face" to each other in a skit.

It was sometimes a challenge to get faculty members to give up a weekend to go on this retreat but I think that once they went, they were glad that they did. My most faithful adult volunteers were Sheri Austin, Gloria Sam, Betty Kohls, Ken Knabel, and Greg Robinson.

Greg Waltz, Eric Cox, and others have told me in later years how glad they were that as students they were selected to attend and it was one of the highlights of their high school days. One student whom I would especially expect to say this today is Joe Palmer.

Joe was a student in one of my classes and he wanted to go to Bradford Woods in the worst way and kept asking me if he could go. However, Joe was not the most well behaved student in school and had spent time in the dean's office and Mr. Head always went over my final list and took students off who had behaviour problems.

However, I went ahead and put Joe on my list. Sure enough Mr. Head called me into his office and said, “Mrs. Wooden, you can’t take Joe Palmer to Bradford Woods.” I told him that Joe really, really wanted to go and that if he would let me take him that I would be personally responsible for him.

So, Mr. Head relented on that condition. The next time I saw Joe he asked me if Mr. Head had said he could go or not. So, I told him that yes Mr. Head had said he could go but that I was personally responsible for him and if he caused a problem that I would be in trouble.

Joe said that he would be good and he was. He came up to me several times during the weekend and asked me how he was doing and of course he was doing fine. This weekend probably meant more to Joe than anything he did in high school.

Don’t know where he is today. I hope he is doing fine. I would bet he would mention his Bradford Woods experience.

I would like to thank Mr. Head for being so supportive of this program, all of the faculty members who sacrificed their weekends to make this program possible, and all of the great students who made this such a rich experience.

You are the Executive Director of the Center for Inquiry Indiana. What tasks and responsibilities come with this position?

I organise social and educational events and do advocacy work on issues involving separation of church and state and promoting public policy based on the scientific outlook on life.

Do you consider yourself a progressive?

Yes.

Does progressivism logically imply other beliefs, or tend to or even not at all?

See Affirmations of Humanism [here](#):

How did you come to adopt a socially progressive worldview?

From being a history major, reading history, observing life.

Why do you think that adopting a social progressive outlook is important?

It promotes more opportunity for more people.

As a progressive, what do you think is the best socio-political position to adopt in the America?

Secular Humanism. I am not committed to one political party and grew up with a father who

was active in the Republican party. However, in today's politics, the Democrat party represents my world view in most cases.

What big obstacles (if at all) do you see social-progressive movements facing at the moment?

Lack of scientific literacy in the general population. Anti-intellectualism, biased media which spreads fear and unfounded claims.

How important do you think social movements are?

Very important. That is how change happens.

What are your religious/irreligious and ethical beliefs?

Secular Humanism.

Do atheists and secular humanists experience bigotry and prejudice at all levels of American society?

Yes. I think it is changing for the better at some levels as more people leave religion but it is still there.

If so, why?

Lack of understanding of Secular Humanism. Religious indoctrination.

Who is a living women's rights activist that impresses you?

Hillary Clinton.

Who are other personal heroes throughout history?

Eleanor Roosevelt. Ruth Bader Ginsburg. Madeline Albright.

What is your favourite scientific discovery ever?

The birth control pill.

Thank you for your time, Reba.

Interview with Eric Adriaans – Ex-National Executive Director of Center for Inquiry Canada

October 14, 2016

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

Eric Adriaans is the former National Executive Director of the Center for Inquiry Canada (CFI Canada). Eric is also a charitable sector leader, student in Athabasca University's post-baccalaureate diploma program in Legislative Drafting and Fanshawe College's Logistics and Supply Chain management program, and writer.

Adriaans is extremely interested in Parliamentary e-petition 382, which is opposition to Canada's blasphemous libel law. This might set the context for Canadian discussion on blasphemy laws. He notes the e-petition system might or might not prove useful to progressives as an innovation in democracy. It has direct links to Parliament. He remains an active CFI Canada member and continues to provide strategic consulting services to CFI Canada.

In terms of geography, culture, and language, where does your family background reside?

My family and I currently reside in Southwestern Ontario but we have lived just about everywhere a highway will take you in Ontario from Thunder Bay to Ottawa and from Elliot Lake to St. Thomas.

We are primarily Anglophones but like most Canadians and almost everyone who has spent significant time in Ottawa, we have a working knowledge of French. My daughter, Chloe-Lynne, and I have both attempted to pick up some German. She's far more likely to be successful with that than I am.

Culture is an interesting question, isn't it? My father was born in Germany but when he obtained Canadian citizenship, he proudly identified as Canadian. I don't recall that he ever used the hyphenated language (i.e. German-Canadian) that people use today.

My mother's family has English roots but has been in Ontario for many generations. Our home was a secular home—meaning religion did not play any significant role in my upbringing. I expect that my parents would have claimed a belief in a supernatural power but there was no religion in my upbringing.

Our house was a blue-collar home with a healthy counter-authoritarian independent streak. Education and intelligence was, and is, valued in my family. Literature and reading were core expectations in my family.

For most of my elementary school years, we lived in Ontario's Durham Region and were connected through my father and sister to the labour movement and the NDP. In today's language, we might fairly be called social democrats.

My wife, who has been one of the most important influences on me as a cultural person is from a small town north of Montreal. In a way that is very Canadian, our slightly different cultures have

come together in our house to create our own family culture that I would call contemporary Canadian. We love the diversity that this country offers.

What seem like pivotal moments in personal belief, and personal life, with respect to humanism, secularism, skepticism, and the associated suite of “-isms” relevant to you?

I consider myself fortunate to have been raised outside of religion in a home that was open to and embracing of people from other cultures. My earliest childhood friends were various.... two kids from first nations families, a brother and sister whose family had immigrated to Canada from India and a couple of brothers from England.

Basically, if you were different than me, I wanted to meet you and hang out. That eagerness for diversity and wanting to treat everyone as a valuable and equal person was fundamental. I observed the same trends in my older siblings, so I know it was part of how our family worked.

We were very reluctant to associate with “isms” and I continue to be uncomfortable with labels or the assumptions that come with them. That being said, there are perspectives which gain prominence. I suppose my skepticism came from a basic rule of our family.

“Don’t believe them just because they say it’s so,” I heard that about everyone from employers and politicians to teachers or priests. Any authority figure was not to be accepted at face value. Humanism is a term that I struggle with a bit; I prefer humanitarianism; that is charitable work done for the benefit of people, society, animals and the environment...that general “leave the world a better place” ethic but done without any religious framework.

When I was in second-year University, I was choosing between English Literature studies and Psychology. Wanting to avoid significant student debt, I worked during the day. As chance would have it, I was out with a friend who was looking for work and learned about a job at the Canadian Diabetes Association.

I was amazed that it was possible to have a career in the charitable sector (I assumed it was entirely volunteer driven) and the path for me was suddenly clear. The idea that my working life could be focussed on helping people was simply too compelling not to act on. Humanism and humanitarianism seem to me to be intimately connected as philosophy and application.

Although the organisations I’ve worked for have always been secular (i.e. not religiously affiliated and embracing modern diversity), I was not a part of the specifically secular movement until I joined CFIC in 2014. As most Canadians have been exposed to issues of faith-based bigotry and violence, so was I.

From religious opposition to women’s health progress or physician assisted dying to issues of fanaticism or terrorism...the harms and dangers of religion seemed to have become more prominent to everyone’s attention. I recognised that my former status as a polite agnostic might need to shift to impolite atheist-agnostic in order to defend basic human rights.

You have done some writing and poetry through personal websites. Your writing remains new. In that, the outlets exist, to date, for only a short time. What inspires these forms of self-expression?

Creative writing and journaling has always been an extremely important part of my self-development. Writing allows me to work out my thoughts and try on new ways to communicate.

In my poetry, I've explored what I think may be new rhyme structures while retaining a deep respect and appreciation for highly formalised structures like sonnets or haiku. I suppose it is the challenge of expressing an idea or creating an image within a pre-determined structure that appeals to me.

So often people think they want to do something that is "outside the box" when they may not even know what they can do inside the box.

Whether it is writing or some other undertakings, I am something of a nomad. I am interested in some pursuits for what I can learn or explore. So my writing is sometimes retained only for a short period of time until I'm ready to move on.

I don't hold my prior accomplishments up as significant unless they are informing something that I am working on now or wish to work on in the future. What I do now is intended to help me drive forward.

Sometimes my pursuits are to help me learn something or work on a part of my character. I spent several years watching CFL football and listening to the commentary, because I wanted to understand if the many football metaphors I noticed in the language of business and day-to-day life held any validity.

I did eventually become a (American) football fan but it started as an intellectual exercise rather than as a passion. Recently I took up motorcycle riding. I was amazed by the experience of learning a new basic physical skill—the interactions of balance, controlling fear, focussing awareness, coordinating movements.

Self-expression is about communicating something of yourself to others. We do it for strategic reasons whether it is through the way we dress, what we write or anything we do as an attempt to reach others. For me that is all about what I'm learning today, helping others, growing as a person and preparing for tomorrow.

You earned a Bachelor of Arts, psychology and English, from 1987 to 1992 at Carleton University. In addition to this, you hold the following certifications: Volunteer Development (1994), Fundraising Management (1999), FDZ Licence (2005), Certified Automotive Fleet Manager (2010), PB Diploma (2014)—with continued education in Legislative Drafting at Athabasca University.

Within each domain, the consistent pragmatic elements of charitable leadership and work, management of individuals, and clear communication seem prominent to me, how does each qualification assist in personal and professional life to the present day?

What we learn as individuals today helps to make future options either possible or out of reach. I wanted to learn how to drive large commercial vehicles at one time my life and that positioned me as a uniquely qualified candidate for a specific career opportunity at the Canadian Red Cross Society—not many people have a long charitable sector management background and the capacity to operate commercial vehicles).

That career opportunity gave me the opportunity to study legislation and how to communicate the need for regulatory compliance to a variety of people, which in turn led to further studies and opportunities. It may be that my most valuable skills have been literary, an ability to recognise strategically important information and to communicate what I learn.

If you aren't able to communicate what you know, then the information isn't of much value to anyone. That to me has been the value of my English literature and language studies.

Leadership in the charitable sector has always been a very clear situation to me. Given the dependence of charitable organisations on volunteers, if people don't like you or what you're trying to do, they won't help. Pretty simple.

So I have always looked at it as a situation of creating an environment where people are not only able to do the work of the organisation but actively want to do it. You have to show that you are aspiring to be the best representative of the organisation that you can be.

I actively manage myself more than anybody else; in life and in charitable organisations we have to learn, understand, communicate and drive forward to new and better circumstances and outcomes. We're here to make things better. The status quo is always a launching point to a better tomorrow.

You worked for the Canadian Diabetes Association (District Coordinator, 1991–1997), The Kidney Foundation of Canada ((A) Executive Director, 1997–1999), The Arthritis Society (Associate Director, Ontario North & East, 1999–2001), Ottawa Humane Society (Manager, Development and Outreach, 2001–2002), Canadian Federation of Humane Societies (Director, Development & Finance, 2002–2005), Avocado Press (Director, Business Development, 2005), The Lung Association (Fundraising Coordinator, 2006), and the Canadian Red Cross Society (Director, Regional Operations, 2006–2014). This work occurred in diverse areas including Thunder Bay, New Zealand, North Superior, Ottawa, and Western Ontario.

With respect to these diverse and extensive experiences throughout professional work and leadership, what insights come to mind, and seem relevant, about the nature of the charitable sector, especially for those without religious affiliation?

The charitable sector is about making the world better—not accepting the status quo. It doesn't matter where you live, things can be made better. No charity I have ever worked for has said "OK, our job is done." Just as with science, any question or problem that is investigated brings up a host of new questions and problems. Charitable organisations, big or small, will always need more resources and more time.

The charitable sector is the most socially productive counter-authoritarian undertaking I can think of. Charities tell authorities, whether they are governments, media, religions, judiciaries, political parties, corporate forces or any other form of authority that they must not rest. It is the charitable sector which pushes for human rights, education, health or any priority.

Charities are the community expression and engagement of non-religious people. People get involved with issues that matter to them through charities. Charities are the modern secular replacement for churches. There's nothing supernatural about showing up at a foodbank to help out, coaching a children's sports team or protesting violence or bigotry.

You were the national executive director of the Center for Inquiry Canada (CFI Canada) on March, 2014 until July 1, 2016. You drafted the Statement of Values, in addition to its revision, which, in part, states:

To educate and provide training to the public in the application of skeptical, secular, rational and humanistic enquiry through conferences, symposia, lectures, published works and the maintenance of a library...I. CFI Canada values people above ideas...the leading international voice for critical thinking, secularism, skepticism, humanism, and free-thought...III. CFI Canada values Humanism...IV. CFI Canada values skepticism; we strive to ensure that information or messages we circulate do not require the audience to accept it without validation of evidence...V. CFI Canada values science, rational thought and critical thinking...VI. CFI Canada values free thought...VII. CFI Canada values human rights...VIII. CFI Canada values education...IX. CFI Canada values the wellness of people...X. CFI Canada values excellence...XI. CFI Canada values transparency...XII. CFI Canada is an open and diverse community of individuals that embraces individuals regardless of sex/gender, gender identity, sexual orientation, disability, physical appearance, body size, race, or religion. We do not tolerate harassment of participants in any form.

Of course, more information exists with thorough answers to relevant questions about humanistic values, for instance, in the CFI Canada Statement of Values and elsewhere. Regarding the representation and functions of CFI Canada, what does CFI Canada represent—in terms of direct and indirect constituents, and function as—in terms of its general activities, within the general population of Canada?

CFIC's mission statement includes the term "secular humanist" as a key feature. It also includes keywords like freethought and skepticism. All of these words are charged with history and significance for the people who use them. There are even degrees of identity politics associated with them.

Secular humanist is a very near synonym for atheist. Recently, I have started to encourage the use of the phrase “Your Community For Science and Secularism” to feature the basic values of an evidence-based approach to matters such as education and healthcare and the separation of religion from governance of people.

Many people have assumed that CFIC is therefore an organisation specifically for anyone who self-identifies as atheist, skeptic, agnostic, secularist, secular humanist, humanist, rational, freethinker or rational. To the extent of active members and volunteers, that is mostly true. I argue, however, that the organisation is for the majority of society, whether they view themselves as religious or not, because it is my perspective that all of society benefits when evidence-based practices are in place and when religious freedom and freedom from religion is assured. I sense that CFIC represents the view of most Canadians, they just don’t know it yet. I very much want people to move beyond arbitrary and partial labels which will never adequately describe any whole person and get to the work that is done to make the world a better and more satisfying place for more and more people.

Women's Rights News in Brief

November 3, 2016

Scott Jacobsen

In Indonesia, men don mini-skirts to end violence against women

According to the **Daily Mail**, men in Indonesia have begun to put on skirts in protest against the persistent discrimination against women. An individual, Syaldi Sahude, recollected the statistics that about 85% of Indonesian women have suffered from “violence at the hands of their partners” and remain in those relationships.

“There were women’s empowerment, legal aid and trauma programmes for survivors but the root cause of this is men,” said Sahude, who was working at a women’s rights group at the time.

Protecting women human rights defenders in Honduras

Global Report **reports** that there is a great need to defend women human rights defenders within Honduras, especially that women “shouldn’t have to risk your life to demand respect for your rights and the rights of others.”

“Hundreds of defenders” have face various threats, and even murdered, and without prosecution or investigation into the either. Honduran women human-rights defenders spoke out.

They sent a “message to United Nations Special Rapporteur on the Situation of Human Rights Defenders, Michel Forst” in August, who put out a joint press release stating, “Honduras is one of the most hostile and dangerous countries in the world for human rights defenders.”

Sex workers’ rights in public discourse in Latin America

According to **The Frisky**, there is, and has been, a movement for the labour rights for sex workers in the world following the summer of 2015 “when Amnesty International released a declaration identifying workers’ rights as human rights.”

Germany and New Zealand have legal sex work with concomitant reductions in violence against sex workers and sexually transmitted diseases of them compared to other nations that have, by default, made sex work illegal.

The dialogue has continued to increase through the 13th conference on Women in Latin America and the Caribbean, especially with the push in that region for the rights of sex works.

Interview with Professor Rebecca Goldstein— Novelist, Philosopher, and Public Intellectual

November 2, 2016

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

Professor Rebecca Newberger Goldstein is a novelist, philosopher, public intellectual, and visiting Professor of Philosophy and English at New York University and Visiting Professor of Philosophy at the New College of the Humanities.

What is your family story?

I was brought up in an Orthodox Jewish household. My father was a refugee from Poland, and all the kids in my extended family were named after relatives who had died in the Holocaust. I'm named after my great-grandmother who died on a cattle car on her way to Auschwitz. I would say that my father never quite adjusted to the New World and carried tremendous sadness within him.

He was a gentle and compassionate man, of great intellectual potential, who had no ambition beyond never again seeing the worst that humanity can do to each other. He was exquisitely sensitive to others' pain, a great believer in performing secret acts of charity. He became a cantor in order to support his large family.

We were poor. My mother, who was born in the U.S., had more worldly ambitions, but they were all directed toward her one son, my older brother, who is a rabbi. As a girl I was raised to have no ambitions beyond getting married to an Orthodox Jewish man. I was engaged to my first husband at age eighteen.

What about your personal story?

Though we couldn't afford many books, it was a bookish family, which meant that we used the public library religiously. The Sabbath day was spent reading, and my parents' attitude was that if a book came from the library then it couldn't be a bad book.

So, for example, when my mother saw me reading, at age thirteen, a book by the philosopher Bertrand Russell called *Why I Am Not A Christian*, she had no objections—especially since we were Jewish!

She had no idea that the title essay went through each of the major arguments for the existence of God and systematically destroyed them. I was particularly interested in the elegant destruction Russell brought to bear on the so-called moral argument for God's existence, which tries to argue that God is necessary to provide an objective grounding for ethics.

(Only years later did I discover that Russell had cribbed his elegant counter-argument from Plato. It's the famous Euthyphro argument.) In any case, after much intense thinking, spurred by

Russell's essay, I became an atheist—a quiet atheist, since I didn't want to do anything to upset my parents, most especially my father, of whom I was, for obvious reasons, always protective.

What are your religious/irreligious, ethical, and political beliefs?

I'm a secular humanist and a political progressive. Although I began my career as a philosopher of science, most interested in the foundations of quantum mechanics, I've become increasingly interested in moral philosophy, which has—since the time of Plato and Aristotle—been going about the business of grounding morality on purely secular grounds.

One of my books was on the philosopher Spinoza, with whom I feel a strong affinity. Spinoza was the first philosopher of the modern age to try to rigorously ground morality in naturalism. His concept of conatus is essential in his project of naturalising ethics, so I was pleased to see the name of your news organisation!

I also sympathised with Spinoza's personal story. He, too, had been born into a Jewish family that had been traumatised by murderous bigotry—only in his case it was the Spanish-Portuguese Inquisition. This personal involvement with his story went into my book, Betraying Spinoza: The Renegade Jew Who Gave Us Modernity.

I've always been interested in showing how the whole person, including personal history, is involved in philosophical positions, which is one of the reasons I also write novels. Our individually variable intuitions that are expressed in our philosophical positions are embedded in our philosophical characters and temperaments, shaped both by genetic and environmental factors.

Your recent publication is *Plato at the Googleplex: Why Philosophy Won't Go Away*. It won the Forkosch Award (2014). An earned award from the Council for Secular Humanism. What was the content and intended message behind the text—or set of themes covered?

I had four interrelated goals. The first was to put forward an original theory as to why the ancient Greeks were responsible for inventing the field of philosophy. Their society was saturated with religious rituals, but when it came to the question of how to live our lives, they didn't look to their gods but rather to a secular grounding.

This doesn't mean that they were a culture of philosophers. There never has been a society of philosophers! And, of course, Athens sentenced Socrates to die. But the pre-conditions for philosophy were created in their secular approach to the big questions, and I was interested in exploring this aspect.

The second goal was to explain Plato in the context of the wider Greek culture. The third goal was to demonstrate that progress has been made in philosophy, and to demonstrate this by going back to the inception of Western philosophy and uncovering presuppositions that had been instrumental in getting the whole process of critical reasoning going but which critical reasoning had, in its progress, invalidated.

I was concerned to demonstrate in the book that progress in philosophy tends to be invisible because it penetrates so deeply down into our conceptual frameworks—both epistemological and ethical.

We don't see it, because we see with it. And the fourth goal was to demonstrate that the kinds of questions Plato introduced, philosophical questions, are still vitally important to us, and to demonstrate this, I interspersed the expository chapters with new Platonic dialogues, injecting Plato into contemporary settings.

The first place I bring him to is the Googleplex in Mountainview CA, the headquarters of Google International, where he gets into a discussion with a software engineer on whether philosophy makes progress. I also have him on a panel of child-rearing experts, including a tiger mum.

Then I bring him to a cable news set, where he's interviewed by a rabble-rousing blowhard; they discuss the role of reason in the public square. The last dialogue has him getting a brain scan and engaging the neuroscientists on the question of whether neuroscience dissolves the notions of personal identity and moral responsibility.

I'd produced these dialogues as a bit of fun to enliven my points, but it was this aspect of the book that got all of the attention from reviewers.

You earned other prizes in previous years: MacArthur fellowship (2011), Humanist of the Year, Free-thought Heroine, Richard Dawkins Award (2014), and the National Humanities Medal (2015). What do these public recognitions of professional excellence mean to you?

Since I've been very experimental in my writings, using forms of writing that my fellow philosophers don't recognise as legitimate—for example, novels—these prizes have been encouraging. I got the MacArthur prize, for example, at rather a low point in my philosophical career, when many of my colleagues had written me off because I'd written some bestsellers.

The MacArthur carries a great deal of weight in American academic circles, since it's popularly known as the genius prize, so this prize did a little bit of work in rehabilitating my reputation.

What one is most dear to your heart? Why?

Without a doubt, my proudest moment was having President Obama put the National Medal of the Humanities around my neck. And when he had greeted me in private before the ceremony, he had said, "Ah, the philosopher who knows how to write great novels."

Being in the White House, in the presence of the president who knew something of my work, I couldn't help being flooded with memories of my father and how displaced he'd always felt in his new country—how displaced he'd felt in the world at large.

And here was a president, putting a medal around my neck, who hadn't been raised to feel entitled to stride the corridors of power—quite the contrary. I felt proud for all of us who believe

that reason can destroy the groundless prejudices that break the human spirit and keep our shared human potential from being realised for the greater good.

I only wished that my father might have been alive to witness the moment, though it might have been too overwhelming for him—as it nearly was for me.

What responsibilities come with these recognitions?

I wasn't raised to be a public person, to say the least. The virtue that had been most impressed on me growing up as an Orthodox girl was female modesty, meaning never to attract undue attention to oneself, especially male attention—not to one's body, not to one's mind.

So I have to overcome a great deal of inner resistance, even shame, in speaking out in the name of things I believe in. It remains a torment to me to do anything that gets me attention, though over the years I've toughened up a bit.

Sometimes, when the criticisms against what I've said or written become very personal (and they do), my upbringing kicks in, and I have to fight the sense that this is what I deserve for being so immodest as to make myself heard.

But I do feel that addressing a public audience is my responsibility, as someone who has had the privilege of being able to get myself a first-class education and to use it to think about big issues. It's a great privilege to think for one's living—especially when that is what one most loves to do!

But, as with all privilege, this one, too, begets obligations, which is why I've ventured beyond the confines of academia.

You are the visiting professor of philosophy and English at New York University (NYU) in addition to the visiting professor of philosophy at the New College of the Humanities (NCH) in London, England. What tasks and responsibilities come with these positions?

I try to impress on my students what a hard thing knowledge is to achieve and that they ought to take their responsibilities for being accountable for their beliefs—as well as their actions—seriously. No matter what they go on to do in their lives, they can't leave accountability behind. That's what I most want to impress upon them.

What are your favourite courses to teach to students?

Coming to philosophy from a background in physics, my first interest was philosophy of science, and this is still my favourite course to teach. I love it because it requires that one understand both the science and the philosophical issues to which the science gives rise, and it forces me to keep up with what's going on in science.

In general, I like to teach courses that attract an interdisciplinary mix of students, so that they can learn from the strengths of one another. I also teach philosophy courses that use novels, and these courses also attract an interdisciplinary mix of students.

Who is the smartest person you have ever met?

There are too many kinds of smartness for me to be able to answer this question. I've known mathematical geniuses who are dunces when it comes to the kind of imaginative intelligence that goes into interpreting works of art—or, for that matter, interpreting people.

I've met brilliant novelists whose deductive talents aren't sufficient to get them through an elementary course in symbolic logic. I have an appreciation for sundry forms of smartness, though there are characteristics other than smartness that I value far more in people.

Too many people who are celebrated for their intellectual or artistic talents think that their gifts license them to be jerks. What I call "talentism," the conviction that those with extraordinary abilities matter more than other people, is as faulty a normative proposition as any other that regards some people as mattering more than others—such as sexism, racism, classism, ableism, lookism, ageism, nationalism, imperialism, and hetero-normativity.

Challenging all of these presumptions is part of the mandate of progressive thinking and progressive activism, at least as I conceive it. The truth to which progressive movements have always been pointing is this: to the extent that any of us is committed to our own lives mattering—which is, of course, a commitment that forms the infrastructure of our entire emotional life, something that Spinoza had tried to capture with his notion of *conatus*—then we must be equally committed to all lives mattering and to the exact same extent.

To me, that's the essence of what drives moral progress forward, and the greatest privilege of my privileged life is to play any role at all, no matter how small, in that progress.

Interview with Roslyn Mould - President of the Humanist Association of Ghana; Chair of the African working group (IHEYO)

November 2, 2016

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

You grew up as a Catholic. You went to Holy Child School, Cape Coast as well. What is your story as a youth growing up in a religious household? What was the experience?

I attended Catholic schools, St. Theresa's School in Accra from primary, junior high school and in Holy Child School I got my Senior high school education. They were one of the best schools at the time and provided us with the best teachers in all subjects.

The major criteria for admissions was to be a Catholic and I was baptised at the St. Theresa's Parish so it was easier for me to gain admission. In primary school, we had 'Worship service' on Wednesday mornings as part of our curriculum and from 1st grade, we were read the Bible and taught to understand it.

In the beginning, I did not really understand it, especially when it came to topics on the afterlife since my mother had died when I was 4 years old and I had still not come to understand the concept of death by then. I must have tried to discuss the existence of God once to my classmates, but I was told that I could go mad (mentally ill) so I stopped.

I then made it a point to understand and accept Christianity because I felt that everyone believed in it and it was the right thing to do. By 6th grade, I attended catechism classes and had received my First Holy Communion.

My Senior High School was an all-girls boarding School and was built by the Catholic church in a town called Cape Coast in the Central Region of Ghana in 1946. It had been run initially by British nuns for decades and later by alumni of the school.

It was strict and aimed to form students into 'women of substance' who would grow up to be the best in the country at home as good wives, at work, and in the Catholic church.

Obedience, discipline, and morality were the core teachings there with religion and especially Catholicism at its core. It was compulsory for all students to attend Mass at least 3 times a week and observe 'The Angelus' prayer' 3 times a day.

Most of the students were Catholic, but we had Anglicans and Protestants of various denominations as well. I became more exposed to Christian Charismatic teachings, joined nondenominational prayer groups and underwent a period of 'being born-again', which cemented my belief on God. It was there I had my 'Confirmation of the Holy Spirit'.

Due to my mother's death, I was brought up partly by my mother's family and later by my dad's. My mother's family is mostly Catholic and conservative who encouraged and supported me to be a good Christian and was proud of me whenever I hit a milestone in my religious life.

My father's side of the family is mostly Anglican and also went to church often, but were more liberal and reformed. I was encouraged there to think for myself and I learnt to care for myself and my sister at an early age since there was no mother-figure and my dad was not really 'there' either.

Staying at my dad's, my sister and I grew up with lots of books and educational programs on satellite TV, which at the time was expensive for most homes to have. As my mother's side taught me to be obedient and subservient in their understanding of being respectful, my father's side of the family encouraged me to ask questions and express myself freely.

You de-converted and became an atheist in 2007. What were the major reasons, arguments, evidence, and experiences for the de-conversion?

I had finished University where I acquired my BA in Linguistics and Modern Languages and I had made lots of friends in the expat community. At the time, I had come to realise that I had certain views such as feminism that a lot of Ghanaian men were not interested in due to cultural and religious reasons so I seemed to connect well with foreigners.

Dating a Serbo-Croatian then, I became familiar with the Eastern European community in the Capital, Accra. I came to realise that most of them were non-religious as most people from Europe tend to be including my partner although they were baptised in the Orthodox church.

I also started to notice that whenever I made religious statements, there would be a short awkward silence and a change in topic. I felt then that I was not doing my job properly as a Christian if I could not teach them about the Word of God and pass on the teachings of Christ.

It was at this juncture that I set on a personal course to do objective research on the origins and importance of religion, especially Christianity, in order to properly inform my friends about it.

We had Satellite TV then as well so I gave more attention to programs on channels like the HISTORY channel, which at the time showed objective documentaries on the life and times of Jesus Christ and the origins of the Bible.

This was eye-opening because all my life, I had watched the same type of movies and documentaries which were shown every Sunday and especially on Christian Holidays, but those ones had certain relevant information left out of it and they also did not give archaeologically documented information so came my first 'shocks'.

I also watched the Discovery and National Geographic channels for scientific documentaries on evolution the possibilities of life on other planets and these baffled me further because I had been taught to believe in only Creationism and I did not know there was another way of explaining how humans exist.

At that point, I had not gotten any information to preach with and I had no one to talk to about my findings. I went through stages of grief, disappointment, sadness, anger, and finally stopped going to church.

Even when I stopped going to church I felt that God would strike me with lightning for disobeying him or ‘betraying’ him, but as time went by and nothing bad seemed to happen, my fear lessened.

I did not know how to explain it to my family and friends. So for years, I kept my non-belief to myself and gave excuses for not attending church and sometimes hoped that I could be proven wrong with my non-belief so I could go back to worshipping God but that time never came.

You studied French at the University of Ghana for a Bachelor’s degree in Linguistics and Modern Languages (French and Spanish). Was this education assistive in personal and professional pursuits during postsecondary education and post-graduation?

Yes, it was. Actually, at the time, the University of Ghana did not give much room for choice by students. They mostly took subjects you excelled in from High School and gave you subjects in that field to study and since I passed exceptionally in English, French and Geography, I was given the Language subjects.

I grew to enjoy Linguistics which was a social science program and it interested me greatly as its history taught me a lot about who we are as humans and how far we have come in terms of communication in our development as a species.

I studied various courses in pragmatics, phonetics, syntax, linguistics in Ga (my local language) and Linguistics in English. In Spanish, history and literature formed a big part of our studies and French grammar as well.

As Ghana is the only Anglophone country in Africa completely neighboured by Francophone Countries, it became integral that I learnt it as it could get me a long way in the job market although I never really used it much in my career.

It came in handy in translating for visiting clients, contractors. I loved studying Spanish for the love of it and linguistics helped me in my career as an administrator in creating and reviewing company documents. I speak 3 local languages and knowing 3 more foreign languages came in handy in my social life meeting people from all over the world.

How did you become an activist?

I became active in activism after joining the Humanist Association of Ghana. I gained confidence to ‘come out’ then as atheist and I wanted to help share what I knew now just as I was as a Christian but this time, based on evidence.

I also realised how religion was destroying my country and continent due to ignorance, lack of education, and human rights abuses, and I felt I had to do something to help change things for the better. I felt that if I knew of an alternative to the dogmatic teachings I was given, I might have been atheist earlier and maybe, I could give someone else the opportunity to be a freethinker, which I was never given.

Were parents or siblings an influence on this for you?

My family had no idea that I would turn out to be atheist/humanist. I used to know that my uncle (father's brother) who moved to the USA over 40 years ago was a deist by then, but never got the opportunity to discuss it with him until now. My sister's godmother was also a German atheist, but it was never discussed perhaps because I felt it would be rude.

My sister left the Catholic church to become an Evangelical youth prayer group member while I was turning atheist. It was not until 2 years later that she became atheist. Even though we are so close and tell each other everything, it wasn't until 3 years after her de-conversion that I got to hear about her story during a HAG group meeting. I definitely had no influence from Family.

The best they helped was by giving me a good education and logical reasoning skills.

Did you have early partnerships in this activist pursuit? If so, whom?

Not really. I did not know about humanism until after I joined the Freethought Ghana group from which HAG came. Once I was introduced to it and I was able to recognise that humanism describes my personal philosophy of life, I began to identify as a humanist.

The group then organised the 1st ever West African Humanist Conference in 2012 and after learning what steps other groups across the West African region were taking, we started to realise the importance of organising and formalising our group from a social group to an activist group.

The conference also gave the group the opportunity to meet other groups and their representatives that are working on humanitarian projects on human rights activism such as now Minister for Gender, Children and Social Protection, Honourable Mrs. Nana Oye Lithur who spoke to us on the LGBT situation in Ghana at the time, Mr. Gyekye Tanoh of 3rd World Women's rights group, Mr. Leo Igwe a renowned African humanist from Nigeria who was then doing his research in Ghana on Witchcraft accusations in the Northern region for his PhD in Germany and other humanist groups from Liberia, Sierra Leone, and Nigeria.

They gave us an insight on what they had been doing and gave us ideas from which HAG was inspired to join in.

Do you consider yourself a progressive?

Yes, I do. I am of the view that as a humanist who bases her ideas and decisions on logical reasoning and human value, I have had to rethink a lot of negative dogmatic beliefs, superstitions, and culture.

I believe that Ghana, and Africa as a whole, is knee deep in ignorance and social dogma, and that is why we remain undeveloped for the most part. I love my country and my people of various tribes and cultures and for that, the need to create a better future for our next generations urges me on to fight age-old systems that stagnate our progress as a people.

Does progressivism logically imply other beliefs, or tend to or even not at all?

Progressivism, in my opinion, has not got to do with any belief in the supernatural or deities.

There has been no proof of that and so moving forward for me, would mean totally discarding those beliefs and critically thinking of ways people can create better systems of living as a civilised nation that takes into account the responsibility of the well-being of its people.

However, I personally believe also that people have their right to association as enshrined in our constitution and therefore, need to have their rights respected but monitored so that its members and the general public are not badly affected by negative religious practices that would infringe on their rights. Rather, the religious can also be freethinkers with progressive views using religion as their source of inspiration.

How did you come to adopt a socially progressive worldview?

Personally, I have always been progressive since I was young. I was a member of the Wildlife club and Girl Guide Association since Junior High School and in Senior High School, I became President of the Wildlife Club of my school as well as held the position of Public Relations Officer of the Student & Youth Travel Organisation (SYTO) in 2002.

With these organisations, I advocated for the rights of animals and the plight of near-extinct species, the rights of girls, participated in various donations and awareness campaigns such as HIV/AIDS and Breast Cancer.

I believe that becoming atheist made me more aware of my passions and my part to play in advocacy and the promotion of human rights based on the realisation that there is no one and no god to help us other than ourselves as people.

Why do you think that adopting a social progressive outlook is important?

It is very important since our lives and our well-being depend on the environment and the kind of society we are in. Having bad cultural practices, harmful traditions, and laws could lead us backwards rather than providing us with a bright future for ourselves and the next generations around the world.

I have grown to witness and live with hearing cases of child abuse at homes and in schools, seeing child trafficking on my streets, the handicapped begging, the mentally ill left naked to roam the streets, people dying of diseases that could have been prevented or cured, the loss of trust in policing and the judicial system and the effects of bad governance, bribery, and corruption on a populace.

People are growing ever so desperate that they are falling for the con of others using religion as a means of using them for their sexual perverted desires and money. Poverty is driving people to abandon their loved ones or accuse their own mothers of witchcraft in order for them to be put to death or banished from their communities for life.

It is important that we do away with these in our societies as we have come to know better and rather look to our past which in the Akan language has a term called “Sankofa” which teaches us to learn from our past to build a better tomorrow.

As a progressive, what do you think is the best socio-political position to adopt in the Ghana?

A major investment into Ghana’s educational system and the review of our school curriculum. Almost all government and private schools are influenced or owned by religious institutions and they dictate what should and should not be taught to our children.

It is in schools that major indoctrination starts and stifles freethinking in children. It is also there that teachers are given a right to beat up children to enforce ‘god’s will’ of the “spare the rod, spoil the child’ culture. If our educational system is revamped as our 1st President, Osagyefo Dr. Kwame Nkrumah, a humanist himself, started and envisioned it to be, Ghana could have a well-educated and empowered workforce to develop the country in all the other sectors.

I attended the first University built by Osagyefo Dr. Kwame Nkrumah, The University of Ghana.

You became a member of the Humanist Association of Ghana (HAG) in 2012. You helped organised the first ever West African Humanist Conference (2012), which was sponsored by the International Humanist and Ethical Youth Organisation (IHEYO). What tasks and responsibilities come along with volunteering and organising for the HAG?

At the time, our group was quite small but vibrant.

It was an exciting time to meet other Ghanaian atheists and agnostics and we were very pleased that IHEYO would entrust us with organising such a big event despite us being so new as a group.

We did not have any formal leadership or an Executive Committee at the time so most of this was planned by volunteering members especially Graham Knight who helped to bring us together and started the Freethought Ghana group.

I was then working for an Australian Mining Company out of Accra so I made myself available to attend and help with last minute preparations like picking up delegates from the airport to their hotel and vice versa after the event.

During the event, I volunteered to be at the information desk where I helped to register attendees, distribute pamphlets, notebooks, pens and provide drinking water. I also took it upon myself to film the conference since the funds were not enough for photo and video services.

I also represented the group for interviews by local and international media. To be a volunteer, to me, is about helping however, wherever and whenever you can. Whether financially, using your skills or socially, any help at all goes a long way to achieve a successful event and team effort makes it even more motivating, fun and organised.

In Ghanaian culture, what are some of the more effective means to teach critical thinking within the socio-cultural milieu?

Ghana is made up of a culturally diverse population. It consists of roughly 100 linguistic and cultural groups. These groups, clans and tribes, although very different from each other, have certain similarities in various aspects of their culture. In Ghana, a child is said to be raised by the whole village rather than just the nuclear family.

Traditionally, information was passed on from generation to generation mainly through song and dance. However, in modern days, education not only begins from home but in schools, mainstream media such as TV, radio and religious institutions. As humanists, our focus has been with the youth in schools and social media.

What about modern scientific ideas?

Most of the understanding of things around us are taught from home by parents and extended family members who usually pass on what they learnt from their elders. This is mostly dogmatic and superstitious rather than scientific even though the end result is meant to educate.

Educational institutions are good grounds to teach modern scientific ideas. Ghana can boast of some of the best science institutions such as the Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology as well as research centres such as the Noguchi Memorial institute.

We also have some of the most renowned Medical Teaching hospitals in the West African region such as the Komfo Anokye and Korle-Bu Teaching Hospitals. Ghana has the only Planetarium in West Africa which is 1 of only 3 on the continent, which HAG members patronise and promote. There are also science programmes and quiz competitions amongst schools on TV.

What are the main barriers to teaching critical thinking and modern scientific ideas?

Lack of infrastructure, dedicated science teachers who are poorly paid, medical personnel and government interest has made our science sector struggle as compared to more developed countries.

The average Ghanaian sees science as more theoretical and career-specific than practical. The understanding of science is seen mostly as a 'Western' construct than a global one. This could have stemmed from the fact that most modern inventions known to us came from Europe and the USA.

As a Ghanaian and African, what seem like the positives and negatives of religion and religious fervour on individuals and communities in Ghana and Africa in general?

Using the major religions like Christianity, Islam and Traditional worship, the positives of religion are that they give a sense of community, feelings of love, boosts self-esteem and gives hope and inspiration. The negatives however, are countless.

Many of which include spiritual leaders taking advantage of people financially and sexually, having delusional thoughts out of superstition and religious indoctrination, self-loathing, and guilt from unnecessary thoughts, a sense of false hope, illogical reasoning, lazy attitudes towards work and charity, a false sense of entitlement, mandates to abuse yourself and others most of which turn out to be fatal, etc.

What big obstacles (if at all) do you see social-progressive movements facing at the moment?

1. Lack of governmental/State support
2. Lack of funding or insufficient funds
3. Mismanagement of funds
4. Lack of public support
5. Inadequate and outdated rules of law
6. Insufficient legal backing and law enforcement

How important do you think social movements are?

Social movements are very important especially in 3rd world countries in being the voice of the people and putting pressure on government and the people to review and approve the living conditions of people and the state of affairs of a country and its environment in the best interest of everyone.

This is because despite democracy being adapted as a system of rule in most African countries, most of the time, cultural, traditional and religious biases steer the governments in the wrong direction and also because most of the countries may not have enough funding to care for its citizens and infrastructure.

In November, 2015, you became President of the HAG and in July, 2016, the Chair of the IHEYO African Working Group. What do these elected-to positions mean to you?

In the beginning of joining the humanist movement, I honestly never really saw myself as a leader. I just wanted to contribute my quota. However, I started to realise I had it in me to do great things for my group when I wrote my first article and got the most hits online! I received over 200 comments within days of posting it.

Most of the comments were negative but I felt I had left a mark and got people thinking. It also got the group recognised. I was recommended to IHEYO for a position as Secretary of the African working group in 2014 and at the time, I did not have much on my portfolio as an activist so I was so surprised and over-the-top excited when I got the news that I had been elected by international humanists who barely knew me from a record number of nominations!!!

I was grateful that they read through my nomination and entrusted me with the position, which I held for 2 years.

I took it very seriously and had a lot of guidance from the IHEYO EC whose President was Nicola Jackson. I saw how long the working group had been dormant, and so many things I could do to bring it to life and so many ideas started coming to me.

I increased social media presence on our Facebook page for the African Working Group and membership increased from 12 to 183 members within 2 years (It is now over 230). I also started a new Twitter page, @IheyoAfwg, with 130 followers including local and international humanists and humanist organisations.

I helped create a network of African humanists and humanist organisations that are in regular communication via email, skype and WhatsApp and I discovered several African humanists and organisations that I am in constant contact with to advise and guide.

In December 2014, I together with the Humanist Association of Ghana, hosted the 2nd West African Humanist Conference (WAHC), sponsored by HIVOS and IHEYO. Please see below for links to the videos of the 2-day event which was aired live online setting a record for my group: Day 1—Day 2— I founded the HAGtivist podcast project and started it with other volunteering members of HAG.

I had been a contributor to the IHEYO newsletter Youthspeak personally and from various member organisations in Ghana and Nigeria, and I represented the working group at the recently held General Assembly (GA) in Malta this year.

I was part of the team that helped to organise the first ever continent-wide humanist conference held in Kenya called the African Humanist Youth Days (AHYD 2016) in July. This year, I knew that if I won the election as Chair, there would be so much more I could do to lead the Working group and despite a new resolution to have only Working group MOs voting this time, I came out victorious once again.

I am grateful to my fellow African humanists for their support and belief in me. It was on the same day I also received news of our election from HAG that I had also gained the position from Interim President in November 2015 to President elect in July 2016.

It was truly humbling that my work was recognised and my fellow members had given me the responsibility of representing our group of highly intelligent, creative and wonderful people.

These 2 positions come with the responsibility of representing Africa positively, dedicating a lot of time and resources, being passionate, bold, charismatic, firm, principled, professional, discerning, and diplomatic.

I believe that history is to be made this time around with young African humanists, and I am really happy to have the opportunity to be one of the ones at the forefront of change at this time setting a foundation for generations to come.

Who are personal heroes within the culture?

Historically, there are many personalities that are celebrated in Ghana. Some of my personal heroes are Yaa Asantewaa, an Ashanti Queen mother who, in 1900, led the Ashanti rebellion known as the War of the Golden Stool, also known as the Yaa Asantewaa war, against British colonialism. Her courage and bravery for a woman of her time inspires me.

Our first President of Ghana, Osagyefo Dr. Kwame Nkrumah is also one of the most renowned figures in Africa. He was born in a small village in Ghana and was able to finish his education in 1 of the most prestigious institutions in the world at Oxford University, returned home a humanist and fought for Ghana's independence from the British, making Ghana the 1st African country to be free from colonial rule in 1957.

He was able to transform Ghana by providing us with our first and largest Hydroelectric dam, free basic school education, universities, science centres, Highways, our only International airport, our biggest port, etc. which we enjoy to this day.

In modern times, I have come to admire the work of our current Minister for Gender, Children and Social Protection, Nana Oye Lithur. Although Christian, even before her Ministerial appointment, as a Lawyer, she has helped fight for the rights of the LGBT community despite serious opposition, worked Pro bono to solve many domestic cases especially those against women and children and is working tirelessly through her Ministry in assisting alleged witches banished from their communities.

What is your favourite scientific discovery ever?

Electricity! It forms such an integral part of modern day living that I cannot imagine where we would be without it.

What philosopher(s), or philosophy/philosophies, best represent your own views about aesthetics, ethics, metaphysics, and politics?

I do not follow any philosophers in particular because I have not read about any. Instead, various documentaries have helped shape my thoughts on various aspects of life. I am a lover of nature, science and art. I am not interested much in politics and I derive my ethics from logic, constant research and debates amongst friends and members of HAG.

Who seem like the greatest anti-scientific representatives in Ghana?

Religious leaders!

What about the greatest anti-scientific and anti-humanistic movements within Ghana?

Ghana's greatest enemy in the progress of science and technological advancement is religion. It is the only and greatest barrier because it allows for so much wrong to go on with little or no opposition.

From faith healing, false prophecies, work ethics, illogical theories, women's oppression, authoritarianism, human rights abuse, bribery and corruption, etc. Ghana is highly religious in the sense that everything that happens is attributed to a deity or superstition or both! If something good happens, it is "By His (God's) grace", if something bad happens, it is "God's will" or "the devil's work" or "a bad spirit" or "angry ancestors".

It is almost impossible to argue with people no matter how educated because of this train of thought. Religion is not a private matter as most religious countries practice. Here, it is allowed everywhere and anyone who stands in the way of their ideology or spiritual leader is an enemy of progress to them.

Most homes force relatives to pray at odd hours loudly and some go on the streets at midnight to pray or preach. In the public buses, herbal medicine traders who also double as Christian pastors are allowed to stand and preach for hours during the journey.

At work, highly religious entrepreneurs and Managers force employees to sing and pray before and after work. All official meetings and occasions, private or public begin and end with a prayer. Our entire lives are circulated around prayer and worship of one deity or another. There is little space for intellectual conversations and critical thinking.

What can external associations, collectives, organisations, and even influential individuals, do to assist you in your professional endeavours in Ghana?

I implore all external associations, collectives, organisations to partner with legitimate, active organisations here especially HAG. I advise that not only should they support the work of HAG, but also keep following up on our work.

You may support the activities of HAG through bringing in substantive ideas, financial aid, materials such as books, clothes, Resource persons, promoting our activities on social media and

mainstream media and influential people can also visit to help promote our work and start fundraising campaigns that would be widely reached.

International women's empowerment, equality, and rights are important to me. What is the status of women regarding empowerment, equality, and rights in Ghana?

I am very happy to be born at a time when women empowerment is starting to benefit the masses. However, there are several factors that are hampering empowerment and gender equality in Ghana, which include Cultural and religious beliefs. I wrote an extensive article regarding this issue in March 2016.

Can humanism improve the status of women in Ghana more than traditional religious structures, doctrines, and beliefs?

Most definitely it can! This is because, humanism emphasises the value of all human beings regardless of gender and promotes wellbeing of people whereas religion and superstition creates an illusion of differences between the gender making men feel superior than women. Humanism also brings about a sense of selflessness and working to better the lives of the deprived in society which are mostly women.

Thank you for your time, Roslyn.

Exclusive Interview with Stephanie Guttormson - Operations Director for the Richard Dawkins Foundation for Reason and Science

November 2, 2016

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

Stephanie Guttormson is the current Operations Director for the Richard Dawkins Foundation for Reason and Science – a foundation she joined in March of 2013. Stephanie was the leader of an award winning student group at the Metropolitan State University of Denver which impressively brought in notable names such as Michael Shermer and James Randi to speak on campus.

Where does your personal and family background reside?

Denver, Colorado, my last name, apparently, is Icelandic. Based on the name, my heritage is Icelandic, Vikings, and those kinds of people – Scandinavian.

If we look at the landscape now, especially in North America, atheism is a rapidly growing movement. From your expert position, what seem like the reasons behind this phenomenon?

In one word for you, the internet. The internet is where religion goes to die. I don't remember who said that. It wasn't me, but the internet is where religion goes to die. There's too many ways to get appropriate facts now. Yes, of course, there's tons of crap on the internet too, but being able to debate rationally with people and get them to listen to arguments that they wouldn't otherwise.

Also, they get more exposure to more news about the same facts. They consistently don't see atheists in the news doing violent things. I would also like to say that it has to do with the Richard Dawkins Foundation having a movement to get people to come out of the closet starting with the Out campaign. Now, there's Openly Secular.

I also credit people like David Silverman from American Atheists being super open about it as well as Richard Dawkins, Sam Harris, Ayaan Hirsi Ali, Christopher Hitchens, and James Randi. These are people that I know opened my eyes and open the eyes of a lot of other people.

Listening to these people and working for one of the organisations of probably the most prominent at present, you've probably heard most of the arguments. What do you consider the best argument for atheism?

Atheism is more of a conclusion rather than something to be argued for. (Laugh)

Atheism is what happens when you follow the evidence where it leads, where it leads right now is to the conclusion that there is likely no supernatural force watching over us or any magical force.

Everything we've been able to figure out. Everything we've been able to verify so far has not been magic. We are still waiting for magic to happen. It hasn't, yet. All of our progress has been the result of the method known as the scientific method, for the most part.

Even social change, you look at the situation and people think, "That's not fair. That seems to hurt people. Let's fix that." The thing changes and things get better. The more we learn, the more things get better because we're responding to evidence and the changing situations.

Humans were pretty good at doing that when they left savannah. Now, we need to get our brains to do it and change our minds with new evidence as the new landscape changes.

You hold two bachelor degrees. One in linguistics. One in theoretical mathematics. Both from Metropolitan State University in Denver. I want to focus on theoretical mathematics because it could be technically defined as a science.

So, when it comes to having a mathematical understanding and know the scientific method more than most, does this seem to provide a bulwark for you to consider these topics of critical thinking, faith healing, and other topics along the range of pseudoscience, non-science, bad science, and real science and making that demarcation?

Religion is not the only thing that benefits from wish thinking and that kind of thing. I really hate grief vampires like Adam Miller. He's more of a straight-up conman. "Grief vampires" are psychics, mediums, and those kinds of people. I hate them so much.

Anyone promoting any non-scientific idea boils down to a couple of quotes. One is from my friend Matt Dillahunty. He said, "I want to believe as many true things and as few false things as possible." Also, the other probably is "scientia potentia est" or "knowledge is power."

If you look at the general public and the method of teaching critical thinking, if you could comment of the state of critical and ways to improve education of critical thinking, what is it?

It is garbage. (Laugh)

The current state of teaching critical thinking in this country is garbage. I chose to take logic courses and things that challenge or made my ability to think better. I can't say I wish it were mandatory, but I wish we would encourage it more, certainly. I wish it was a core class to teach critical thinking and its importance.

The fact of the matter is any false belief has potential to do harm because it is incongruent with reality. Those things that are incongruent with reality have great potential to cause harm.

Do you think the work through the Richard Dawkins Foundations assists in the development of critical thinking to a degree?

We would always want to do more, but I think the programs we have help with it. There's one teaching evolutionary science, where we teach middle school teachers how to teach evolution. Some think, "You're indoctrinating them with evolution." No, evolution requires asking a lot of questions.

Kids are interested in it because you get to ask, "Why do cells do that? Why does this happen that way?" Teaching any science, especially evolution, will lead to more critical thinkers.

When you were Metropolitan State University in Denver, you managed to bring Dr. Michael Shermer and James Randi to campus. What was that like getting people that prominent in the atheist, agnostic, and critical thinking movement to come to your university?

That was pretty surreal, not going to lie. That's the only way I could put it. I was shell-shocked at that age. James Randi put forward a ton of effort to get to Denver. One of my heroes did something for me. That was incredible. I can't tell you how good that felt. It is hard to put into words.

For those that don't know, that aren't as involved in that community. Who are individuals that you would recommend to them, and what particular texts would you recommend to them?

I would recommend Ayaan Hirsi Ali. I would recommend Richard Dawkins, Obviously.
(Laugh)

I would encourage them to find a book, *How to Think About Weird Things*. That's a good book. *Lying* by Sam Harris, that is pretty decent. *God is Not Great* by Christopher Hitchens. I would probably have them take any logic book, really, for those that are academically inclined.

They have them in different levels like "Logic for Dummies" all the way to a serious textbook. They all touch on the same things. Also, they should learn on how to be persuasive and how arguments work has been helpful.

What are some of the other ongoing activities and educational initiatives through the Richard Dawkins Foundation?

We have a ton of videos on our [YouTube channel](#). Tons of videos of Richard and other people with loads of information about science and evolution, but everything is in English. There weren't subtitles in other languages until we had the project to translate as many videos into other languages as we could.

We have many videos now in Spanish, Arabic, Chinese, Russian, and so on. We have lots of languages. This is all done by volunteers around the world. Some of them as far away as Pakistan helping us translate videos. We get a translation and have someone double-check it. It is translated and checked by at least two people.

Even the English videos, we have to do the language in English first for something to be translated back for the translators. Those are some of the most important to get right.

Is there an unexpected large following in the Middle East and North Africa region?

We get quite a bit of people from that region contacting us more to get more involved with us. What initiatives are you hoping to host and expand into the future for the Richard Dawkins Foundation?

Currently, we are merging with the Center for Inquiry. We're not planning on launching anything new at the moment because we're in process of this merger.

You have appeared monthly on the Dogma Debate radio show and the Road to Reason TV show.

I stepped away from both for a bit because I had some mental health stuff to deal with first. I will be back for the Dogma Debate show soon. Same for The Road to Reason TV show. I am booking Richard's touring now. It takes most of my time at the moment.

Apart from professional capacities, what personal things do you hope to continue for your own intellectual enjoyment?

Next, I am going to start a video. I have a new target. As you probably know, I went after a man named Adam Miller. He sued me because I said he didn't have magic powers. I won, hilariously. There's this other little dumb fuck who I found on the internet that I want to go after. He claims to be a medium.

I want him to stop taking advantage of people. He's a grief vampire. He's one of these assholes that goes around saying, "Oh, I hear the letter F... coming out of my ass." You are a smug prick and are taking people who are vulnerable, fucking with them, and taking their money when you do it... You need to stop.

Those people are despicable and immoral. You want to talk about how pseudoscience harms people. You don't tell vulnerable people things that they want to hear. That can fuck with their emotions, especially pretending to speak with loved ones that they have never met. It is disgusting. It is despicable.

Historically, pseudo-scientific, non-scientific, and bad scientific views had negative consequences. Sometimes very big ones. It's around now. It has been around in the past. Those around now, by implication, have been around in the past. What are the worst ones that come to mind for you?

Psychics are really bad, but they don't seem as bad because you see the holes in the wall. The really bad ones are those that take advantage of people, such as John Edwards. They are the worst from an immoral perspective. I think the most harmful are medical ones.

The anti-vaccine movement by far is the most harmful pseudoscience movement that we've ever seen. It is followed very closely by chiropractors or any kind of "healing acupuncture." That kind of stuff. Medical pseudoscience by definition is the most harmful, no question – if you're talking about harm.

The medical stuff scares me to death. Mostly because we have people here that are extremely desperate to get better. They are putting their money in places they shouldn't, many times.

Thank you for your time, Stephanie.

Interview with Alejandro Borgo – Representative of CFI-Argentina

October 30, 2016

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

Alejandro Borgo is a journalist and paranormal researcher based in Argentina. In 1990 he co-founded CAIRP (Centro Argentino para la Investigación y Refutación de la Pseudociencia), the first Argentinian sceptical group.

In brief, what is your family story?

Well, my grandparents came to Argentina from Italy. My parents were born in Argentina. My father was a great man. He liked arts. He inspired my love for music and science. He used to give me books about astronomy, biology, etc. He died at 71 and I miss him a lot. He was the man who influenced me, more than anyone.

What about your personal story?

I was born in Buenos Aires, Argentina, on August, 1958. I had a very happy childhood. When I was a teenager I began to read books on the paranormal, and I was fascinated about parapsychology, UFOs, and so on. Then, I began to study at the Argentinian Institute of Parapsychology where, paradoxically, I learned the scientific method.

During 7 years of intensive research there, I could not find even one case in which parapsychological phenomena appeared. I didn't found anything at all and I became a skeptic. At that moment, I was 25 years old.

What are your religious/irreligious, ethical, and political beliefs?

I'm an agnostic regarding religion. My ethical and political beliefs: I respect what we call "negative liberty", I'm against coercion, I think that the State, at least in my country, regulates almost everything. It is abusive. So many laws, so many taxes.

I believe in free exchange with the minimum intervention of the State. I think that we have to put individuals in the first place, not society. And of course, I think that Church and State should be separate, which does not happen in my country. I believe that populism is dangerous, and in Argentina, there were a lot of populist Presidents.

How did you become an investigator and activist-skeptic?

I carried on so many experiments and scientific research and didn't find anything true about paranormal phenomena. I thought: "there are a lot of astrologers, seers, and clairvoyants publishing ads in the newspapers, and I can't find just one of them able to prove their powers... there's something wrong here".

Then, together with Enrique Márquez (magician and researcher of paranormal phenomena) and Alejandro Agostinelli (journalist, specialized in UFOs) we founded the first skeptical organisation in Argentina: Argentinian Center for the Refutation and Investigation of Pseudoscience, in 1990.

We kept in contact with CSI (at that time called CSICOP) and Carl Sagan and Mario Bunge became Honorary Members of our organisation. We published a magazine, El Ojo Escéptico (The Skeptical Eye), and I was the Editor until 1997.

In 2004, the Center for Inquiry decided to publish a magazine for Spanish-speaking people called **Pensar** and I was the Editor until 2009. In 2006, we started with the CFI/Argentina branch, and I was elected to be its Director.

Being a journalist specialised in the paranormal, I was invited to hundreds of TV shows, radio and I was interviewed by the press, in several newspapers and magazines from Argentina and other countries. I published three books about the paranormal and critical thinking.

Were parents or siblings an influence on this for you?

Well, I've said that my father used to give me science books that stimulated my curiosity. My parents were not religious. They never talked to me about religion. They lived without the necessity of believe in god.

Did you have early partnerships in this activist pursuit? If so, whom?

Yes, I had. They were professionals, students or magicians that became friends of mine and share my interest in paranormal phenomena.

Do you consider yourself a progressive?

Yes. I like progress. But I think we have to differentiate people who like progress from those persons who declaim that they like social progress and do nothing to achieve it. I support scientific progress. Social progress is very difficult to define.

I think our ideologies could lead us to commit mistakes. That's why I try to divulge critical thinking. We take so many things for granted and we are not educated to ask "dangerous" questions.

How did you come to adopt a socially progressive worldview?

Well, during my whole life I've changed my worldview. I liked socialism ideas which I don't like anymore. Socialism was a failure, and in some countries a disaster. It's against freedom and is a system where the State regulates everything.

I prefer a democracy with free market without regulations from the State. And of course an education system allowing and promoting free-thinking.

Why do you think that adopting a social progressive outlook is important?

Because progress is necessary to build a better and healthy individuals. And to achieve this goal scientific progress is essential.

As a progressive, what do you think is the best socio-political position to adopt in South America?

A democracy promoting freedom of speech, and encouraging critical thinking, where the individual is the main component. We should not sacrifice individuals in the name of society, because populist systems precisely promote the following point of view: the majority is more important than citizens.

What big obstacles (if at all) do you see social-progressive movements facing at the moment?

Dogmatic ideologies (including religion), secular religions and everything that is opposed to critical and free-thinking.

How important do you think social movements are?

It depends on which movement we are talking about. I would support a movement that promoted freedom, free-thinking, and fought against dogmatic ideologies of any kind.

What is the national state of irreligiosity in Argentina?

Near 90% of the population is composed of believers of different religions.

Do the irreligious experience bigotry and prejudice at all levels of Argentinian society?

Yes, it does.

Why?

First of all, Church and State are not separated. So, citizens, paying taxes are supporting the Catholic Church, even when they believe in another religion or they are agnostics/atheists. That's unfair.

You are the representative of the Center for Inquiry-Argentina. What tasks and responsibilities come with this station?

My responsibility is to represent a world organisation which is promoting science and reason, and secular humanism. I organize lectures, debates, meetings whose main topics are critical thinking, pseudoscience and skepticism.

What are some of your more memorable investigations into the paranormal and parapsychological?

I have investigated hundreds of people who claimed to have paranormal powers, also “haunted” houses, UFOs’ episodes and so on. I also organised, with the support of CFI, the first Iberoamerican Conference on Critical Thinking, on September 2005, with speakers from different countries: Brazil, United States, Chile, Spain, Argentina, Paraguay (sorry if I have left out any other countries!).

You wrote for Skeptical Inquirer. What is the importance of this magazine, and others, to skepticism?

The importance of this magazine is that it is promoting science and reason, in a way that ordinary people could understand what they are.

What demarcates real science from pseudo-science, non-science, and bad science?

Science requires evidence. Pseudo-science does not.

Science is both knowledge and process. Knowledge about the natural world through empirical methodologies. Process to attain empirical knowledge. What is the best way to teach both of these at the same time – because science can be seen as the Periodic Table of Elements, the names of species, the names of minerals, the traits of different astronomical bodies, and so on, alone?

We need science-disseminators, with the ability to explain what is science using clear and simple language. The best example of what I mean is Carl Sagan. I have seen scientists which are invited to TV shows to talk about some subjects and most of them are boring, using complicated words, and scientific terms.

They are not prepared to be disseminators. If we cannot approach to the audience in a direct and simple way, we are failing. We have to do what Bertrand Russell did. He was a great philosopher, but he also wrote to ordinary people.

What is your favorite scientific discovery ever?

Evolution.

What is your favorite debunked pseudo-science?

I think that we have to apply skepticism and critical thinking in economics and politics. There is a lot of pseudoscience on both subjects.

What is your current work?

I'm a journalist, writer and musician. Right now I am on tour with a tango orchestra called Camerata Porteña.

Where do you hope it goes into the future?

I am optimistic. But I see that magical thinking and pseudoscience are ignored by the major part of the scientific community. And, as I wrote above, it is absolutely necessary to form science-disseminators. We need to spread the word of reason. But sincerely, I don't know if that is going to happen in the short run. For what I see, pseudoscience is invading academic institutions, and religion is still strong.

Thank you for your time, Alejandro.

You're welcome!

Interview with Tara Abhasakun on the Baha'i Faith

October 26, 2016

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

Tara Abhasakun is a journalist based in the USA and occasional Blogger. Tara talks about her community, the Baha'i faith and feminism.

As noted in correspondence, you are not a Baha'i scholar. You are a recent undergraduate graduate and a woman Baha'i member. What is your background in Baha'i?

Both of my parents are Baha'is. I was raised in the Baha'i Faith. Although, I do not personally identify as a Baha'i. The Baha'i teachings that I was raised with are still very important to me. I think the teachings play a role in my life in a secular way.

I believe in the promise of world peace in the coming century, and the goal of uniting all of mankind, though I don't believe in a god who can hear people's prayers. I believe in the social reforms that the prophet Baha'u'llah advocated for, but I don't believe that god is necessary for them to occur. Most of the time when people ask me about my religion,

I say that I was "raised as a Baha'i."

Does Baha'i have articles of faith that might best be deemed progressive?

I believe that the vast majority of Baha'i principles are progressive. Baha'is believe in the alleviation of poverty, and the elimination of extremes in wealth and poverty. We believe that men and women are equal, and that racism must be overcome.

What is the ultimate aim of the Baha'i faith insofar as you understand it?

As I understand it, the Baha'i Faith's ultimate goal is to bring about world peace and reconcile human conflicts and differences. It is to create an ever-advancing society free of borderlines between countries and nations.

Are there general ethical precepts and political stances within the doctrines or derivatives of the doctrines of the faith?

Baha'is don't believe in partisan politics, and don't align with particular political parties. We are, however, allowed to vote for individuals who we see as fit to lead. Most Baha'is tend to support liberal candidates, though.

What is the perspective of the faith on women's equality? How are women equal in the faith?

Baha'is are taught that men and women are two wings of one bird, and without one wing, the bird cannot fly. In fact, Baha'is are taught that the education of women is more important than

that of men. This is because, as Baha'is believe, women are more likely to teach their children what they learn in school than men are.

We do, however, have an issue with not allowing women to serve on our world leadership. Women are allowed to serve on local and national leaderships, but not our world leadership (known as the Universal House of Justice).

Abdul'baha, our Prophet's son, who was assigned leadership of the Baha'i faith after the Prophet died, said that the reason for excluding women from the UHJ was a mystery that would one day become known. So, nobody knows exactly why he said this.

Are there those that, like those experiencing bigotry and prejudice for being atheist, Christian, Jewish, or Muslim, experience prejudice, bias, bigotry, and bullying because they happen to follow the Baha'i faith but are decent, honourable members of the global community?

Baha'is have been persecuted in Iran ever since the faith's inception there in 1844. This is because according to mainstream Islamic belief, any religion that comes after Mohammad is considered apostasy. Baha'is have been killed since 1844.

Today, violent hate crimes still occur, though much less frequently. There was one hate crime in 2014 when a Baha'i woman was poisoned to death. These hate crimes occur much less frequently now. However, there is still government persecution. Baha'is in Iran are banned from attending all public and private universities in Iran, and are frequently arrested on false charges such as "spying" for the West.

All seven members of the Baha'i leadership in Iran have been imprisoned for the past eight years for such charges. Last month, a Baha'i was stabbed to death in what was likely a hate crime, and Iranian police deny that religion could have played any role in the killer's motivation.

Can you recount any personal or family experiences of this?

My grandfather is a Baha'i from Iran. When he was seven years old, he was called into his principal's office. The principal asked if his family were Baha'is. My grandfather responded, telling them that his mother was a Baha'i, and his father was a Muslim who had become a Baha'i.

The principal then pointed to a drinking fountain and said, "You are not allowed to drink that water because you are a Baha'i, and are therefore dirty." This was in a desert area, so in the desert heat, my grandfather was not allowed to drink water at school. In addition, people in the town would sometimes throw stones at and insult my grandfather when he walked home from school.

Things began to get worse. In the town that they lived in, Kashan, people had to fetch water from wells, and carry them in large, heavy barrels. One time, when my grandfather was carrying a

barrel back, someone from town took a handful of dirt off the side of the road and put it in the water.

So, my grandfather had to walk all the way back and get another barrel of water.

Instances such as these forced my grandfather's family to move to another city a year later, when he was eight.

Extremists come in different stripes and levels of severity. What are some unfortunate examples of extremism coming out of self-identified Baha'i members? How is the Baha'i community, and those outside it, attenuating that extremist behaviour?

As far as I know, Baha'is have never committed violent extremism. They do, however, have some beliefs that are now considered intolerant in the 21st century. Despite being very forward and progressive in most areas, Baha'is still don't allow same-sex marriages within their faith.

Many, though certainly not all Baha'is, believe that homosexuality is a "spiritual affliction." Though there is scriptural reasoning behind this, I believe that there are other scriptures to counter this belief. Shogi Effendi, the guardian of the Baha'i Faith, said that homosexuality was a spiritual affliction. On the other hand, Effendi himself said that he was not infallible in matters of science.

One Baha'i principle is that if science ever proves a religious belief wrong, then that belief becomes superstition. Today, science is further proving that people are born with their sexual orientation. Some Baha'is argue, however, that even if homosexuality is natural, then it's still wrong.

Shogi Effendi also said that homosexual people should consult a doctor. Advice that doctors give on homosexuality varies between countries, though. While a doctor in the US or Europe would likely say that homosexuals should accept themselves, a doctor in Iran certainly would not.

Clearly, this is an area where there is not technically a right answer. I believe that Baha'is should follow a statement made by Abdul'Baha, "No man should follow blindly his ancestors or forefathers." He did not say, "Don't blindly follow your forefathers, except for your Baha'i forefathers."

He simply said don't blindly follow your forefathers. Abdul'Baha argued that humans should investigate reality for themselves, and use reason. Therefore, I think that it's in line with Baha'i values for Baha'is to admit that certain statements made by early Baha'i leaders don't have a place in universal human rights in the 21st century.

I believe that this statement can also apply to the statement about women not serving on the Universal House of Justice. While there may have been a reason for it in the early 20th century, this is no longer an appropriate ideal.

The current state of LGBT rights, as well as the issue of women not being allowed to serve on the Baha'i world leadership, must be resolved if Baha'is truly want to achieve their goal of building a unified world.

Interview with Kate Smurthwaite

October 25, 2016

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

Kate Smurthwaite is a British stand-up comedian, a human-rights activist, political activist, and a feminist. She regularly appears on British television and radio as a pundit, offering opinion and comment on subjects ranging from politics to religion.

How did you become an activist, comedian, and feminist?

Well I became a comedian by doing a number of courses on writing and performing and on stand-up and then by getting up and doing it and working on it. Being a feminist and an activist is just how I've reacted to the things that I've experienced and witnessed and learnt in my life.

Who are comedic heroes for you?

John Oliver and Tina Fey are the performers working right now that make me want to do the sort of things they do. So talented. I also love Mark Steel's columns and his wonderful "Mark Steel's in town" radio shows. But in other ways I feel like I carve quite a new and different path. Which is probably why it's so bloody hard all the time!

Why them?

Well Last Week Tonight is a masterpiece of political comedy and 30 Rock is the greatest sitcom ever written. And what I love about Mark Steel's work is how he can make it so political but so personal and connected too.

What is the importance of freedom of speech for more avant garde comedians?

There are comedians in various places around the world doing political material, especially material about organised religion, that puts their life and well being and liberty at risk. Powerful leaders are rightly afraid of comedy because it connects with people and influences them in ways that no amount of angry lecturing can.

That's something we should always bear in mind and work to end. Sadly, it feels like in the UK comedians banging on about freedom of speech are mostly unimaginative acts who make racist sexist and homophobic jokes and then call it "censorship" when their third series doesn't get broadcast. I really think we should arrange some sort of cultural exchange to try to help them understand that their rights extend to not being shot at rather than not being given their own chat show. LOL.

Were parents or siblings an influence on this for you?

No. They all have sensible jobs.

Was university education an asset or a hindrance to this?

I learnt a great deal at university. I'm not sure my maths degree gets used much any more. But the experience of being around a lot of interesting people and exposed to a lot of ideas and activities was important.

Did you have early partnerships in these activist and comedic pursuits?

No. In fact rather the opposite; I'm always trying to find partners and teams to work with but I've more or less always found the problem is that I end up being the one doing all the work and it falls apart.

How did you come to adopt a socially progressive worldview?

That's not a term I particularly use but I guess I could say I have a tendency to empathise with whoever is being mistreated. I never understand when people say "well we should bomb this country because they've done XYZ", I just think: But the people of that country now have corrupt leadership AND western bombs to contend with.

It's like saying "stop hurting me or I'll kill your wife". It only works if you're such a psychopath you don't understand that the wife is also human.

Why do you think that adopting a socially progressive outlook is important?

I think human rights matter. I think that's important. You can call it whatever you like, I don't care about labels like that. In fact, I actively don't like them, 'cos they don't mean anything. As soon as you ascribe to one someone will just say, "Well, John is a social progressive and he wants to eat frogs," and suddenly it's my job to justify battery frog farms. Then we end up in a six-year debate about what the term should mean and who is and who isn't and all that time there are kids starving.

Do you consider yourself a progressive?

I'm a feminist and an atheist, I'm in favour of human rights and equality and more protection for the environment. Labels labels labels whatevs yeah?

What is feminism's importance in the UK in the early 21st century to you?

52% of the U.K. population is women and we tend to take the radical view that we should have the same rights and face the same opportunities as the rest of the population. Right now we're miles away from that.

There's a yawning pay gap, there's an average of two women a week being killed by their partner or ex-partner, there's a rape conviction rate of about 6%. Unless that seems like a fair and equal society, it seems pretty relevant to all of us.

And as for me? Well I live here and I'm a woman so I'm aware of sexism every day. Watching my less experienced male colleagues offered top well paid roles I'm not even considered for. Officials that don't listen to me. Harassment in and out of work.

And then there's the Internet abuse. The rape and death threats, the words "bitch" and "cunt" appearing within minutes under any new piece of work I produce online. Sexism is what I live in. Of course I want it to stop.

What are your religious/irreligious beliefs?

I'm an atheist. The non-existence of God is not a belief, it's a fact.

What were pivotal moments in becoming an atheist for you?

I stopped going to church at about 14. Prior to that I went to a very happy-clappy baptist church where Sunday School was cringe-worthily trendy. God on a skateboard, graffiti Jesus. I liked it though, they were really nice to me, it was a shame in some ways that I no longer believed it and I couldn't keep spending time with those people. But somehow it had reached a point where the illogicality of it was too much for me.

Are there inspiring and well-known atheists that you could mention here?

Not long after becoming an atheist I went to college where I heard Richard Dawkins speak several times. Fast forward twenty years to now and I know Richard and have had the privilege of asking him in more detail about some of the things he talks about, especially evolution, in more detail.

At the moment I'm particularly inspired by women connecting feminism and atheism.

Something I think should be obvious and intuitive given the history of misogyny in every major religious tradition. Something I consider myself a part of alongside women who have become my friend like Lisa-Marie Taylor, Maryam Namazie, Rayhana Sultan, Gita Saghal, Joan Smith and probably someone else who will be offended I didn't mention them!

Atheism is a growing movement. It seems to be a mixture of 'coming out' and being convinced by arguments, even disillusionment with traditional religious structures. What is the importance of atheism now?

Atheism isn't, in a way, important, it's just true. What is important is ending the lies of religion that are used to imprison millions of people physically, emotionally and socially. From stoning "adultrresses" to forced child marriage and FGM all the way to those insidious guilty attitudes and feelings that so many people have around sex, masturbation and even eating pork!

As a progressive, what do you think is the best socio-political position to adopt in the United Kingdom?

I think we need to defend and extend the welfare state, I think the elderly, the unemployed, the sick and the disabled deserve proper support. And young people too. I think we should scrap Trident and scrap university tuition fees. I have a lot of other views on policies I think we should introduce that will make life fairer and easier for people in the UK. I also think we should let refugees and migrants into the UK and support them too.

How important do you think social movements are?

I think everyone should get up and work and campaign for a fairer society. If you want to call that a social movement, sure. I call it being a human being with a sense of compassion. I think the way the press is able to lie and distort the truth is a problem for everyone, not just those who consider themselves part of a particular movement.

What is your current work?

I'm currently doing two things. Firstly, I'm touring my new solo show Smurthwaite On Masculinity. I'm really proud of it. Tour dates will be up on my [website](#) as they're announced. Secondly I'm building up a crowdfunded base for my video work to allow me much greater creative freedom. The details for that are [here](#).

What are some of the main themes in the new solo show, Smurthwaite on Masculinity?

Well as the title suggests it's about masculinity and specifically about the rise of 21st century toxic masculinity. Stag parties, pick-up artists, mob-mentality football crowds, all those things that get justified as "man behaviour" but are often very intimidating and destructive to those around them. It's a very different show to anything I've ever performed in the past but you'll have to come along and see why!

We talked about freedom of speech and the roles of comedians in society. You mentioned crowdfunding for greater creative freedom. For up-and-coming comedians, what are some important resources for them to be able to develop professionally, test cultural boundaries, and build their own skill sets to express their own creativity?

I'm not sure there are any resources. Comedy is a freelance business so if you want to pay your bills doing it some sort of compromise is going I sneak in eventually. But it's such a diverse field I could probably give advice to someone looking for a specific sort of club or platform for their work, but the whole industry? It's tough. Don't do it unless you're sure you really want to.

Where do you hope your professional work will go into the future?

I'd just like more people to see my work. I don't really care whether that's on TV or radio or at live shows or on the Internet I just want to continue to build my audience to share my ideas and give people a good laugh in the process.

Thank you for your time, Kate.

Interview with James Underdown – Executive Director of Center for Inquiry-Los Angeles & Founder & Chairman of the Independent Investigations Group

October 21, 2016

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

James Underdown has been the executive director of The Center for Inquiry (CFI) Los Angeles since 1999. The Center for Inquiry is a non-profit educational organisation with headquarters in Amherst, NY, whose primary mission is to foster a secular society based on science, reason, freedom of inquiry, and humanist values. CFI Los Angeles is the largest branch in the organisation outside Amherst.

Underdown founded the Independent Investigations Group IIG, a volunteer-based organisation, in January 2000 at the Center for Inquiry-West (now Center for Inquiry-Los Angeles) in Hollywood, California. The IIG investigates fringe science, paranormal and extraordinary claims from a rational, scientific viewpoint, and disseminates factual information about such inquiries to the public.

In brief, what is your family story?

I was born in Chicago. I have a sister a year younger than I. We grew up in Wheaton, IL, with both our parents. My mother's side of the family are 2nd generation Italian and Catholic, generally. My father (now deceased) was an atheist, but agreed to raise my sister and me Catholic.

What about your personal story?

I've been very lucky and have had a good life so far. Was able to attend pretty good schools all the way through college and have always been able to find employment. I've had over 40 jobs in my life, though I've never been fired. (e.g. truck driver, teacher, stand-up comic, hotel clerk, football coach, warehouse manager, roadie, limo driver, traffic school teacher, carpenter, singer, executive director at the Center for Inquiry – just to name a few.)

Married (2nd time) for 9+ years with no kids.

What are your religious/irreligious, ethical, and political beliefs?

I am a secular humanist, which is an atheist with certain ethical principles. (Atheism doesn't address ethics, merely belief – or lack thereof.)

I consider myself Liberal and left for most issues, but don't feel locked into what any group thinks.

How did you become an investigator and activist-sceptic?

I left Catholicism at an early age (10?) because they told stories (think miracles) that didn't sound true and couldn't answer simple questions about those stories.

Even though I liked science, I still held some mild beliefs about paranormal abilities, alien visitation, and weird phenomena when I was in my teens. When I discovered Skeptical Inquirer magazine and started reading the solid, science-based explanations for what people were experiencing, my paranormal beliefs dried up. The SI explanations were more interesting than the stories, I thought. Still do!

L.A. is a hotbed of wacky beliefs, so when I took the Executive Director job at CFI in 1999, I decided to create (what we eventually called) the Independent Investigations Group so more of us could get some first-hand, up-close looks at paranormal claims and claimants. Soon after, we started offering cash prizes (a 'la James "The Amazing" Randi) to anyone who could prove such ability.

There were very few people doing testing and investigations then.

Were parents or siblings an influence on this for you?

Probably not directly, but my father was never afraid to argue a minority point of view about any idea, and both parents seemed to give my sister and me a fair amount of rope when it came to doing what interested us. So the door was open to explore interests in our family. My mother still has difficulty explained to people what I do. ☺

Did you have early partnerships in this activist pursuit? If so, whom?

There were and are like-minded people who are integral to all the work we do, but no individuals that affected my path.

Do you consider yourself a progressive?

Yes, if I understand the definition correctly as being one who favours social reform.

Does progressivism logically imply other beliefs, or tend to or even not at all?

There may be some correlation between progressivism and certain beliefs, but I think it's more about being open to change, and that means one must be willing to look hard at both the current world and what led to that world. It also means being willing to challenge the status quo and one's own positions. These are all signs of an active intellect.

How did you come to adopt a socially progressive worldview?

Here's where my parents had an influence on me. My father was a social worker who understood how people's environments and genetics steered them. My mother was not afraid to disagree with her church, friends or family. They both got along with people well, but thought for themselves.

My own life has been full of people, places, and experiences that have rounded out my worldview. I've been to 5 of the 7 continents and circulated among people who range from homeless to CEOs of large businesses. Being exposed to such variety helps me see the world in gray tones instead of black and white.

Why do you think that adopting a social progressive outlook is important?

Clinging to past ways is not how humans have improved their lot. Seeing other people's perspectives, and constantly reassessing what we do to and for each other is how we make life better – for everyone.

As a progressive, what do you think is the best socio-political position to adopt in the America?

I kind of like Churchill's quote, "No one pretends that democracy is perfect or all-wise. Indeed, it has been said that democracy is the worst form of government except all those other forms that have been tried from time to time."

I don't think I could put a label on my position. People should work if they can, and we should help those who can't. Societies should have safety nets so no one suffers too badly as long as there are billionaires. People should be treated fairly and accorded as much respect, freedom, and opportunity as possible. These are generalities, I know, but maybe some sort of starting point.

What big obstacles (if at all) do you see social-progressive movements facing at the moment?

Polarisation and misinformation.

Certain news outlets (like FOX) seem hell-bent on keeping their audience angry, and afraid. They portray opposing ideas as attacks trying to destroy decent God-fearing Americans. We seem to have lost the ability to find common ground between well-meaning citizens and to work through disagreements.

There seems to be few gating mechanisms to spreading false information. Does anyone care about being accurate?

Average people seem to think they have mastered enough science, economics, and climate to jaw-flap at length about such complex fields. It's disturbing.

How important do you think social movements are?

Very. It takes large numbers in a society to wake people up and change wrongs. Some change won't happen quietly. Some injustice must be exposed and squeezed out in a public way.

You represent the Council for Secular Humanism. What is the national state of secular humanism as a philosophy and a movement in the United States?

The poll numbers suggest we're making progress. More and more people every year are openly living their lives without religion, and young people are identifying as secular in extraordinary numbers.

But the country is still not ready to elect an atheist president, tax the churches, or take God off the money. We are making headway, though! I wish I could see what things look like in a century or two.

Do secular humanists experience bigotry and prejudice at all levels of American society?

People who live in urban, progressive areas probably aren't encountering too much bigotry – at least not active bigotry. We still have to endure civic prayer, God references, and make up for the taxes churches don't pay.

The secular folks in the bible belts (there are many) are another story. Many must maintain a low profile or risk being ostracised. One's business success or career track might depend on some serious discretion when it comes to revealing religious beliefs.

Why?

Evangelical Christians and fundamentalists in other religions are constantly being told that secular folk are anything from God-haters to Satan-lovers. (We don't believe in either!) The Pat Robertsons and Jerry Falwells in their world have poisoned minds about their neighbors. Most of us are likeable...I think.

Since 1999, you have been the Executive Director of Center for Inquiry-Los Angeles (CFI-LA). What tasks and responsibilities come with this station?

My responsibilities span from making sure the building and office are in working order to bringing critical thinking to my fellow human beings. We specialise in religion, philosophy, and scepticism and bring a science and evidence-based perspective to issues under those headings. I get to represent those perspectives everywhere from network TV (Dr. Phil, Oprah, Hannity & Colmes) to a comparative religion class at Ontario Christian High School. I am a free-range evangelist for critical thinking.

You wrote for Free Inquiry and Skeptical Inquirer. What is the importance of these magazines to scepticism?

Ok, I am biased, but I think these magazines are the top of the line resources for great information in the arenas of secular humanism and scepticism. Our editors Tom Flynn (FI) and Ken Frazier (SI) get great talent to contribute to these publications. I always learn something new from reading them – even after years in the business!

You are the Founder and Chairman of the Independent Investigations Group (IIG) in Hollywood, California. What are some of its more notable investigations into the legitimacy of paranormal claims?

We found pseudo-science being taught to California nurses. We've tested psychics, telepaths, dowzers, fortune tellers and telekinetics. We learned how TV mediums John Edward and James Van Praagh appear to converse with the spirits of dead people. We've investigated ghosts, UFOs, athletic enhancement devices, perpetual motion, and dozens of other claims.

Just for the record, we've found zero evidence that the paranormal exists. ZERO.

What demarcates real science from pseudo-science, non-science, and bad science?

I'm not sure I'm qualified to say what good science is, but here goes: Good science is peer reviewed, checked and double checked. It is replicable, transparent, and falsifiable. Good science withstands criticism from those most knowledgeable about the claim, and often enjoys a clear consensus of experts in the field. Good science is evidence-based and is provisionally thought to be the best current explanation until – if and when – better evidence comes along.

Science is both knowledge and process. Knowledge about the natural world through empirical methodologies. Process to attain empirical knowledge. What is the best way to teach both of these at the same time – because science can be seen as the Periodic Table of Elements, the names of species, the names of minerals, the traits of different astronomical bodies, and so on, alone?

Yes, science has accumulated great gobs of knowledge over the last few centuries, but it's the process part that carries over to other areas. Once we learn the best proven ways to get reliable information, we can point those methods at any question and know that we've done our best to get a good answer.

What is your favourite scientific discovery ever?

The expanding universe and all the exoplanets are pretty mind-blowing. Let's find some life out there!

What is your favourite debunked pseudo-science?

I find the cryptids – Bigfoot, Loch Ness monster, Chupacabra, etc. – kind of funny. I hate to see people waste their money on psychics and alternative medicines or faith healers. They're all debunked, by the way. ☺

You offer 100,000 USD prize through IIG. Has anyone ever won it?

Not even close.

Who has been the closest?

Once during a rehearsal for a test, one of our people guessed a bunch of Zener cards correctly, but it was a fluke. His final score was average, though he scored really well early in the test.

What was their failure?

Telepathy.

What is your current work?

Teaching others to test and investigate.

Where do you hope it goes into the future?

A serious reduction in the belief in things that are apparently not true. Is that too much to ask?

Thank you for your time, James.

Extended Interview with Maryam Namazie

October 24, 2016

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

Maryam Namazie is an Iranian-born secularist and human rights activist, commentator and broadcaster. She is spokesperson for Iran Solidarity, One Law for All and the Council of Ex-Muslims of Britain.

How did you get involved in activism?

I became an activist as a result of my own life experiences after an Islamic regime took power in Iran. We fled the country. One of the first ways in which I got politically involved was in doing refugee rights work. My family and so many we knew had become refugees and it was a way of dealing with the trauma of losing everything and starting all over again – somewhere completely new – and at times unwelcoming.

It followed too, that I would be active against theocracy and religious rules, and for people's rights. The best way you can fight repression is to refuse and resist. I didn't set out to be an activist; in many ways I was forced into it. I had no choice but to fight back in the best way I knew how. Also when you are faced with such inhumanity – like the Islamic regime of Iran – the best fight back has to be fundamentally human.

Was there support from parents, siblings, or others for you?

My family has always been supportive of me. That's why it has been easy for me to be an activist. Also, my partner is an activist. I've really always had a lot of support.

I can't imagine people who not only don't have the support of their families, but are being beaten and abused because of their beliefs. I think it makes it so much more difficult. Doesn't it? It still astonishes me people like that can still be active and speak out.

I have met a lot of very vocal women. Many of them say they've had supportive parents and fathers. I think that's key when you're an activist. Obviously, you can be vocal without family support, but it helps a great deal.

Speaking of human rights as well as women rights, which are somewhat separated but definitely overlap, do you note that more of the rights violations are women's in general?

Obviously, I think rights are violated across the board, but because women are seen to be more vulnerable, they are seen to be the property of the community, the society, the family's honor, the society's national honour, it makes it easier to target them. And often the abuse is legitimised in ways that other abuses aren't.

As a result, violence against women is more acceptable in many ways. In that sense, one of the greatest violations of human rights is in the area of women's rights.

Some of the more tragic and dramatic examples are violations of women's bodies through things such as tens of millions of women having female genital mutilation, infibulation, clitoridectomy, and so on, against their will, even as girls. Does that seem, along with others, more religiously motivated or not?

I think there are obviously non-religious motivations for those violations, but very often religion also justifies and legitimises it, and gives it divine sanction in ways that other justifications don't – which makes it all the more dangerous.

You are working on a new film. What is the content and purpose of that film?

The film is on Islam's non-believers. It's been made by Deeyah Khan, who is an award-winning film maker. Her previous films have been about honor killing as well as Jihadis.

And this one is about Islam's non-believers. It looks at the situation of young people, particularly in Britain, who are facing discrimination and abuse because they've decided to be atheists. Often, including from their families and the larger communities that they live in. The film also links to the international situation.

You see the links between Bangladeshi Islamists hacking atheists to death in Bangladesh and also threatening atheists right here in Britain. People who are respected, people who are so-called 'community leaders'. It shows that Islamism is an international movement that targets apostates.

It also shows the ex-Muslim resistance as an international movement and how it too is an important way of pushing back the Islamists by opening up the space to question and debate, and criticize religion, even to renounce religion. The ability to do it despite the risks involved.

The American Massachusetts Institute of Technology trained and Tufts University based philosopher and cognitive scientist professor, Daniel Dennett, did something similar to that. He looked into pastors, ministers, and preachers who had lost their faith and continued to preach.

There's a decent amount who've lost their faith and continued to preach. I haven't seen the precise results, but this seems like a similar case. A possibly relatively common phenomena of people putting on the 'face' such as the engaging in practices and wearing the clothing in public, but not holding the beliefs sincerely or simply not believing.

Do you know of the numbers of non-believers in Islam, but are putting on that face – so to speak?

Yea, also, there are 13 countries that execute apostates and atheists. There's also a huge amount of threats and intimidation. The numbers are much larger than we can imagine because of the many risks involved. Social media and the internet are doing to Islam what the printing press did to Christianity.

So, it is opening the way to challenge it in a way that hasn't been possible because of the risks that are involved. My opinion is its a tsunami of millions. It really is the case that there are atheists in every family, in every home, in every neighbourhood, in every country.

There are many of them. We can see it now via social media. What we see, though, is still the tip of the iceberg. We have many members living in Britain, which is a relatively safe place to live. There are no apostasy rules, but people continue to wear the veil, go to mosque, and continue to say they're Muslims when they are atheists.

I think if the pressure of the Islamist movement is removed, if that movement is pushed back in the way political Christianity was pushed back by an Enlightenment, the world will be surprised by the sheer number of non-believers. I think even we will be surprised by it.

On the fringe of that sector of people, that sub-population within the community will be those that simply had over time their fundamentalist beliefs softened and liberalised quite a bit. Do you think that would be a much larger population – that sector would then move into non-believing as well?

Definitely, I think that is the case. I mean, of course, no community or society is homogenous. There are so many differences of opinion. The problem is we live in an era where communities are homogenised.

Very often, those in power are seen to be the representatives of those communities. In the so-called Muslim community, Islamists are seen as the authentic Muslims and representatives. I think many people are forced to keep up appearances, even if they don't believe.

Time will reveal all, but already we're seeing the extent of it. If anyone is interested in seeing it, is interested in accepting that there's diversity and dissent in what is considered a homogenous group, it is very easy to see.

And it is on the increase. A convert was telling me that the Islamists always talk about how many people are converting into Islam, but we never hear about many of those converts who then decide to leave Islam and to become atheists.

We hear it is the fastest growing religion. We never hear about all of those people running for their lives in the opposite direction. (Laugh)

Things are skewed in the favour of religion because religion is privileged anyway. No matter what society you live in. But when it is imposed, very often by brute force, by the Islamist movement, the numbers can never really be revealed.

But you can get a really good sense of it. When we started **#ExMuslimBecause**, we were expecting to have a couple of hundred people respond. We even thought, "Let's do it a few weeks in advance of December 10th, International Human Rights Day, so, we can build up on it and gather a few hundred statements."

It went viral in 24 hours. There were over 120,000 tweets from 65 different countries. Again, that is still the tip of the iceberg, really.

At this point in time, how do you self-identify in terms of irreligious/religious beliefs as well as socio-political beliefs?

I have a big problem with identity politics. I think it's regressive as it tries to pigeonhole people into groups of constructed identities. It refuses to acknowledge that people are multifaceted. They have so many different characteristics that define them or they define themselves with.

For me, even the whole ex-Muslim movement is not about identity politics, I know it is for some people, but it is about a political challenge to the Islamist movement, to discrimination and violence against apostates, and it is one way of highlighting that.

It also challenges the view that the "Muslim community" is a homogenous community. If you have ex-Muslims, millions of people who don't want to be considered Muslim anymore, it challenges multiculturalism as a social policy. I personally have political positions and ideals, which, for me, mark who I stand with irrespective of background or belief.

I am a secularist, for example. I will stand with Muslims and ex-Muslims, and non-Muslims, in support of secularism. I might be an atheist, but I don't necessarily agree with all atheists on all issues. I am pro-refugee rights and against profiling of Muslims, for example.

I am old-fashioned in the sense that I think we need to build solidarity around political ideals, rather than around ridiculous limiting identities, which narrow the allies we can have and put us amongst those who aren't necessarily our allies because they fit within a narrow identity.

Unfortunately, this is old-fashioned, but that's how political organising has always been done. It has been done irrespective of one's background, beliefs, and identity around specific political ideals.

I think that's why we're in the mess we are in today because we are not able to see our allies and our enemies given the bogus identity politics.

I want to shift the conversation to some of the things you mentioned at the beginning about refugees. In the early 21st century, we have a singular tragedy with the Syrian refugee crisis. How do you think countries in Europe are managing and handling refugees as well as the crisis at large?

For me, the refugee issue is a human rights issue – in the same way that I don't think you should stop people using a hospital because they are undocumented and an EU citizen rather than a British born citizen or exclude people based on age, sex, race, or belief, I don't think you should stop people from gaining protection.

It doesn't matter where you fled from and where you seek refuge, you must be granted protection. It's a basic human right.

People who have never had to worry about getting visas or fleeing for their lives might find it hard to understand the desperation – to have to leave everything you know – the language, the society, your work, your family, your loved ones, sometimes even sending your children on their own (unaccompanied minors) because you have no other hope of saving them. You send them off on this perilous journey and don't even know if they will make it alive.

From my perspective, we should do everything and anything we can to help people. In the same way, I think everyone who needs healthcare should have it. Everyone who needs housing should have it. I don't understand why we should have homeless people. I don't understand why there are children who go to bed hungry in this country. I also don't understand why refugees shouldn't be given protection and safety.

I know of course it is because profit is more important than human need, and differences amongst us are more deemed more important than our common humanity but I don't see why it should be that way.

Also, rights are not contingent on whether you like or agree with those demanding it. Sometimes the refugee issue is muddled up because people want to run an inquisition before deciding whether someone is eligible for this right.

My perspective is that even if a person's views are disgusting and vile, they still have human rights. You can't stop people from accessing a GP because you don't like their beliefs, so why do you think you can do it when it comes to those trying to save their lives and fleeing wars and persecution? Also beliefs are not set in stone. They change all the time.

People have a right to an education. They have a right to food. They have a right to healthcare. I would also say they have a right to asylum. I know we're living in a time when this is unfashionable to say. With Brexit, so many hate anyone who doesn't look like them. They want everybody out. Even if they're doctors who are saving your life, they are still not good enough, not white enough, or what have you.

I think this boils down to a very fundamental issue. Rights are for everyone not just your pals. And there is more that hold us together than separate us if only we could see beyond the propaganda.

We are seeing some concerns from many people being raised both in North America, Europe, and elsewhere with, the phrase being used is, "right wing nationalism," which can sometimes be seen as ethnic nationalism in a way. What do you think is the state of that at this point in time? What are the possible major concerns associated with that?

I think this is what happens when identity politics rules.

Identity politics divides and separates people so that they can no longer see their commonalities across these false borders. It's not just that minorities love to live in ghettos and be humiliated day-in and day-out.

This ghettoization is part and parcel of government policies of multiculturalism and cultural relativism. It means that governments can manage their minorities on the cheap by outsourcing citizens to self-appointed community “leaders” and Sharia courts, Islamic schools and so on.

When identity politics is supreme, it makes it possible for white identity politics to be portrayed as a legitimate option.

It surprises me how many people justify and legitimise what is fundamentally white identity politics, white supremacist politics, because the fascists and bigots happen to be critical of Islam. Look, the Islamists are also critical of US militarism but that doesn’t mean I should be siding with them.

You can oppose both. This is a trap, though, the so-called “Regressive Left” fall into. But so do those who use the term “Regressive Left” in every other sentence but consider it a “smear” to call out those feeding into the far-Right narrative.

Like the atheists and secularists who fall into the trap of defending Tommy Robinson and Robert Spencer because they have “some legitimate views.” Well, I’m sure if you sit down and have a chat with al-Baghdadi, he will have “some legitimate views.” Assad or Khamenei might too; they might think that roads should be paved.

But that’s not a reason to ally with them or to justify their politics. I think this is a huge problem. You have people saying, “Well, the Far Right is dealing with the Islamists, therefore, let’s deal with them with kid gloves.” I think that’s a mistake. If you look at them (I always get shit for saying this but people don’t understand what I’m saying) fundamentally they are similar to the Islamists. Islamism is a far-Right movement.

Of course, I’m not saying Tommy Robinson decapitates people, but movements can be fundamentally similar yet based on the amount of power or access to power they have, they might not necessarily be able to wreck the same havoc as one that has state power and backing.

Fundamentally, though, their politics is one of hate, placing collective blame, regression. It’s unfortunate that so many people who consider themselves freethinkers would side with them.

You mentioned Sharia courts as well as Islamic schools. I know this is a bit of an issue in the United Kingdom. For instance, private religious schools for youngsters, for kids. Kids are told things that at times are outright wrong, especially even facts and fundamental theories, principles, and laws about the natural world.

For instance, creationism over evolutionary theory and so on. What are your own personal concerns with some of these institutions and the way they being implemented within the United Kingdom?

I think “faith schools” is an oxymoron. Schools and faith don’t go together. Unless, you’re talking about indoctrination. I know there are some Church of England schools that are not indoctrinating the way Islamic schools are.

They used to do it and still they promote ideas that are antithetical to free thinking and education. I think, in a sense, the educational system is one of the only ways in which we can protect children from their families.

It is meant to be a way in which the playing field is levelled for all kids irrespective of background. You’re rich. You’re poor. Your family beats you. Your family tries to veil you. Schools should be a place where you’re safeguarded.

You get to hear different ideas. You get the protection you might not get at home. You get to be equal to other kids. Faith schools are antithetical to this. If you question, you are punished. If you raise dissent or you don’t agree, or you ask how certain religious edicts could possibly be true, you’re penalised for it.

Education should promote and encourage questioning, inquiry, and free thought. It makes no sense to have religious schools. It’s a prescription for disaster. We’re faced with that disaster today. I can’t understand how it’s ever seen to be good idea.

Historically religion was in charge of education; faith schools are a remnant of the time when religion played a central role in the state and society. And of course even today, religion holds a privileged place in society.

The British government, for example, is not a secular state by any means. This is a state in which the Church of England has real power. They’ve got bishops in the House of Lords. The Queen is the head of the church. You’ve got prayers in Parliament.

When speaking about faith schools (even the term seems innocuous, though it’s so sinister), it is not enough to address non-discrimination in admission policies or hiring practices but about why it is bad for our children. Fundamentally, there shouldn’t be any faith schools whatsoever, whether it’s stated funded or private.

What about Sharia courts existing alongside mainstream court systems?

I can’t understand that either. If you look at Sharia courts in Britain, they are dealing only in family matters, e.g. divorce, child custody, domestic violence, and so on and so forth. Family matters are not trivial matters as it’s often portrayed.

They are not matters of the community. They are human rights issues. In many countries, where Sharia rules apply, this is one of the main areas of fight back by women’s rights campaigners because of the huge amounts of discrimination against women.

For it to be sold to us here as a choice and a right is like selling FGM as a choice and right. The courts hold women's testimony to be half that of a man's. Women don't have unilateral right to divorce. Men do.

The rules are discriminatory and legitimise violence against women. For example, you've got one Sharia judge saying that there's no such thing as marital rape because women should expect to have sex within marriage. And that calling it rape is the act of aggression and not the actual rape.

Or they have said if only we've had one amputation or stoning in Britain, there would be fewer thieves and less adultery, look how great Saudi Arabia is. These are the judges making rulings in these courts and making decisions on women's lives. They've been recorded saying, "You've been beaten by your husband. Have you asked why he's beating you? Is it because of your cooking? Is it because of you going out with your friends?"

It is outrageous. It is a scandal that they should be allowed. I think one of the things we're seeing is not only are the rules discriminatory, but the process itself is tantamount to abuse. That is the argument women's rights groups are making.

No matter what a woman's background, a man's background, or a child's background, they are citizens first and foremost. They have rights. To relegate minority women to kangaroo courts, that are violating their rights should be considered a human rights scandal.

In international studies done by UN organs, or bodies, one of the major, probably the best, ways of improving the wellbeing and livelihood of an entire society, from economics to child and maternal mortality rates (reduction) in addition to increasing access and achievements in education, is under the guise of the empowerment of women.

When individuals such as others and yourself are campaigning and fighting for women's rights, and looking for ways, politically and otherwise, to empower women, it is actually improving the lives, on average, of everyone in the region or the society.

What do you think should be or is the best means through which to implement women's rights in cases that are very difficult? Where women have less of a vote or no vote, they have a lot of pressure not to speak up for their own rights.

I think one of the key ways, of course, is defending secularism. One of the problems is that secularism has become a dirty word. We hear how secular extremists are compared with religious extremists. I'm sorry. No. There's absolutely no comparison.

The French government saying there should be no conspicuous religious symbols in schools is actually a protection of school children. Why should a child be veiled because their parents are Muslims?

Don't we agree that children have the right to decide their political leaning and positions when they reach of age, why not also their beliefs? Why is it okay for religion to be imposed?

In that sense, compare that with acid being thrown in your face for going to school, compare that with compulsory veiling from the age of puberty, compare that with gender segregation, there's absolutely no comparison between what a secular state wants and what a theocracy wants.

We should unashamedly, unconditionally promote secularism. It is one of the main preconditions for women's empowerment and rights. I think particularly when religion has any say in the state or law it is detrimental to women's rights.

That is one precondition. Equality before the law is key, but equality on a social and economic level are also key. That comes down to a system that puts profit before human need and human welfare. Religion is useful for that system as well.

It helps to keep women down.

Who are some personal heroes for you?

My parents are my personal heroes because the more I actually see how many young people have been abused and destroyed by their parents, it does make me realise how lucky I am to have the father that I have and my mum as well.

Also, the person who most has affected the way I think is the Iranian Marxist Mansoor Hekmat. Unfortunately, he died at 51, but his politics which centred on the human being has influenced my politics and the politics of many from Iran, the region, and Diaspora.

Do you have any recommended novels or more academic writings for people with an interest in or leaning in getting involved in these issues?

There is Mansoor Hekmat's Collected Works of which there is one translated into English. I would recommend that to anyone who wants to know more about Iranian politics but also about how to address everything from Islam, Islamism, veiling, secularism from a fundamentally human and Left perspective.

Anything written by Algerian sociologist Marieme Helie Lucas is a great read. There are two interviews with her on the veil and gender segregation, which are brilliant.

I'd recommend reading Marjane Satrapi's Persepolis for a view of the Iranian revolution (which was not Islamic) and its expropriation by the Islamist movement; Mona Eltahawy's Headscarves and Hymens on the veil as well as Karima Bennoune's You Fatwa Does Not Apply Here on people's resistance against Islamism. Elham Manea's Women and Sharia Law is also a really good book on legal pluralism in the UK.

For getting in contact with you, people can go to your Twitter and website.

I have a really good website now thanks to a really wonderful volunteer. My website was hideous before. It was embarrassing to refer people to it. It is www.maryamnamazie.com. Via the website, people can read things I've written, see videos, and media coverage.

Also, there's a TV program that is broadcast in Iran, which I do weekly with a co-host of mine. It is called Bread and Roses. It is Persian and English. It uses illegal satellite dishes to get into Iran. Many people have satellite dishes in Iran.

It just deals with free thinking, taboo breaking issues. There's always an interview. We've interviewed some of the greats as well as people who should be considered great by all free thinkers, but aren't as well known, unfortunately.

One of the things the program shows is that there's so many atheists, secularists, and free thinkers in the so-called Muslim world. I mean, it is important to see them, recognise them, because once we do it breaks this whole idea that dissent and free thought are Western concepts, which is nonsense.

That, in fact, there are lots of people fighting for the very same issues that people fight for here it home in Britain.

Also good organisations to support are the Council of Ex-Muslims of Britain and One Law for All.

Any feelings or thoughts in conclusion about the things we've discussed?

Sometimes, when we're having these discussions, people only see homogenous groups; they make decisions based on group identity. But group identity is very often imposed. It fails to recognise that there are so many individuals within those groups who are individuals, courageous and are resisting in many different ways – often at great risk to themselves.

If we can start seeing each other as people and recognising that there is a lot more which brings us together than separates us, I think we would have a real chance of pushing the Islamist and far-Right back.

One of the reasons that the Islamists are so violent is because they see this immense dissent. Unfortunately, it is not recognised in the West because it is either Islamophobic to criticize or you've got the Far-Right trying to hijack the criticism in order to scapegoat and vilify Muslims and migrants and push forward their own white identity politics.

It is important for us to go back to basics of universal rights, citizenship, secularism, and join hands together around political ideals and not identities. It is this united solidarity as human beings that has helped us overcome inhumanity in the past and can also help us today.

Interview with Tehmina Kazi

November 6, 2016

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

Tehmina Kazi is an activist, writer and author based in Ireland. Tehmina was, until mid 2016, the Director of British Muslims for Secular Democracy (a position she took up in May 2009). British Muslims for Secular Democracy aims to raise awareness within British Muslims and the wider public, of democracy particularly ‘secular democracy’ helping to contribute to a shared vision of citizenship (the separation of faith and state, so faiths exert no undue influence on policies and there is a shared public space).

Prior to joining BMSD, Tehmina was a Project Officer at the Equality and Human Rights Commission. Tehmina has done extensive research on domestic and international human rights issues, particularly the detention of foreign nationals and violence against women in South Asia. Tehmina regularly contributes to debates and forums on civil liberties and foreign policy. Her articles have been published in a wide variety of newspapers and blogs.
Image Credit: Tehmina Kazi.

How did you become an activist?

I was always passionate about combating injustices, even from an early age, when I was subjected to a sustained campaign of bullying at both primary school and high school. I did an A-Level in Politics, loved it, and consequently decided to devote my career to campaigning for the rights of oppressed and marginalised people.

I then studied Law with an emphasis on human rights law at university, and ended up working for a number of human rights organisations afterwards. I was the Director of British Muslims for Secular Democracy from 2009 until 2016.

Were parents or siblings an influence on this for you?

They support me in everything I do, although deep down they would probably prefer me to be working in one of the “safe” professions like medicine, or a conventional legal career in private practice.

Was university education an asset or a hindrance to this?

An asset. I never went on to become a lawyer after completing my law degree, but my legal education has come in spectacularly useful for my campaigning work, particularly on equality and human rights matters like gender segregation.

Did you have early partnerships in these activist pursuits? If so, whom?

My early partnerships were with far-left anti-war groups. I don’t support them anymore, as many of them are only interested in opposing Western interventions for the sake of it, rather than genuinely working towards the cessation of hostilities and casualties.

How did you come to adopt a socially progressive worldview?

Because I was so keenly aware of injustices, regardless of who the perpetrators were, or who the victims were. I knew I couldn't just sit back and not even attempt to tackle them (whether I've been successful or not is another matter!).

Some individuals and organisations turn a blind eye to injustices where one of "their own" happens to be the perpetrator. I had no truck with this kind of tribalism from the very beginning.

Why do you think that adopting a social progressive outlook is important?

Most of us are working towards the same goal: a fairer, more inclusive society for all. Promoting socially progressive values in everything you do – or at least, trying to – is the best way to achieve this.

Do you consider yourself a progressive?

Yes, I do consider myself to be a progressive.

Does progressivism logically imply other beliefs, or tend to or even not at all?

It implies a belief in the FREDAs principles: fairness, respect, equality, dignity and autonomy.

What are your religious/irreligious beliefs?

I was a practising Muslim for twelve years, but now consider myself to be a deist with a strong interest in humanism.

As a progressive, what do you think is the best socio-political position to adopt in the United Kingdom?

Enlightenment values: democracy, the rule of law, individual liberty and mutual respect and tolerance for those of all faiths and none.

What big obstacles (if at all) do you see social-progressive movements facing at the moment?

A lack of sustained funding and resources, personality clashes, groups refusing to work with each other over differences that are ultimately quite petty.

Many groups have either been wound up, or end up running out of steam once a particular charismatic personality decides to leave.

How important do you think social movements are?

Critical, but they should not allow themselves to be torn apart by ego-driven personality clashes. They should keep a tight focus without becoming overly partisan.

What is your current work?

I am the Policy and Advocacy Officer for the Cork Equal and Sustainable Communities Alliance, an alliance of 16 equality and human rights organisations in Cork.

Where do you hope your professional work will go into the future?

More opportunities for creative and non-fiction writing, hopefully! (Tehmina recently published a short story called 'The Tulip Asylum' about homosexuality in contemporary Iran).

Interview with Rebecca Hale – President of The American Humanist Association

November 11, 2016

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

Rebecca Hale was elected president of the American Humanist Association in 2013. She is co-owner of EvolveFISH.com, the popular online store of atheist, humanist, and pro-science merchandise, and co-founder of the Freethinkers of Colorado Springs.

Rebecca became a member of the American Humanist Association in 1996 and served as vice president from 2005 to 2012. She is a frequent speaker and commentator on humanism for the media, conferences and local humanist organisations. Rebecca was born in New York, NY, to Humanist-Unitarian parents. She received her Masters in Public Administration in 1976 and embarked on a career in government, real estate development, and college administration. Rebecca lives in Colorado Springs, CO, with her husband, Gary Betchan, and has two children.

Any prefaces to the interview?

Please bear in mind that these are my answers, I am one humanist and I do not see this as representative of the AHA or all other humanists.

What is your family story?

The cliff notes are that my father was raised in a mildly Jewish household in New York City and my mother was raised in Johnstown PA as a member of the Church of the Brethren. It never made sense to her that her good friend would go to hell just because she attended the wrong church.

Upon asking her mother why this was so; she was told not to worry about all the stuff the church says, “just be good to people, live by the Golden Rule”. When my parents met my father had become a Unitarian and that made sense to her. I was raised as a Unitarian in the days of humanism.

What were some of the tenets involved in the Church of the Brethren faith?

I know very little about the Church of the Brethren, my mother had long since left it behind. I do know that it isn't among the liberal progressive churches. Mum called them the “Dunkards”.

What made your father become a Unitarian in the first place?

After his Bar Mitzvah his father said to him ... “okay, enough of that, lets go exploring” and the two of them proceeded to attend various churches until they found themselves at the West Side Unitarian church in New York City. I have a collection of “The Calendar” from 1927 through 1929, my father had them bound and signed by the minister, A. Wakefield Slaten. He must have made a considerable impression on my father!

What about your personal story?

I was bred, born and raised as a Unitarian, which during the time period of the 50's – 80's was essentially humanistic, in the modern tradition. I have at times been more aggressively atheistic and at other times more a live and let live. In high school a friend of mine and I both wore a little silver devil charm as a necklace!

And yet the night some friends and I “borrowed” my parents’ car and had trouble sneaking it back into the garage I promised god I’d believe if we could just get the car back without getting caught. We did but I couldn’t keep that promise any longer than it took to push the car back into its spot!

What differentiates non-aggressive atheism from aggressive atheism?

There is a difference between just moving ahead with your life, ignoring other peoples’ efforts at proselytising and engaging them in debate or calling them out. I call that aggressive. I also think my little Satan charm that I wore around my neck (even in my yearbook picture) was aggressive; I was clearly doing it to snub the sea of Christians that were convinced that they knew everything.

What were some of other things that you did to qualify as an aggressive atheist?

That was pretty much it, that charm and always looking for a chance to confront believers. I didn’t attack all Christians, just the ones that pushed their religion.

You earned a BA in cultural anthropology and environmental studies. You earned an MPA, too. You worked in college administration, government, and real estate development. What were some of the important life lessons gained from these credentials and those professional capacities?

It was cultural anthropology and I think it gave me some of the best lessons one can learn in college. To view people from the perspective of their background, where they come from; what is important, the value of tradition and ceremony, that smart and curios and artistic people exist in all cultures. And that you should not be afraid of “different” because that is where we can learn.

Environmental studies, well, this was the time of the first environmental movement, Rachel Carsons and Silent Spring. It has given me a messy house! (I can’t seem to throw things away because I might need them again.

This all reinforced my mother’s guidance “waste not, want not” and “use it up, wear it out, make it do, or do without.” – even though I have been fortunate in never having to really do without. I am frugal to a fault, I plan my auto travel so I don’t waste gas, I accelerate slowly and coast to braking.

An organic chicken is first a roast, then part of it becomes a casserole or sandwiches, or chicken salad and the bones become soup. I'm a scratch cook. I'm probably just this side of kooky when it comes to the foods I'll shop and prepare for my family.

I aim for organic and non GMO, which puts me at odds with many people in the secular movement. And, at times I am paralysed by how we are destroying the planet. I easily feel a sense of awe and joy when looking at how beautiful our natural world can be.

These are all characteristics that were first instilled by my parents and then reinforced by environmental studies. My study of government and then working in the public and private sectors taught me about the dampening effects of bureaucracy and it taught me to first recognise the rules and then find a way either through them or around them.

And that sometimes when you are the one that always names the elephant in the room, you'll get stepped on. One of the advantages of moving back and forth between the public and private sector is that you learn to understand the value of cost benefit analysis; and that sometimes its important to know the cost of doing something, even if you understand that you'll need to go ahead and take the loss.

You have been a humanist throughout life. What makes humanism self-evidently true to you?

Humanism works; unlike prayer, where it fails more often than it succeeds. I think my parent's raised me "right" and I'm proud of how my children are turning out. They are strong, caring, ethical people.

I deal with reality. I don't expect everything to be perfect (I'd be okay if it was but I don't expect it). Life can be ambiguous. You don't always get hard answers. Humanism supports that; we strive to use logic and reason and we leave room for doubt and emotion.

What is a clear example of prayer failing in personal life?

I don't have any personal experiences where prayer failed! I got that car into the carport. But I know it fails when people pray to win the lottery, pray for a sick loved one to recover or to get the big job, etc. The odds are against prayer.

What about in large groups?

I don't think large groups of people praying has any better and actually has a lesser chance of success than a large group of people actually doing something.

What about in the peer-reviewed research on it?

The oft offered peer-reviewed research about prayer over sick people has been shown to be flawed. If the individual does not know that everyone is praying the results do not substantiate

that prayer made a difference. It seems to only work when the sick person knows about the prayers and so we have the placebo effect in effect.

Were parents or siblings an influence on humanism for you?

My parents provided the model. I don't think my siblings have had much influence on me in this area. One became a Jehovah Witness, one is also a card carrying humanist and the third lives her life as a humanist and adds the colour of the 9th planet theory to her core beliefs.

Did you find a community of humanists to have that community for your children? No, we found it to support rational thinking in Colorado Springs. Its been a bonus for our children, especially Tani. She has found support among her fellow humanist friends (and friends from her time at CampQuest)

Did you have early partnerships in the activist pursuit?

Yes.

If so, whom?

My husband, Gary Betchan, he is a bundle of organisational and creative energy. We started EvolveFISH.com together. I was reticent to make waves. Gary leaves a wake wherever he goes!

Do you consider yourself a progressive?

Absolutely.

Does progressivism logically imply other beliefs, or tend to or even not at all?

You'll need to define what you mean with the term "progressivism". I have never used this exact term, so I did what any person sitting in front of a laptop would do and I "googled" it and then read Wiki. Historically it seems to be a bit all over the board with good and bad ideas.

I imagine if we could look back to today from 75 years in the future I might see our humanism that way as well. We will have gotten many things right and may find a few mistakes or misconceptions. We can't help but be a construct of the times and cultures we live in.

What ethical precept appears to transcend contingencies of geography, culture, and era?

If you are asking what ethical precept is universal, I'm not sure there is one that is man made. I think there may be some natural proclivities that humans have. In times past I might naively say "not to kill" but the religious only apply the do not kill to their particular tribe identity. The concept of stealing being wrong doesn't even hold up across all cultures.

How did you come to adopt a socially progressive worldview?

It just seems to be in my DNA humanism, cultural anthropology and environmentalism. I have not pursued any of it with some grand scheme, looking back it just flowed together. It evolved as I have I'm always open for new outlooks.

Does this seem like the norm to you?

Evidently, its my norm.

Why do you think that adopting a social progressive outlook is important?

Overall If for no other reason, its pragmatic. Change is inevitable; wouldn't you prefer to help guide it rather than stand by or oppose it and get run over? There is research that these social progressive values work best in the long run.

Game theory experiments have shown that being fair and kind ends up enhancing the position of both. However, it only works when everyone is playing by the same rules! There must be reciprocity when economics, relationships, power etc. get too far out of balance they are not sustainable.

What movements and forces in American society work against reciprocity to take advantage of the real-world implications of the game theory experiments outlined before?

The very competitive nature of our capitalism; that you "win" by getting one over on someone else. That there is a basic greed worked into our society and reinforced by our media. We have come to a point where a person is valued by their bank account, the size of their house, how much media then can attract.

The behaviors that support these goals do not support being kind and generous, unless we can help people understand that they really do "get ahead" by using reciprocity and kindness.

As a progressive, what do you think is the best socio-political position to adopt in the America?

What I have come to realise is that this is not a simple answer. It isn't Republican or Democrat, or Green or Libertarian answer for me. It isn't even a Berniecrat answer. This isn't a simple world, we can't just say this works in Colorado so it will work in or anywhere else, and what works in an urban area may not work out in the farmland.

What big obstacles (if at all) do you see social-progressive movements facing at the moment?

We need to be able to get people away from the 24-hour consumption of entertainment and find the carrot that will attract them to educating themselves on the critical topics of the day; climate change, economic inequality, and social justice. The United States is a pretty big ship that needs to change course, it won't be easy. We built our business by selling bumper stickers and bumper

sticker slogans but it takes a willingness to go deeper and educate oneself for people to understand the practical value of progressive positions.

If America does not change course, what might be the impacts to its citizenry, especially the poor, the vulnerable, the downtrodden, and the marginalised?

There will be more poor and they will be poorer. This is already evident in the growing number of homeless, the people with virtually nothing. As the economic inequality widens many in the middle class are slipping into the lower class. At some point I hope that those that are grossly wealthy will notice that they can no longer make money because there is no one left with the resources to buy things, or go places.

How might the world react to it?

I'm not sure that the world will have the capacity to take on the United States, in order to force us to compassion and equality... that was always our story that we inflicted on others, but we are too big to conquer. So, I don't think they will act when it's only economic inequality however, if we don't start being more proactive about the environment, that could be a different story.

Environmental abuses cannot be limited by our borders. The responsible environmentally conscious countries, may at some point take action against us. They will have to do this for their very survival and the survival of the human race.

How important do you think social movements are?

If we didn't have them we'd still have slavery, women would still not have the vote, we'd bow down to a king, the list goes on. I can't think of any of the great strides in human freedom that have not been pushed and forced through without a social movement. Power is never given up easily.

Who are those unwilling to attenuate their power in American society at this point in time?

There are so many! And, of course this is not to say that there are not exceptions within these groups: older white males, the churches, the people in power (be they elected officials or bureaucrats), the very wealthy and even the moderately wealthy. That's a start.

What are your religious/irreligious, ethical, and political beliefs?

I do not believe in a supreme being; no gods, no devils, nothing pulling strings on our lives. I think we each have components of those traits within us; we have good, we have not so good.

We are by nature animals and so we have all the in bred tendencies that an animal would have and over the eons we have imposed values or ethics on ourselves in an effort to institutionalise the "good".

I don't mean to make it sound as though our basic nature is bad because I do believe humans want to be "good", that kindness and altruism exist outside of humanity and are just as natural and inherent.

Generally good begets good. However, I also live in the real world, where there are people and belief systems that I would judge as destructive and cruel and there are people who will do harm, be stupid and be damaged. I don't see the value of allowing myself to be a victim; I prefer to only turn the other cheek once.

Above all do no harm. As a humanist I see that my active participation to make the world a better place is what gives my life purpose and value. This is my one life, no one will punish me later or reward me. So, its up to me to do the best that I know to improve the planetary condition.

What religious system does the most harm?

The ones that proclaim to have the moral high road and the implied or expressed mandate to enforce it on everyone else.

What irreligious system does the most harm?

I'm not familiar with any irreligious philosophy that encourages harmful actions. I do feel that being purely focused on scientific advancement without the constraints of compassion and empathy could do damage.

What about the most harmful political ideology as well?

Totalitarianism mixed with Fascism would be my guess. There is a famous quote from Stephen Weinberg "With or without religion, good people can behave well and bad people can do evil; but for good people to do evil – that takes religion." I'm not an expert in the field of ideologies, but this one makes good sense to me as the "right" answer.

You saw the rise of evangelical Christianity in Colorado Springs in 1993. What were the negative and positive aspects from personal observations at the time?

The positive is that was developed a community of like minded people, the Freethinkers of Colorado Springs. And the Freethinkers have provided a home for the members of the community who felt and continue to feel oppressed by the influence of the evangelical Christians and their organisations and businesses.

I am sure that living in the Springs has made me more and more reactive to the incursions made by Christians into our school curriculum and our municipal government.

There is a bit of a siege mentality that develops in secularists when they are consistently demonised by organisations and people that cannot be criticised and that flagrantly violate the law and skim along its intent and all the while being celebrated.

They use fire and police protection, the roads and other public infrastructure but avoid all taxes because of their non profit status.

As a result, they have added to the costs of local government but have not paid anything. They also pay below the norm and often require their employees to tithe back. As a result, the “jobs” they bring to the community tend to be low paying.

That sparked the need to found the Freethinkers of Colorado Springs (FCS) in addition to the web-based business EvolveFISH, which was sold in May, 2014. Now, you are the president of the American Humanist Association (AHA). What tasks and responsibilities come with these positions – at FCS and the AHA?

I’m largely in an advisory position with the Freethinkers at the AHA I am the President of the board of directors, its a volunteer position, our paid staff handles the day to day business at the professional level. I’m more of the head volunteer, so I run the board meetings, attend various movement meetings, and give the staff uninvited advice!

Technically I have oversight duties over the top two paid staff, our Executive Director and our Development Director. I’ve been president for 4 years (I was elected president before Gary and I sold EvolveFISJ) and on the board of the AHA for 12, I’ve just been elected to another 4-year term on the board, next month we will vote for officers again.

You hold to the philosophy of personal responsibility. What does this mean in personal and professional life for each individual?

It means if we see something that needs to be done we do what we can about getting it done. “If it is to be, its up to me.” This is not to be confused with a libertarian or objectivist approach. What I am referring to is that there is no deus ex machina to come to the rescue, the ills of the world are largely of human origin and it will be up to humans to fix them.

To your philosophy, human beings have responsibility to each other and the environment, or their life support system. What are some of the more mundane examples of this responsibility in action?

What kind of car do you drive? Is it a polluter or clean energy? Have you done what you can to make your home more energy efficient? Do you recycle? Do you waste food and other resources? Do you assist others within your financial capabilities? Are you contributing goodness? Each person finds their own way to contribute to the solution, there are no rules, no dictates.

What about more urgent global examples with this responsibility in action, and potential solutions that societies need to implement – quickly?

I have some controversial positions here, not necessarily sanctioned by the AHA or even humanism. I think we as a society need to look at population control. Is it a basic human right to be able to have as many children as we want or are we at a point that reproduction should be limited?

How can we change our landscaping and food production to increase carbon sinks and biodiversity and limit our use of environmentally damaging processes? Nothing else matters if we destroy our ability (and that of other life forms on earth) to live on this planet. Economic inequality, social justice, whose God is more right, all become irrelevant.

We could also help mitigate the climate issues by refocusing our cultures on things other than consumerism. My car has a rather ugly dent do I need to fix it or replace it? It's still functional, do I need the latest new smartphone, latest fashion and more clothes than I can wear in a week, or a bigger house or my own jet plane?

The marketing folks could lend their talents to convincing us that who we are is not what we own but what we know, or the art we create, the theatre or parks we visit. To find those things that we can find purpose and meaning in that do not consume the planets resources.

Please not another KidsMeal with some cheap plastic toy that is either broken, forgotten or lost in the blink of an eye! If we make our own meaning for our lives; then let's find the ways to do that that do not consume the planet.

How might the implementation of serious proposals of population control look to you?

I haven't gotten this all figured out yet, how, as humans on this planet come to agreement on how best to achieve this. I've gotten a lot of push back on the notion of limiting reproduction. I get the argument that if we just educate women and girls population growth will slow.

It is understood that the more educated a woman is the few children she will have, and there are countries in the world with declining birth rates. This is the problem that comes up; the educated, the responsible people have fewer or no children however the uneducated and the highly religious tend to have children in very high numbers.

There is this "Quiverfull" movement among Christians to have as many children as they can specifically so they will have the armies they need to enforce their religious ideals on everyone else. It seems all of the Abrahamic religions focus on this ideal of winning by numbers.

So, in a short period of time we will have fewer and fewer educated rational people and we could be over run by the "masses" if you will. And then is it fair to put the same limitations on people who live a subsistence life? They contribute far less to the climate change drivers than Americans or people with excessive and abundant lifestyles.

Also this would require a totalitarian process, not the best choice!

What would be the restrictions?

Maybe the best approach would be to reward people with only 1 or 2 children. I think we need to be near 1 child for some period of time, but we are seeing how this hasn't worked well in China.

This may be because their social structure has developed for the children to take care of the older generation and when 4 grandparents and 2 parents are to be cared for by one person, well that's a bit of a load. When that one person gets married, now there are likely 8 grandparents and 4 parents, so that doesn't help spread the load at all.

Who would qualify?

I have no clue how this would work. I've been around long enough to realise that brilliant and talented people can raise terrible children and vice versa. Wealth shouldn't be a determining factor, so I hesitate to offer a "cap and trade" system on children, but it's an idea.

You raised two children, Joshua and Tanrei, within the humanist framework. What did this mean in terms of life within the home, at the school, and in relationship with the community?

It meant that sometimes they didn't have the friends they wanted (parents wouldn't always welcome them), it also meant that they have grown up with a bit of the sense of being an outsider or not quite fitting into the same mould as most of their friends.

They are strong, insightful individuals. They were raised with an eye of helping them learn to make their own decisions and to think about the values they want to live by. Home life was not laissez faire and it wasn't dogmatic. They have been given the freedom to decide for themselves what life philosophy they want to embrace.

What is the national state of humanism as a philosophy and a movement in the United States?

Humanism is catching on. Our numbers are growing. There are factions with one focus or another but overall moving in the same direction. I know that there are far more humanists out there who simply don't know the term; none the less they are living their lives with humanist principles.

What about secularism?

Secularism is most likely outpacing humanism, I don't have any statistics to back this up, but since humanism is a subset of secularism it is a reasonable assumption. Secularism includes people who maintain their belief in god(s) and other supernatural forces and reject religious interference in government and our laws.

I think this segment has gained numbers as people have looked at the abuse of the privilege that religion has demonstrated. The Catholic Church's sexual abuse issues are a part of the drive towards secularism.

Do secular humanists, or humanists alone, experience bigotry and prejudice at all levels of American society?

Overall I'd say "yes". I'm sure there are segments of society where it is more acceptable, the arts and historically the institutions of higher education.

Why?

I'd say that within the arts you find people who, by nature, tend to think outside the box and are more willing to allow other people to disagree with them. The institutions of higher learning because we tend to find more humanism among those who are better educated and those whose work is based in critical thinking and analysis.

Who is a living women's rights activist that impresses you?

I can't say that I would pick out any one woman who has pushed women's rights as their only "cause." I understand the value, and the need for women's rights but I tend to lump it into the category of fair play and economic justice.

I don't know that I'd want to name one woman over another, although the women in the Middle East are putting a lot more on the line, their lives. As far as the United States, I'm a pretty big fan of Elizabeth Warren.

Who are other personal heroes throughout history?

I don't think much about personal heroes. And I'm somewhat embarrassed to admit that history was not a subject I warmed up to. No one explained its value to me, I realise it should have been obvious, but it wasn't.

So, I'm not well grounded in all the famous and influential people throughout history. Overall I'd say its the people who tried to do the right thing There are a few names that come to mind; Molly Ivans, Martin Luther King, John F Kennedy, Anwar Sadat, Che Guevara, Thomas Jefferson and my current favorite Bernie Sanders. I feel like this list should have more women, Pink, really, this is not my thing!

Who is the smartest person you have ever met or known personally?

This is really tough, I have met a lot of brilliant people. I prefer people who think differently who come up with a different way to see something, or make something work, people who synthesise various bits of knowledge and come up with new ideas and observations.

And I've met brilliant people who are also strong on compassion and empathy. But it isn't enough to be brilliant, its not enough to be strong on compassion and empathy, you need to take action, to make things better. My dad was brilliant, he set a pretty high bar.

What is your current work?

I have three jobs, I volunteer a fair amount of time to the American Humanist Association, I rent and manage houses to college students (that's how I help pay our bills), and I'm a mother. I'm also a wife but my husband, Gary, is pretty independent, he knows how to feed himself and do his own laundry!

Where do you hope it goes into the future?

Humanism? In my most optimistic dreams I see humanism as the overlay for everything. I'm perfectly fine with whatever religion or philosophy some one wants to adopt; I'd just like to see humanism's basic premise be the guiding principles for living with each other.

If we all are considerate of each others space and need to survive, if we take action to support a healthy planet and healthy communities and if we all could accept that my rights only go so far as the end of my arm (and so do yours). Don't ask me to live by your religious ideals.

Thank you for your time, Rebecca.

Education News in Brief

November 15, 2016

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

One religion dominance not allowed in public institutions such as schools

According to **The Times Live**, 6 former Model C schools had pupils recite prayers from the Christian faith in assembly. Students had to “pray before sport matches and describe themselves as having a predominantly ‘Christian ethos’”.

They are having to defend the right to follow a single religion in the courts. The Johannesburg High Court will be hearing the case and this will have “implications for any state school that promotes one religion.”

That promotion would include “dress code, prayers or readings – even if the religion reflects the belief system of the majority.” The “OGOD, the Organisasie Vir Godsdienste Onderrig en Demokrasie,” noted that the constitution and the National Policy of Religion disallow one religion dominance in public institutions.

US broken education system caused Trumpism

The **Toronto Star** described the nature of the Trump phenomenon, Trumpism, as resulting from the breakdown of the American educational system, which comes from the abandonment of the educational system.

The author congratulates Canada on having a good educational system, and thinks that as long as it can be maintained then the nation will not crash as “our next-door neighbour has, a backyard of flaming wreckage and oh no, where are the nukes.”

“Education is the key to civilized life” the columnist asserts and the underfunding of US schools tied to the absence of teachers and the inadequate salaries for teachers has eroded the educational system in America.

England’s unsustainable educational system according to the Financial Times

The **Financial Times** describes the “tatters” of England’s educational system because of the unsustainable level of funding given to the system, which means that the funding levels will need to change at some point in the future.

Alison Wolf, Professor at King’s College London, states that the increasing numbers of university graduates creates one funding system that cannot keep up and the “technical qualifications below degree level have suffered” resulting in a decline in “student numbers.”

That is, the current demographics of the university graduate population cannot be sustained because of the poor suitability for the current job market, and those that could fill them will be able to fit into the market. Thus, the situation is described as having “serious flaws” with high levels of expense and involves “a major misallocation of resources.”

Science News in Brief, 15th November 2016

November 15, 2016

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

Dan Rather supports science

According to Scientific American, Dan Rather supports science and says that it is more important than ever in the modern world. Some questions might be raised about the presidential election of 2016 by future historians.

The Trump Administration will need to work on the scientific front because of the pressing concerns of the modern world that require scientific solutions and pursuit for their alleviation.

“The political press treats science as a niche issue. But I would argue that it is central to America’s military and economic might [...] it shapes the health and welfare of our citizenry, and that our governmental support of the pure pursuit of knowledge through basic research is one of the defining symbols of American excellence.”

“Supermoon” is here

Space.com reports that there will be a November “supermoon” on November 14 that can provide “an extraordinary sight for skywatchers,” which is “a full moon is at its perigee, or closest point to Earth during the lunar orbit.”

It will be the brightest and biggest moon, supermoon that is, to date in about 69 years, where the next one is expected to come on November 25, 2034. It is a rare event, and a rarefied experience for those that had or have the chance to see it.

NASA’s Noah Petro, Deputy Scientist of the Lunar Reconnaissance Orbiter mission, said, “The main reason why the orbit of the moon is not a perfect circle is that there are a lot of tidal, or gravitational, forces that are pulling on the moon.”

New Zealand shakes and kills

Science Magazine said that an earthquake hit New Zealand on November 14, which killed 2 people, and that New Zealand has convoluted seismic activity based on the judgment of experts.

James Goff, Seismologist and Tsunami Expert at the University of New South Wales in Sydney, Australia, said, “[New Zealand -seismology] is a lot more complicated than we thought... We are finding out again that there is seismic activity that we didn’t really know about.”

The US Geological Survey found the epicenter was a 7.8 magnitude earthquake near kaikoura, which is a coastal tourist town. The shallow quake from the earthquake “caused extensive damage to infrastructure.”

Interview with Dana L. Morganroth - Advisory Board Member and Vice President of CFI-Pittsburgh

November 25, 2016

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

Dana L. Morganroth is an advisory Board-Member and Vice President of CFI-Pittsburgh, and a Board-Member and Vice President Sunday Assembly Pittsburgh.

What began the interest in critical thinking, science, and scepticism for you?

During high school, I was an active member of a Christian youth group that spawned the Willow Creek Community (mega) Church outside of Chicago. Throughout my involvement, I could never successfully take the “leap of faith” that allowed others to drive doubts from their minds.

I dropped out of the group and upon entering college took some courses in comparative religion, which led to philosophy, and then what was termed *logical thinking*.

When did this become and social concern for you?

Quite quickly in terms of geological time – I waited no more than 30 years after college at the most. Immediately engrossed in my career after leaving school, I spent a great deal of time complaining about, but almost no time acting upon, social or religious injustice.

I often daydreamed about what I might do to combat the ills of religious dogma and lack of critical thinking in society but never found (took!) time to take action.

How did the interest and the concern feed into the becoming active? You like the quote by the Brazilian author Paul Coelho who said: “The world is changed by your example, not by your opinion.” In correspondence, you described this as a “full-stop!” moment for you. That is, a thought for reflection. What positives followed from this in life for you?

I’m not proud of the fact that for many, many years my ratio of complaining-to-doing-something about it – trying to make the world a better place – was very high. In fact, it probably was infinitely high, the denominator in my ratio being about zero.

That Coelho quote somehow just resonated with me. I suddenly wished I’d spent constructively the time I’d wasted just complaining. I remember sitting in my office chair completely immobile for what seemed like half an hour.

Thinking over my career in consulting and business management, wondering if any of the work I’d done was truly important. Reflecting on my belief that the majority of harm done to human happiness and progress was imposed by religious belief and inability to think critically. And since my wife and I chose not to have kids, wondering what might be considered my legacy after I’m gone someday.

I decided the time was “now or never.” Before I left my chair, I’d decided to sell the small company I operated, find one or more compatible organisations to partner with pro-bono, and leave behind the goal of making money in favour of making a difference.

How did you discover Center for Inquiry (CFI)?

Google told me. I researched the multitude of organisations out there in the critical thinking/secular/atheist/anti-pseudoscience/human rights/humanist space and was drawn to those with a broad mission.

CFI appealed due to both their mission and the fact that they were just merging with the **Richard Dawkins Foundation** and taking on new leadership in the person of Robyn Blumner. It seemed that after a suitable period the organisation would be poised for growth and new initiatives and I thought there might be a way for me to help. And there was a local branch with some great people: CFI-Pittsburgh.

Who were personal heroes in the midst of this discovery?

Of course, I was drawn to the “Four Horsemen of the New Atheism” – Dawkins, Hitchens, Dennett, and Harris, in terms of their intolerance for superstition, religion, and irrational thinking. But more personally with respect to my own journey, I was motivated and inspired by Meriwether Lewis who, upon being designated by Thomas Jefferson to lead America’s “Corps of Discovery” expedition in 1803, wrote:

I reflected that I had as yet done but little, very little indeed, to further the happiness of the human race, or to advance the information of the succeeding generation. I viewed with regret the many hours I have spent in indolence, and now sorely feel the want of that information which those hours would have given me had they been judiciously expended, but since they are past and cannot be recalled, I dash from me the gloomy thought and resolved in future, to redouble my exertions and at least endeavour to promote those two primary objects of human existence, by giving them the aid of that portion of talents which nature and fortune have bestowed on me; or in future, to live for mankind, as I have heretofore lived for myself.

All the more poignant for me because Lewis came to that realization in his 30’s (!) and not in his 50’s, as in my own case.

CFI-Pittsburgh does not have paid staff. Unlike most other CFI branches, it operates on volunteers. What is the mission and purpose of CFI-Pittsburgh?

Our mission is the same as that of CFI’s branches that have paid staff.

We promote the mission of the Center for Inquiry, Inc. on a local level – to foster a Secular Society based on Science, Reason, Freedom of Inquiry, and Humanist values. We create a local community of people who share these values and goals and come together regularly to learn, discuss and organise action in support of our values on a local level.

We seek out and combat local instances of social, political or other injustice; when our local resources are insufficient to get the job done, we enlist the help of our CFI, Inc. parent or similar organisations.

I've come to believe that over the years CFI's branch organisation has possibly grown more organically than per any particular strategic plan. Speaking for our local members as individuals and NOT officially on behalf of CFI, we hope that current leadership will recognise the value that local branches can provide in terms of creating awareness of CFI as an organisation and fulfilling CFI's mission, and will develop strategic plans that incorporate expansion of the branch network and enhancements to existing branches and their programs. And we think there's extraordinary potential to leverage local relationships in terms of fundraising which would benefit both parent and branch organisations.

Now, you are an advisory board member and vice president of CFI-Pittsburgh. What tasks and responsibilities come with this position?

Advisory Board membership responsibilities are the same as for any other corporate or nonprofit Board – to set a Mission-Vision-Strategic plan; to choose Officers who will implement that plan, to ensure adequate financial resources, etc. Of course as a branch of CFI, Inc. our high-level Mission is established by the parent organisation's Board and Officers and we are overseen by the parent.

CFI-PGH's Advisory Board, working with CFI-Inc's Debbie Goddard and the Outreach department, determines what aspects of the CFI Mission are best implemented on a local level. As Vice-President of CFI-PGH, I work with the other local CFI-PGH Officers and Committee Chairs to effectively implement our programs here in Pittsburgh and western PA.

What have been CFI-PGH's largest initiatives?

Besides creating awareness of the organisation in general, one of our largest standing initiatives has been our regularly scheduled lecture series with draws new locals as well as long-term stakeholders together to learn, to be entertained and to improve their critical thinking skills, and gives us the opportunity to involve them more closely in our mission.

We've organised locals to lobby Congress in Washington D.C. on behalf of issues important to CFI. Right now our focus is somewhat internal, better organizing our local constituency, educating them on all the programs and positions of CFI, and for the first time beginning formal membership and fundraising drives on a local level.

What have been its greatest impacts?

We're proud our parent organisation can include our thousands of local stakeholders when counting CFI, Inc.'s constituency for congressional lobbying or UN NGO advocacy purposes.

We're beginning to assemble a critical mass of key people, many of whom echo my own story, that is they are becoming motivated to take action in the community and as contributors to the parent organisation in addition to merely reading, discussing and complaining.

And we've added our voices to many small but important issues in the community, from effecting greater separation of church and state at local church polling places to protesting church tax credits at rallies of "prosperity gospel" preachers held in Pittsburgh. And we've advocated strongly for people to vote for leaders who reflect our values and goals.

What are some of the smaller activities performed by CFI-Pittsburgh to build community?

We bring like-minded people together by organising monthly lectures, social nights and guided discussion groups. We support other related local groups in western PA and try to coordinate our activities with them. We try to get our views into the public sphere by working with local media and thought leaders.

We have a great annual canoe/kayak trip on a local river followed by a family style shrimp boil picnic. Not to be missed! We celebrate small victories – one of our local members just had "ATHE1ST" vanity licence plate denied by PennDot (PA Dept. of Transportation).

The plate was issued after Freedom from Religion Foundation (FFRF) attorneys reminded PennDot that issuance of such a plate does not violate rules prohibiting "offensive language or slogans" and that the individual(s) who may have denied the application could not allow their own religious beliefs to infringe on the applicant's right to free speech.

More important than the issuance of the single license plate was the local media coverage that educated the public about church-state separation, helped normalise atheistic worldviews in the community and informed readers of the existence and activities of CFI and other secular organisations.

What are the important of science, reason, and secular humanist values?

I think of science and reason as merely the means to the end – secular humanist values. I think the idea that any belief not based on reality is either useless or harmful is kind of an a priori proposition, so I can become overly excited when trying to explain. Let me propose an I.T. analogy:

(Science) in this analogy is a valid database. The nature of science is observation, and the identification of truth, facts. Testing hypotheses results in the validation of the existing truth/facts and the rejection of falsehoods. This both refines and expands the database – it becomes an ever-larger repository of truths/facts.

(Reason) is the computer program we use to analyse the database. It is the program's capacity to apply logical rules that insure correct and reproducible output when we manipulate data. A program that doesn't have correct logic, or that introduces random instructions (dogma) we would call "corrupted" and unsuitable for any use.

(Humanist Values) is the output when we run our database (Science) through our program (Reason) with the query “how should human beings behave and act within society to maximize human happiness including social justice...etc.”

All good things flow from the act of critical thinking. To improve the critical thinking skills of humanity would promote science, reason and secular humanist values exponentially.

Sunday Assembly Pittsburgh (unaffiliated with CFI) is a 501(c)(3) non-profit corporation, one of 70 worldwide affiliated with the UK registered charity Sunday Assembly. You call yourselves “A Secular Congregation that Celebrates Life.” What is a typical secular congregation gathering like on Sundays?

We strive to live out our motto: Live Better, Help Often, Wonder More. Two descriptions of Sunday Assembly that quickly describe the nature of the event are “Atheist Church” and “TED talk with karaoke.” While putting those two together may best evoke an image of the physical event, it’s what’s happening below the surface that provides value to the human community. Assemblers are “good without god.”

But they recognise that traditional religious congregations provide value based on community. Assemblers come together to learn ideas that enable them to live more fully and wisely. They celebrate their shared values with readings and music. They support each other as needed and do perform charitable works within the community.

We have an Assembly filled with young families with children, it’s probably most rewarding for me to see these children grow up free from the horrible guilt and prejudices imposed by organized religion, while being exposed from an early age to critical thinking, science, reason, tolerance, and encouragement to live this “one life that we know we have” to the fullest.

What has been the experience for the “congregation” from reports to you?

So many people have come forward to thank our group for providing a safe place, a welcoming place, for letting them know that others share their worldviews and experiences. For putting them together with others that inspire and empower them to leverage their talents to stand up for their belief in a society in which currently about 75% (but declining!) of people hold worldviews in strong opposition.

I think there is a real parallel with the LGBTQ movement of some years ago where it took a real act of courage for many people to come out of the closet and share their orientation with family, friends, co-workers, community. And with the advent of social media, “the world.”

It’s empowering to know that others have the same orientation or worldview, and once a critical mass is reached real social and legislative changes follow in our society. Without minimizing the challenges still in front of the LGBTQ community, it seemed (at least before the recent election) that critical mass had been reached and changes were forthcoming; we still have a way to go with the secular humanist cause.

Can you sum up your own experience with both CFI and Sunday Assembly?

On a personal level, I have found great reward in helping to promote and advertise the both local secular organisations such that people who have left (recently or long-ago) a faith-based support community can find an alternative supportive community of people who share their values.

Most want to promote their secular worldview; they just need encouragement and sometimes mentoring to recognise how they can support the mission that we share. As articulated by Aristotle's statement "Give me the child until he is 7, and I will show you the man" and best explained by Richard Dawkins' writings on evolutionary biology, there's a reason dogmatic religious beliefs and harmful prejudices become so deeply ingrained.

It's inspiring and rewarding to help fellow members of my community abandon old beliefs in favor of embracing critical thinking and humanist values, and it's exciting to create a community and institutions which enable a new generation to be brought up with those values from childhood.

Thank you for your time, Dana.

Scott, thanks much for this opportunity to share my views and thanks for the work done by Conatus News through its coverage of social progressivism.

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