

Conatus News: Volume III

Scott Douglas Jacobsen



IN-SIGHT PUBLISHING

Published by In-Sight Publishing
In-Sight Publishing
Langley, British Columbia, Canada

in-sightjournal.com

First published in parts by In-Sight: Independent Interview-Based Journal,
a member of In-Sight Publishing, 2016-2017
This edition published in 2017

© 2012-2017 by Scott Douglas Jacobsen. Original appearance in Conatus News.

All rights reserved.

No parts of this collection may be reprinted or reproduced or utilized, in any form, or by any electronic, mechanical, or other means, now known or hereafter invented or created, which includes photocopying and recording, or in any information storage or retrieval system, without written permission from the publisher.

Published in Canada by In-Sight Publishing, British Columbia, Canada, 2017
Distributed by In-Sight Publishing, Langley, British Columbia, Canada

In-Sight Publishing was established in 2014 as a not-for-profit alternative to the large, commercial publishing houses currently dominating the publishing industry.

In-Sight Publishing operates in independent and public interests rather than for private gains, and is committed to publishing, in innovative ways, ways of community, cultural, educational, moral, personal, and social value that are often deemed insufficiently profitable. Thank you for the download of this e-book, your effort, interest, and time support independent publishing purposed for the encouragement of academic freedom, creativity, diverse voices, and independent thought.

Cataloguing-in-Publication Data

No official catalogue record for this book.

Jacobsen, Scott Douglas, Author

Conatus News: Volume III/Scott Douglas Jacobsen

pages cm

Includes bibliographic references, footnotes, and reference style listing.

In-Sight Publishing, Langley, British Columbia, Canada

Published electronically from In-Sight Publishing in Langley, British Columbia, Canada

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Designed by Scott Douglas Jacobsen

Contents

I	Acknowledgements.....	3
i	Interview with Ali Raza – Kurdish Artist.....	4
ii	Interview with Linda LaScola – Editor of Rational Doubt, Clinical Social Worker, Psychotherapist, & Qualitative Researcher.....	7
iii	Interview with Deo Ssekitooleko – Representative of Center for Inquiry International – Uganda.....	13
iv	Interview with Bob Churchill – Director of Communications at the International Humanist and Ethical Union (IHEU).....	17
v	Interview with Jennifer C. Gutierrez Baltazar – Executive Director of Humanist Alliance Philippines, International (HAPI)-.....	24
vi	Interview with Vic Wang – President of the Humanists of Houston.....	28
vii	Interview with Marieke Prien – President of the International Humanist and Ethical Youth Organization (IHEYO).....	32
viii	Interview with Caleb W. Lack – The Secular Therapist Project.....	35
ix	An Interview with Dr. Saladdin Ahmed – Independent Scholar and Researcher.....	39
x	Interview with Sikivu Hutchinson -Feminist, Humanist, Novelist, Author.....	44
xi	Interview with Haras Rafiq – CEO and Executive Board Member of the Quilliam Foundation.....	46
xii	Interview with Scott Blair.....	50
xiii	Interview with Andrew Copson.....	56
xiv	Interview with Matthew Rothschild.....	64
xv	Interview with Nicole Orr - Branch Manager at CFI-Portland.....	69
xvi	American Soft Power and Abortion Policy Implications.....	71
xvii	Religion News in Brief 24th February 2017.....	74
xviii	Politics in Brief February 25th 2017.....	75
xix	Nagaland and the Constitutional Provisions for Equality.....	76
xx	Women’s Rights News in Brief February 26th 2017.....	79
xxi	South Dakota Anti-Science Bill 55 Shot Down.....	81
xxii	Religion News in Brief February 27th 2017.....	83
xxiii	Arts News in Brief 28th February 2017.....	84
xxiv	An Interview with Adalet Garmany – Founder, Curator, and Chief Executive of ArtRole.....	85
xxv	Science News in Brief 1st March 2017.....	89
xxvi	In Conversation with Professor Jim Al-Khalili (Part 1).....	90
xxvii	Religion News in Brief 2nd March 2017.....	92
xxviii	Education News in Brief March 3rd 2017.....	93
xxix	An Interview with Roy Speckhardt – Executive Director of the American Humanist Association.....	94
xxx	Philosophy News in Brief March 5th 2017.....	98
xxxi	An Interview with Anders Stjernholm.....	99
II	License and Copyright.....	101

Acknowledgements

I express gratitude to Benjamin David, Benedict Nicholson, Kevin Jenco, and Dominic Lauren, and the editing team at Conatus News, and Ali Raza, Linda LaScola, Bob Churchill, Jennifer C. Gutierrez, Vic Wang, Marieke Prien, Caleb W. Lack, Dr. Saladdin Ahmed, Sikivu Hutchinson, Haras Rafiq, Scott Blair, Andrew Copson, Matthew Rothschild, Nicole Orr, Adalet Garmiany, Roy Speckhardt, and Anders Stjernholm. I feel honored to contribute to, participate in, interview and write for, and see Conatus News grow with each passing week.

Scott

Interview with Ali Raza – Kurdish Artist

November 28, 2016

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

What is your familial background and personal story?

I come from a traditional Kurdish family. My mother has no education, but she worked as a local midwife. My father was a radiographer, and is a Muslim Imam. My eldest brother studied fine art in the Institute of Fine Art in Mosul. He is a highly respected and influential member of the family. He inspired myself and many of my other siblings to get involved in the arts. At the time that I was growing up, the unstable situation in Northern Iraq (Kurdistan) was in full swing, living under an Iraqi dictator, with no respect for basic rights, and we were considered second class citizens. We were tortured, and lived under fear and terror. My childhood in this context has had a strong effect on who I am today.

You were born in South Kurdistan, or Northern Iraq, in 1980. That year, the war began between Iran and Iraq. You saw humans act with savage brutality. How did this influence your perspective on life and people?

My perspective is a constant call for peace and rights. Art can hold a beautiful message, such as harmony, beauty and humanity. Art makes life better and beautiful, it facilitates living in peace, a colourful life. I am optimistic. My perspective is one of abject wonder regarding how people can destroy each other, themselves and nature. I believe we can all live in peace.

After The Kurdish Uprising, your family migrated. You were a student at the Erbil College of Fine Art from 1998-2002. Why did you choose this place of study? How did the training and credential help with personal and professional development?

As I mentioned, my oldest brother was a powerful influence on me. When I was young, I looked at him, the way he painted and made drawings. I starting drawing, and it has been a major part of my life since then. This passion for art substantiated itself in the academic study of art and the art movement. I wanted to become technically, practically and theoretically skilled. The choice of Erbil College of Fine Art was an accident at the time, my family ended up in Erbil and it was the only place to study fine art in the city. It was a good accident though, I learned an awful lot there, and met many close friends and interesting influences. My time at Erbil brought me through a personal and professional development in the sense that I moved from a young man passionate about art, to a man confident in his ability to run an art gallery, to write for and edit a fine art magazine, and to be successful in this field.

You fight for human rights through art. How, and why?

I grew up in a warzone, in a violent environment. Since my childhood, and until I left Kurdistan, I lived in fear, surrounded by fighting, and never in a stable situation. There were constant images of violence. Tools of war became a part of normal life. I always asked myself ‘why?’. ‘Why are people killing each other, torturing each other, hating each other?’ Whether for religious purposes, political purposes, etc., to me it is unacceptable to annihilate an individual or

group of people no matter the reason. I particularly focussed on the Muslim religion, and I did not see any space for a human being to live as a free human in a Muslim world, free to think, to behave freely, free to live the way they want to live. One of my early exhibitions was called “fear”, and this was based on the fact that people are tortured for the sake of honour, religion, or different purposes – in particular, women.

Would you consider yourself socially progressive? If so, why? If not, why not?

Yes, I consider myself socially progressive. The nature of humanity is all about change, experimentation, improvement, growth and development. Therefore, day by day, humans are widely progressive in terms of technology, in terms of social life, scientifically, economically, etc.

Who is your favourite human rights activist, dead or alive?

Mahatma Gandhi and Nelson Mandela. To me Gandhi is the “god” of his philosophy of non-violence in activism. Mandela, as one of the pillars of the idea that humans can live together, peacefully.

You went to Ireland to continue artistic studies in 2007 at The Galway Mayo Institute of Technology from 2009 to 2014. How did further refine professional skills to create art that fights for human rights?

My studies in Galway had a huge impact on both my skill and art education. I experimented with different media in order to express my ideas, such as in the medium of print-making and video art. Through this institution I expressed all my feelings in the context of human rights, and how the art has an effect on the audience, and the strength and power of art in delivering a message through a particular technique. Ultimately this was a great experience, one that enhanced my skills dramatically.

You approached the Minister of Culture of the Kurdish government to create a new gallery in Erbil City called the “Palace Art Gallery.” It was built. What was that experience like running the operation for its first year?

At the time, I was running an art organisation, and working as a civil servant in the Kurdish Department of cinema, and working as an editor of the Modern Art Magazine, supported by the Ministry of culture. I approached the Minister of Culture regarding the Art Gallery. The Minister was instantly pleased with the proposal and agreed to build the Palace Gallery. That was first ever experience to work in a gallery as a curator and director.

Our first exhibition lasted for four months after opening, and twenty artists from the area and nearby regions were involved. It was a great platform to combine the works of these talented individuals. Also, to encourage and provide the opportunity for more artists to become involved. The mission of the Palace Gallery was different to that of other galleries at the time, in the sense of the openness to variation and celebration of different vibes, to bring dynamism and movement in the field of fine art in Erbil city.

Unfortunately, I was young at the time, and perhaps naïve. Older, more established individuals (with more pull with the Minister for culture than I had) that felt that I was too inexperienced, and an outsider, caused the funding for the gallery to be withdrawn, without which the new gallery could not survive.

How did this provide a platform for your work and fight for human rights?

The majority of the works displayed at the gallery were reflections of the reality of Kurdistan at the time and rejections of the war and violence. All of the messages were that of humanity, continuity of the human race, of a time when humans can live in peace together, of human rights and human dignity. Each artist had their own technique and their own perspective, using different materials.

This combination between the artists made the exhibition more powerful, and more reaching to the audience to deliver these messages in favour of the protection of human rights.

Thank you for your time, Ali.

Interview with Linda LaScola – Editor of Rational Doubt, Clinical Social Worker, Psychotherapist, & Qualitative Researcher

December 5, 2016

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

Linda LaScola is a research consultant. She recently re-released her book (with Daniel Dennett) based on work in which she interviewed non-believing clergy, Caught in the Pulpit: Leaving Belief Behind, with updates and additions.

Linda co-founded the Clergy Project. The site features members of the clergy project. She also blogs on Patheos at Rational Doubt, a site that features several articles by non-believing clergy.

In brief, what is your familial background and personal story?

I think of my own story as being very boring, compared to the stories of the people I interviewed in the non-believing study I conducted with Dan Dennett. I was raised, the youngest of three children, as Roman Catholic in an Italian-American family in a small town in Western Pennsylvania.

I had a happy and very stable childhood. Although we went to church every Sunday, we weren't very religious. My mother refused to send us to Catholic schools. She didn't go to church much herself, claiming "claustrophobia," and my father guiltlessly skipped holy days.

I attended church less in college and just stopped going as an adult. Though I still believed in God, there was too much silliness in Catholicism for me to take the religion seriously. After about 20 years of marriage and without children, my husband, an agnostic, and I started attending an Episcopal Church, to fill his need for community.

We both enjoyed it – especially singing in the choir. There was no pressure to believe anything – the pastor himself was openly agnostic – and the music was beautiful. About ten years ago, I realised I didn't know much about religion from an academic point of view, so I decided to fill that gap.

After about a year of reading and taking adult education classes at church, I realised there was nothing to believe and we left. My husband, who, like me, now identifies as an atheist, has since joined an Ethical Society and a Unitarian Church. I stay home and read the paper.

What was the original interest in clinical social work and psychotherapy for you?

I once had a job as an American Red Cross caseworker that I really liked, so when I was thinking about graduate school, I decided on Social Work. Also, I had taken what was meant to be a short-term job as a tour guide at the US Capitol.

After two years, the repetition started driving me crazy. In my boredom, I couldn't help but notice how people reacted in groups and I wanted to understand more about that. Once in a graduate social work program, I realised I preferred psychology more than community organising or social services, so I focused on individual and group psychotherapy.

Most of my work as a social worker was in alcoholism counseling, which involved a lot of group work, and employee assistance programs – workplace counseling and referral for employees with personal or family issues that are interfering with their work performance.

What about in qualitative research and analysis for you?

Qualitative research, which is conducted in the form of focus groups and in-depth individual interviews, seemed like a natural outgrowth of my work as a group and individual psychotherapist. It offered more variety, flexibility, and higher pay. What's not to like?

Would you consider yourself socially progressive? If so, why? If not, why not?

Yes – it's just something that I eventually realised about myself as an adult. My family of origin did not guide me in any particular direction. I found myself supporting liberal rather than conservative causes. Of course, this would apply to most if not all of the people who choose to go into social work. We think of ourselves as being empathic and interested in improving society for people less fortunate than ourselves.

Social progressivism tends to involve women's rights and secularism. If advancement of women's rights and secularism seem like the right values and movements to you, what is their importance in the early 21st century in America to you?

I've seen huge advances in women's rights in my lifetime and know that many more are needed, e.g., equal pay for equal work, protecting abortion rights, and continuing the fight for LGBTQ rights. As for secularism, of course, I support that as well, and also see it as something that is happening on its own. People are naturally leaving religion, in many cases thanks to the free-flow of information and emotional support they can receive anonymously on the Internet.

Secularism "happened" in Europe and is happening here in the US, albeit more slowly and with resistance from the strong Christian Evangelical movement. The clergy I interviewed are examples of people who left religion even though the initial decision had a negative impact on their careers and relationships.

Who is your favourite women's rights activist dead or alive?

I don't have a favourite, but I greatly admire two women from my time – Gloria Steinem and Betty Friedan, author of *The Feminine Mystique*.

The Clergy Project is the name of an organisation for non-believing clergy. It is different than the research conducted by Professor Daniel Dennett and you. In brief, what differentiates the organisation from the original research by you?

The Clergy Project (TCP) and the research with non-believing clergy I conducted with Dan Dennett are two completely separate entities. The research preceded TCP, which neither of us had even thought of as being an outgrowth of our research.

When the pilot study was completed in 2010 and getting some attention, we were approached by Richard Dawkins and Dan Barker who had been talking for a few years about doing “something” for non-believing clergy.

They had met at a conference where Dan Barker, co-president of the Freedom from Religion Foundation, gave a talk about having been an evangelical preacher before becoming an atheist. He knew other non-believing clergy existed, because former, now atheist, clergy had made a point of introducing themselves when he was giving talks. He had gathered their names along the way.

After the Dennett-LaScola pilot study was out, non-believing started contacting us, so a larger pool was forming. The Internet, which had not existed when Barker left religion, had since become a way for like-minded people to meet.

Putting together our list of non-believing clergy with Barker’s list, we started TCP with 52 members. Dan Barker and I called each of them on the phone to make sure they legitimate and then invited them to join the private online meeting place that we had prepared for them.

What was the original research question and methodology conducted by Professor Dennett and yourself?

Excerpted from the proposal for our original research: *“It’s understandable that atheist clergy would exist, considering that academically-trained clergy routinely learn about the mythical foundation of the Bible as part of their seminary education.*

What would allow clergy to present these myths as truth to their congregations and what causes some of them to reject this position? What other factors are involved when clergy “lose their faith?”

What price do they pay for this change of heart and what price does society pay? The effects of the cognitive dissonance needed to preach faith in concepts that clergy themselves no longer accept is unknown and requires study.”

What was the conclusion of the original research?

There was no formal conclusion because it was a pilot study to gauge the difficulty in finding non-believing clergy to interview and to try to figure out how best to engage them in conversation about their experiences as their beliefs changed. The larger study, chronicled in Caught in the Pulpit: Leaving Belief Behind, also does not have a conclusion, but rather describes the experiences of non-believing clergy.

In the Preachers who are not believers (2010) published in *Evolutionary Psychology*, you describe the spectrum of God's definition, as follows:

...frank anthropomorphism at one extreme – a God existing in time and space with eyes and hands and love and anger – through deism, a somehow still personal God who cares but is nevertheless outside time and space and does not intervene, and the still more abstract Ground of all Being, from which (almost?) all anthropomorphic features have been removed, all the way to frank atheism...

Actually, Dan Dennett wrote that part! But I agree with it. This is his formulation of the various ways all kinds of people define God. It's not a specific finding of our research with clergy.

Does the elasticity of the definition of God support the unanimity and cohesion amongst the preachers and the congregation in church life? That is, everyone believes everyone else believes the same thing without believing the same thing.

I won't opine on what people (members of religious congregations) I've never talked to in depth are thinking about but not saying. I can guess that among religious fundamentalists there is an assumption that clergy and congregants hold the same beliefs – the ones written as the inerrant word of God in their Holy Book.

More progressive congregations focus more on community and in acting in ways that reflect the goodness of their religion. Speaking from my personal experiences in two progressive Episcopal churches, exactly what people believe is not so important.

Can the research findings expand to local temples, mosques, synagogues, and cathedrals as well? Other faith traditions and religions in general.

Again, I can't say. In our larger study of 35, we did interview two rabbis, but we could not find any imams to participate. Anecdotaly, in conversation with Jewish lay people, they don't seem to think believing in "God" is important to being an observant Jew and were not surprised or concerned to learn that some Rabbis do not believe. Christians, in contrast, were often shocked and disturbed by the very concept of a preacher who did not believe.

The Clergy Project is intended to "provide support, community, and hope to current and former religious professionals who no longer hold supernatural beliefs." What have been the notable impacts of The Clergy Project?

The Clergy Project started with 52 members in March 2011. There are now almost 800 members. They found the group online or hearing about it in the media. There has been no advertising and no attempt to recruit members.

Each prospective member is screened by a current member to assure that they meet the qualifications of being a current or former religious leader who no longer holds supernatural beliefs.

The main purpose of TCP is to provide a private forum for non-believing clergy to express themselves with other past and current clergy who also don't believe. People who have been out of the clergy for a long time can be a big help to clergy who are still inside trying to figure how to get out or how to stay in (usually for financial reasons) and keep their sanity.

In the past, these people were quite isolated. People left the clergy individually, often without telling anyone why they were leaving. Dan Barker, now the co-president of The Freedom from Religion Foundation is an exception to this. Some clergy project members who are pastors of progressive churches (e.g., United Church of Christ, Episcopal, Methodist) are pretty happy in their jobs and some choose to stay until retirement.

Because I'm not a member of TCP, I'm not on the private forum myself – and the discussion there is closed to members only. Even founders, who are not clergy, cannot go to the forum. Three of the six founders are members (Dan Barker, Carter Warden, and “Chris”).

Chris and Carter were both active pastors when The Clergy Project was founded and both have now left the clergy. “Chris” chooses to continue to maintain his anonymity. The three non-member founders are myself, Dan Dennett and Richard Dawkins.

I have heard from members that the forum discussions often involve members who left the clergy years ago who are now helping new people navigate their feelings, their relationships, and their plans for the future.

Another popular feature of TCP is the outplacement program, provided by RiseSmart, which helps clergy write resumes and find secular jobs. Carter Warden, a founder, was the first member to use the service, which helped him find a good administrative position in a state university near his home.

You edit the blog called Rational Doubt. It is a place where the “public and non-believing and doubting clergy can interact.” What are some emotionally touching aspects common to many of the stories from those told in either Rational Doubt or The Clergy Project or via your clergy research?

People go into the clergy to “do good”, but because of their changing beliefs, they feel they have to leave a profession which they otherwise enjoy and are good at. They may love the music, the counseling, doing “good works” in the community, and comforting the ill or the grieving. These are activities that don't require belief in a deity, but that belief is expected of clergy. They are so sad to have to leave the good parts of the job behind, that many try to believe, or to act as if they believe.

Many suffer greatly in the process of realising they don't believe. Many try mightily to hold on to their beliefs, going through periods of doubt that don't return to belief (as is supposed to happen). They may consult many people or books in the process. Changing from belief to non-belief is not something that they ever imagined would and when it starts to happen, it's not something they actively want. In some cases, people accept it or even welcome it, but others really fight it.

There can be personal losses along the way, e.g., income (especially if needed for children's education), spouse, family, friends.

They need to retool professionally. Though they had many transferable skills, e.g., organising, administration, public speaking, etc., they are often “pegged” as clergy, and so have difficulty convincing secular employers to hire them.

On the positive side, when I asked research participants what they felt they had gained and lost as a result of their beliefs changing, they all felt they had gained much more than they lost, often citing being at peace with themselves and seeing and appreciating the world as it really is. I remember seeing their faces light up when they told me what they had gained, despite losses they experienced in relationships and income. It was very gratifying to know that they felt they had come to the right conclusion and that their struggles ultimately had great value.

Any recommended thinkers or authors on the subject of non-believing clergy other than Professor Dennett and yourself?

Many members of The Clergy Project have written their own books – Jerry DeWitt, David Madison, Fernando Alcantar, Drew Bekius (coming in 2017), Dan Barker, Bart Ehrman, etc. Also, Catherine Dunphy wrote a book in 2015 about The Clergy Project, called From Apostle to Apostate.

Thank you for your time, Linda.

Interview with Deo Ssekitooleko – Representative of Center for Inquiry International – Uganda

December 7, 2016

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

In brief, what is your family story?

I was born in a poor African family. I first saw my biological father when I was ten years old. I am the heir of my late father, Fulgensio Ssekitooleko. He was a very committed catholic, very social, and a committed humanitarian. I grew up with my mother Noelina Nalwada – which was typically a single-parent household (but at other times I had step-fathers).

I am the only child. My father's children, apart from one, died after getting infected with HIV/AIDS in the 1980s and 1990s. My mother is an atheist, agnostic or skeptic. When I tried to enter a catholic seminary, she abused me and challenged me whether I had ever seen somebody who has ever seen God or returned from death.

However, one of my last stepfathers who was both a devout catholic and a believer in African traditional religion influenced me to be a very religious person (Catholic) in my early youth. My mother knew how to fight for my (and her) rights, so I never understood issues concerning human rights violations during my youth except when seeing teachers apply corporal punishment to my fellow students.

As I was growing up, I was not aware of the massive human rights abuse by the governments of the day, but, once in a while, I could hear whispers about somebody who has disappeared or killed by the government. Those were regimes of president Iddi Amin Dada, and the second regime of Apollo Milton Obote as he was fighting guerrillas lead by Yoweri Museveni – the current president of Uganda.

I am married to Elizabeth, and we have been together for 17 years. We have four children: Sylvia (16 years), Diana (12), Julius (11), and Nicholas (3).

Are there any others things about your personal story you would like to share?

I grew up striving to succeed in education so that I could escape poverty, ignorance, and unfairness in society. My mother's relatives were always exploited by witchdoctors who claimed to have healing-powers and thus could cure diseases – including HIV/AIDS. My uncles and aunts gave away their land to witchdoctors in order to get cured from HIV/AIDS, but they later died leaving no property to their offspring.

In the years to come, the Pentecostal movements emerged promising prosperity on earth, good health and many other opportunities. The two groups, i.e. the traditional religions and the Pentecostals, were undermining the struggle against HIV/AIDS, exploiting poor people. Yet, nobody could talk about them or challenge them.

This was a traumatising experience. I never knew whether this was a human rights issue or mere belief, or ignorance. As the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights defends the right to belief, all governments have gone on to include that article in their constitutions.

This means that ignorant people can be exploited in the name of belief as it is their human right to be exploited as long as they believe. This has been one of my most traumatising struggles in life. I have lost so many relatives out of their ignorance of science concerning health issues. Yet, governments cannot do anything about this because the politicians are also superstitious and the laws protect the charlatans.

In Uganda, almost 80 per cent of FM radio stations spend most of their time promoting the work of faith healers and witchdoctors. Rationalists do not have resources to own a radio station or to buy time on radio and television.

In my struggle to promote rationalism, I founded the **Uganda Humanist Association**. I became the East African Representative of the **International Humanist and Ethical Union** (2007-2012). Now, I am the Ugandan Representative of the Center for Inquiry International.

As advocacy campaigns are difficult, we now engage with local communities to talk about science and superstition in health and community development. Our work is now to invite whoever happens to be involved to discuss these issues openly and inform communities of the dangers of superstition in health and community development.

As of now, I have personally suspended armchair conference-hall humanism. I am in the trenches of community practical humanism. Whatever little I do, I feel proud that at least I am part of the struggle to rationalise African communities.

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

I grew up as a staunch Catholic, and then at university I became a radical secular humanist. Now, having interacted with various so-called humanists and observed their limitations (especially in building harmony, inclusive communities, practical approaches to society problems, and a general lack of openness) I have reviewed my humanism.

I am now a free thinking, liberal, practical humanist. I do not mind other people's beliefs on the condition that they do not infringe on the rights, happiness, and welfare of other human beings. I can work with Catholics on a health project, but I tell them point blank that the use of condoms should not be undermined and that family planning is essential in our families.

I tell Pentecostals that by preaching miracles such as faith-healing they are committing homicide. However, I enjoy my intellectual philosophical humanism as we debate Darwinism, the Big Bang theory, the environment, and the future of humanity among others. Politically, I am a social welfare democrat. Democracy should not be only about elections, but on how society shares opportunities and resources and how it promotes harmony.

I do not support the winner takes it all type of democracy. I prefer proportional representation in government as a form of democracy, as is the case in many countries which suffered the madness of the second world war.

How did you become an activist and a sceptic?

When I enrolled in high school, I was still a very confused young man. I had experienced a lot in my childhood. My Biology teacher, the late Mathias Katende, made an explosion in my brain and changed my ideological worldview. He introduced evolutionary biology to us.

The more he taught, the more we became confused. All along, I had prepared myself to go to heaven and meet Mary, the mother of Jesus, and escape worldly problems. However, by the time I entered University to study Botany, Zoology, and Psychology, I had become completely healed from this ideological and philosophical trauma.

At University, we got more lessons on evolution, but the lecturers were not as committed to evolution as my high school teacher. In fact, most students never took evolution seriously. They just wrote their examinations and moved on with life.

At university, by luck, a friend gave me a book on discovering religions. I read about most religions, worldviews, and philosophies. I found Humanism to be more related to my new worldview. I wrote to the British Humanist Association and got a positive response from Matt Cherry who encouraged me to form a humanist organisation. That was the birth of the Uganda Humanist Association.

He connected me to the center for Inquiry International through Norm Allen who was the Director of African Americans for Humanism (AAH). The Free Inquiry Magazines that Norm sent us opened our eyes wider on how humanity sees itself. Later, we were to work with the International Humanist and Ethical Union (IHEU) on many secular projects.

Do you consider yourself a progressive?

I am very progressive. I have always been evolving in my ideological, philosophical, cultural, and political views. I used to be a staunch believer in American democracy, but now I am more rotated towards European Social Parliamentary Democracy. I used to hate China's politics, but now I see it relevant in order to maintain orderliness and social welfare to a country (that has over one billion people) under one authority. I am a progressive because I am ever open to new challenges, new ideas, and new world views for the good of humanity and the environment at large.

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

I don't look at progressivism as a confined ideology or philosophy. If so, then I need more education about it. In my view, progressivism should be open to all aspects of human life including but not limited to culture, beliefs, politics, philosophy, and views about the environment among others.

How did you come to adopt socially progressive worldview?

As I explained earlier, it is a combination of my childhood experience, my culture, my environment, and possibly my inherited biological genes. I am lucky to have been introduced to evolutionary theory by my high school biology teacher and through reading various related literature including **Richard Dawkin's The Blind Watchmaker**. The works of Philosophers such as **Thomas Paine's The Age of Reason** taught me critical reasoning skills.

Studying the American revolution was equally important in my political thought development. I was humbled by the sacrifices of Nelson Mandela and his colleagues to liberate South Africa from apartheid. Julius Nyerere's trials with community socialism in order to liberate Tanzanians from poverty and to unite them into one nation was a positive human commitment. I can not forget reading the life of Bill Clinton in his voluminous autobiography. It is a story of moving from no where to the top of the mountains of his country.

Thank you for your time, Deo Ssekitooleko

Contacts:

Email: deossekitooleko@rocketmail.com

The website is being worked on.

Interview with Bob Churchill – Director of Communications at the International Humanist and Ethical Union (IHEU)

December 11, 2016

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

Bob Churchill is the Communications Director for **The International Humanist and Ethical Union** (IHEU), Editor of **The Free Thought Report**. Bob Churchill is also a trustee of **Conway Hall Ethical Society** and a trustee of the **Karen Woo Foundation**.

How did you become involved in humanism and IHEU?

I have a habit of looking at any situation and saying “Ok, but what’s the wider context, what assumptions are underlying here, what is beyond this?” The habit was deeply entrenched enough in me that I decided to study philosophy at university. So I started as a kind of curious, Enlightenment humanist, and it became a circle: the humanist impulse took me to philosophy and that sort of formalised my humanism.

But of course you don’t have to be a philosopher as such to have some or all of the attitudes and ideas of humanism. I think of humanism as something lying somewhere between the level of “being an environmentalist” and “having an ideology”. Because it’s not an ideology: there’s no foundational texts or dogmas etc. And like environmentalism it is a broad attitude to a bunch of questions, yet it’s a bit more all-encompassing than “being an environmentalist”.

And professionally, my first role in humanism was at the **British Humanist Association**. I got for a fairly technical job there, starting in 2008 but it quickly became a broader membership role. Head of Membership and Promotion was my final title. I left in mid-2011 and approached the IHEU and basically I developed a proposal with them to support a knowledge sharing program, and I went and worked for the best part of a year alongside various Ugandan humanist projects under the banner of the **Uganda Humanist Association**.

As that project was nearly concluded a role was coming up in IHEU and it was a great fit because now I had organised humanism experience on two continents, at two humanist organisations about as far apart as they come in terms of practice and circumstances, but sharing that common worldview.

You are the director of communications at the International Humanist and Ethical Union (IHEU). What tasks and responsibilities come with this position?

It’s very wide-ranging. At the staff level the organisation is relatively small so it means that “communications” is a lot broader than it would be in a large NGO for example. I’m responsible for all external and internal communications of course, including web presence, also campaigns and press work, but even wider than that... this week for example we’ve launched the latest edition of the **Freedom of Thought Report**.

This is the IHEU's "flagship" publication examining the rights of non-religious people and discrimination against them, examining every country on the planet. I'm the Editor of the report and manage the whole project. So in recent months I've been managing the development of a new online platform for the report, as well as coordinating volunteers and our Member Organizations who make content contributions, and editing the final result.

Right down to encoding my own footnotes into the webpages! And on Tuesday was the big launch at the European Parliament so I'd been planning the event with the parliamentary Intergroup on Freedom of Religion or Belief, and I went to Brussels and spoke on the panel there, telling everyone about the report, the findings this year, and introduced the new online system which we think sets a very high standard for civil society reports like this.

What is the overarching vision and mission of IHEU?

So, IHEU is an umbrella organisation – the "global representative body of the humanist movement, uniting a diversity of non-religious organisations and individuals." And we want to see a world where human rights are respected and everyone is able to live a life of dignity. And of course lots of things are implied by that: we'd favour rational politics with an evidence base.

I think it would be nice if humanity didn't have to spend the next few millennia trying to geoengineer our way out of an apocalyptic feedback loop of global warming in a world where all the big animals are dead and it's just us and the cockroaches.

Obviously those are very long-term goals though! So let me answer more practically in the near-term. IHEU works towards a rational, humanist world by building and representing the global Humanist movement here and now, supporting new and developing organisations.

We promote human rights – we're at the UN and other international bodies where as I see it very often our role is to be talking about things from a uniquely humanist perspective – there aren't many organisations doing that in the international system which still has a lot of religious NGOs.

We're defending individual people and advancing human rights topics: LGBTI rights, women's rights, children's rights, against slavery, for freedom of thought, bioethical issues, religion or belief, and freedom of expression.

Obviously in principle any ethical and human rights topic you can think of a humanist might care about, we do strategically focus often on issues that others are less keen to talk about: We call it out when religion is used to justify violence and human rights violations, we campaign against "witchcraft" accusations and abuse based on these beliefs, against child marriage, we promote secularism, and we defend the rights of the non-religious to be, to identify as, and to manifest non-religious views.

The Freedom of Thought Report looks into the discrimination against the non-religious. One pressing sentence says that "...there are laws that deny atheists' right to identify, revoke their right to citizenship, restrict their right to marry, obstruct their access to or experience of public education, prohibit them from holding public office, prevent them

from working for the state, or criminalize the expression of their views on and criticism of religion.” Of these, what seems like the greatest form of discrimination against the non-religious?

Interesting question! I think that one way or the other all of these things are human rights issues – remember any kind of discrimination like this is bound up in the human rights framework. So I’m reluctant really to prioritise between them, and this really isn’t just a cop-out.

I think it’s a good rule of thumb for advocates of human rights that you shouldn’t be prioritising between them because in principle they’re all basic, and in the right context a denial of the right can be devastating.

It would be tempting to say that something like the last one is most important because if you restrict free expression you can’t do anything else, that’s quite a common response and makes a kind of sense.

But equally, what if you live in a state where you can’t legally say “I dissent from religion, I’m an atheist”, then you can’t even begin to speak. If the state says you’re second class by denying the right to attain certain offices or to register a certain way or marry who you want, then again there’s a sense in which you’re potentially deterred from even thinking about developing your thinking in certain directions.

In human rights language they are “indivisible” and “interdependent”. And I don’t think that’s some dogma. I think it really is the case, logically speaking, that when you deny one real human right you weaken other parts of the whole framework at the same time.

I know a lot of people look at human rights and just think, “Well it’s all just a big convention, it’s not written in the sky or in our DNA that we have these rights,” and of course that’s right – but there’s nevertheless an objective component to them.

They do map onto real human needs and desires (in that sense they kind of are written into our DNA!) inasmuch as the contravention of these rights must represent a frustration of our preferences, our aspirations, or our health or our very lives in some cases.

So for anyone who thinks human rights do not, broadly speaking, map some realities of the human condition, I would say they should think about which human rights exactly they’d be prepared to just disown for themselves. (And of course, they can’t just reject their own rights because that’s what we mean by “inalienable!”)

The reports note the more somebody has more education and more income then their religiosity declines. What seems to be the reason for this link?

We point this out in the context of global secularisation and how it links to development trends, the point being to show that there are lots of non-religious people in the world and that the number is growing.

Again, defending human rights isn't a numbers game, it doesn't matter in a sense if there's only one atheist in a country or a million. Nevertheless, it's worth explaining, especially to those in countries where there's a kind of pretence that no one within their borders is a "non-believer", that actually they're wrong about that and that many people are just being efficiently silenced by a combination of social taboo and oppressive laws.

On the reason for the correlation: I'm sure you'd get ten different answers from ten anthropologists. But I'll bite and speculate that individual security is a big part of it. I think most research that links higher religiosity to trends like education and wealth are ultimately about wealth inequality and social instability and the increased risk of early death and so on.

It would be trite though to simply say that religion is "just a crutch" for people who are insecure in some sense. There's always more going on than that, but personal security does seem to play a big role.

I do think we have to be careful with all research like this. and ask questions of it: Is it that education makes you smarter and therefore atheism is smart and religion is stupid? Or is it that education means you're formally instructed in such a way that you're more likely to acquire non-religious views?

There's also research that finds atheists aren't as "happy" as theists – So, is that just because theists tend to have one more social network (based around their religion)? Or are religious people more likely to lie that they're contented? Or is the atheist just more realistic about the world?

To be clear, I'm not saying "We'll never know!" and that all research like this is worthless, by the way. I'm just saying it's complicated, we should be super cautious about reading too much into any social survey results like this, and most of all to avoid the temptation to homogenize huge groups of people, especially if there's any chance it makes us feel superior in any way.

The violations against humanists comes in a black through green, grave through free and equal scale: Grave Violations, Severe Discriminations, Systemic Discrimination, Mostly Satisfactory, and Free and Equal. Why was this scale selected to describe discrimination against atheists?

The report works by looking at a whole list of boundary conditions (assessment statements really) and whether they apply to each country. Each condition has a "severity level" attached. So the terms you mention are really just labels on a scale of 1 to 5. It's meant to give a general idea of how severe the problems are.

At the level of what we call Systemic Discrimination we're talking about things like tax exemptions for religious organisations if they're not available to non-religious analogues, we're talking about control of some public services by religious groups.

At the level of Severe Discrimination we're talking about things like if there's a "blasphemy" law or similar on statute under which you could be sent to prison for criticising religion, we're

talking about serious controls on family law, like if you live in a country where as an atheist you couldn't marry unless you lied about it – which might not at first glance seem as serious as the risk of going to prison but obviously it's a serious impediment to living your life how you want to live it, potentially!

And at Grave Violations we're talking about for example if you can be put to death in principle for "apostasy" or "blasphemy", if the constitution says that all laws must derive in some way from religious precepts, and of course if it's an outright totalitarian state.

What continent is the most leaning towards Free and Equal? What continent is leaning most towards Grave Violations? Where is the global average now?

Europe, which is more secularised, certainly has a lot of good social conditions and the most "green" countries across the most thematic areas. Though it's also got a surprising number of laws linked to old established churches and traditions that are problematic.

There's still a lot of legal discrimination that is inherent in privileging religion in general, or particular religious denominations. And there's still a few European countries including Denmark and Germany with "blasphemy" or "defamation of religion" laws on statute punishable with a prison sentence, so they get a "Severe" rating in the free expression strand of our report.

The Middle East and North Africa clearly perform worst on our ratings and that's because many Islamic states right now are most clearly associated with the most harsh suppression of non-religious worldviews, and are the most controlling of freedom of thought and belief generally.

In fact, if you're plotting worst countries against anything then it's not the continent but "being an Islamic state" that is the most obvious correlating factor, I think it's worth saying that clearly. This includes places outside of the MENA region, like Malaysia, Maldives, problems in Indonesia, and of course Southern Asia: Pakistan, Bangladesh...

I'm not saying all Islamic states are as bad as each other, and I'm not saying it's only Islamic states in the worst categories: North Korea is dominated by its own kind of enforced national cult, and China obviously is extremely restrictive and that's the official atheist Communist party that's doing it.

But as a region, as a whole, definitely MENA; and really that's because of so many countries where Sharia and hudud laws are enshrined under civil codes and practiced, reinforcing social taboos and threatening actual manifestations of non-religious worldviews with legal ramifications.

All the data by the way is available [here](#), and all the individual country reports [here](#).

Who is a personal hero for you?

A few years ago I was giving a talk about the philosophy of Karl Popper and someone said “Well he was in Europe during the war what did he do about the Nazis he just wrote books!” I have no idea why this person had come to a philosophy lecture given their attitude, by the way.

And I replied “Well, as a young Jewish man he fled the Nazis and then he wrote one of the twentieth-century’s seminal works taking on fascist and totalitarian ideologies and promoting the alternative. That’s *The Open Society and its Enemies*. He’s always been a bit of an intellectual hero.

I’m allowed more than one hero, right? I would also say Avijit Roy. He was the first of the humanists to be **killed in Bangladesh** in the spate of murders of “atheist bloggers”, activists and authors in 2015. He wasn’t the first overall: there had been others previously, including the blogger Ahmed Rajib Haider in 2013. It was after the events of 2013 that Avijit Roy got in touch with IHEU and other human rights NGOs and secular groups.

He was desperately concerned for his friends, his peers. Ahmed Rajib Haider had been killed and his friend Asif Mohiuddin and a number of other bloggers instead of being protected by the state, the state effectively put a bullseye on them, took them through the courts and sent them to prison for “hurting religious sentiments” in their blogs.

Avijit Roy was one of the first to see the real long-term danger here and I worked with him through IHEU trying to raise awareness, trying to put pressure on the Bangladesh government and make them see that by giving into Islamist demands and arresting bloggers they were only going to spur them on and end up with more and more Islamist demands, and fewer and fewer people left to speak against them.

Avijit Roy himself lived in America, but he was worried about all the death threats that his friends were getting – we knew they were serious because Ahmed Rajib Haider had been cut down with a machete and now the state was effectively joining with the Islamists in silencing all the bloggers. Always Roy’s main concern was what might happen to these other young men who were writing about science, defending human rights, writing about minority ethnic groups in Bangladesh, women’s rights – it’s the same humanism you see anywhere.

Then he started to get death threats himself. He was worried about them, but he lived in America, so proportionately he didn’t seem at risk in quite the same way, but it was real cause for concern and it would be absurd to be complacent based on your geography alone today.

Anyway, early in 2015 he took a trip back to Bangladesh – very much under the radar for the most part of course – but he made an appearance at the famous book fair at the university in Dhaka and they murdered him there, also seriously injuring his wife Rafida Bonya Ahmed. This would become the first of several murders of non-religious writers in Bangladesh in 2015. All attacks by groups of men on motorbikes carrying machetes – it’s extremely brutal.

Avijit Roy is a hero because not only was he an intellectual trying to put his message into society to change it for the better, but when that came under threat he worked as hard as he could behind the scenes, reaching out to NGOs, he became a kind of informal advisor to me at IHEU for a

time, he was trying to protect the humanists and human rights defenders back in Bangladesh, and then Islamist radicals took his life.

He is a hero. And Bonya as well for standing up after that attack, overcoming that horror and injury and continuing to campaign – she’s been giving talks and writing and building up the blogging platform that Roy was working with. Incredible of her to be able to come back from that kind of attack and say “I will not be silenced!”

What do you consider your highest ideals?

Kindness and empathy. Reason and truth.

I could stop there because that’s pretty much all human life, but I’ll say one more thing, about reason and truth. Rationality is about having ideas and being open to criticism. It is about truth, but it’s not about establishing and certifying statements as true, we can’t do that.

Rationality means attempting to isolate truths, by being bold in creativity in the hope that you might generate some truth ideas, and then being ruthless in intellectual criticism to get rid of the errors.

Any recommended authors and books?

For philosophy, read the vastly under-appreciated Critical Rationalism: A Restatement and Defence, and Out of Error by David Miller. They’re probably not easy to come by though.

What has been your greatest personal or professional emotional struggle?

Professionally, it must be the last few years, working with Bangladeshis under threat, in some cases seeking asylum elsewhere – in 2015 watching as one blogger after another was killed. And any time we’re able to work with someone who is a human rights defender under threat.

It is gut-wrenching and a kind of torture even for those that survive. It can feel like there is nothing anyone can do, or that the things you can do are so small, but you have to try to focus on those small things, those actions you can attempt, to nurture hope, rather than despairing about what you cannot do.

Thank you for your time, Bob.

Interview with Jennifer C. Gutierrez Baltazar – Executive Director of Humanist Alliance Philippines, International (HAPI)-

December 12, 2016

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

What is your family and personal story – culture, education, and geography?

I have three siblings, and I'm the second eldest. I was catholic schooled since prep to high school, but, even when I was very young, I was already a freethinker (and a natural one – since I didn't have access to anything conducive to freethinking per se such as books or similar like-minded people).

However, I had an 'enlightenment' moment in school which happened during a religious class. It happened when we were taught the Bible's ten commandments. The day before, the teacher lectured about free-will. I began questioning the validity of free-will taking into account the ten commandments – this started my journey to non-belief.

During College I undertook a Bachelors of Science degree in Chemistry, and then I embarked on a Master's degree in Environmental Science and Ecosystems Management. Fast-forward ten years, and I find myself having graduated, raising a family, and separated from my religious husband.

I currently head two organisations: the **Humanist Alliance Philippines International** (HAPI) and my own NGO called Conservation Cavers Inc (I love caving). I am also associated with a private company as their science division manager (my remit centres on the supply of laboratory solutions to various companies) and I'm managing my own business, a rope access company providing cleaning and building maintenance solutions that require vertical and hard access using rope techniques.

So, yes, I do a lot of things, but I make sure I still "play". I'm a blades and knives enthusiast too!

What informs personal humanist beliefs, as a worldview and ethic?

Humanist beliefs are universal beliefs held and shared by everyone across religious and national identities. It stands for humane principles and values that are the very basis on and by which the declaration of human rights rests, and it also adheres to and as informed by the scientific methodology that keeps humans progressing towards a more hopeful future. A life guided by reason and inspired by compassion couldn't be any better. If everyone could be a humanist, I think most of the problems in the world would disappear.

You have an emphasis on environmental humanism and advocacy. Why those topics?

Ever since when I was young, I loved being in nature. It started with being close to pets. I have more animal-friends than human friends as I was growing up. Ranging from chickens, quails,

rabbits to the usual cats and dogs. I feel everything is connected and cannot be separated. It's a realisation that I think is not usual for many people. People treat nature and environment as a separate thing.

This is where the destruction starts – people use resources as if they're unlimited. They start polluting without any care at all. Part of me knows this should not be the case, and knowing this should surely mean that one has the responsibility to inform people that it's a wrong attitude to treat nature as both a commodity and an unlimited resource.

It is important to inform people that we are not separate from nature. As early as the age of 11, I began writing for the school paper, mostly about environmental issues. Many years ago I initiated lecturing about environmental topics to various schools and organisations pro bono, for this is my real advocacy.

If we teach and inform more people that caring for the environment is a very unselfish and, furthermore, that it is the best way to help more people – not only now but in the future -, then I think we could look forward to living in a better world (or at least make things better for the people living in it in the future).

For me, environmental humanism is the greatest form of humanism owing to the fact that it encompasses every belief system, race, gender or nationality. Environmental humanism can benefit everyone – both humans and non-humans.

What are effective ways to advocate for humanism and environmental humanism?

The most effective way is to have reach out to people as far and wide as possible and try and get them to care and get involved in the issues. People can only go so far in attending lectures about the issues, reading articles about the issues, etc., but, if you actually manage to inspire them (e.g. by showing what invaluable role nature plays for us) they will actually play a proactive role and thereby take steps to externalise their care in truly beneficial ways.

In HAPI we try to create programs that try to inspire people to care for the environment – we do tree planting activities nationwide called the HAPI TREES that had spawn other individuals and organisations to do the same. It had a domino effect in inspiring more participants to get involved with HAPI Trees.

We also do a lecture series on climate change and its reality – proceeding from the Climate Reality Leadership Corps (lead by Al Gore). We also launched a mini recycling facility in a small community that aims to teach people the concept of recycling. HAPI funded all of these with the help of some donors we reached out to.

The Humanist Alliance Philippines, International (HAPI) was founded on December 25, 2013 and launched on January 1, 2014. What was the inspiration for the foundation of the organisation?

HAPI was inspired by a growing humanistic movement that is tired of dogma and religious superstition – two things that we believe tries to divide society rather than unite us as humans. Marissa Torres-Langseth (an ANP based in the US) founded this.

She is very passionate about making a change in the Philippines, to free it of superstitious beliefs as someone who works for science. Because of her, the organisation had the momentum to progress and widen as she actively finds and connects with people she thinks has a humanist heart.

It remains purposed to the progressive and secular humanist perspectives and movements. What does this mean within the Philippines?

The purpose is unity in commonalities and the safeguard of everyone within the scope of our multicultural society without favour for any one particular group. This means, that, if we are to work together, we need to work objectively and scientifically in deciding the future of our country and people, rather than emotionally and superstitiously.

What makes secular humanism and progressivism seems more right or true to you – arguments and evidence?

The Filipino people believe in the Humanistic idea that all humans have inalienable and equal rights, and that we must all work forward in achieving a future that provides stability and peace for all people within and outside of the nation. In many ways, these are widely believed human principles.

However, superstition and dogma has clouded this position and infringed many of our citizen's special privileges while simultaneously denying others their liberties and natural rights based on religious beliefs that seek to dictate sexual and relationship preference, education standards, and such.

In finding a solution to the ills that plague our minorities, we need to find an objective, scientific and well-studied approach that allows for our principle to materialize and improve human condition in our society.

HAPI aims to defend freedom, democratic rights, equality, protect children, and reduce poverty. What initiatives work to advance these goals within the progressive secular humanist for HAPI?

HAPI has been actively engaged in education, feeding, and tree planting programs that are designed to help educate and rehabilitate our society and environment. We propose to raise awareness about the need for an objective approach to problems and to the protection of our environment as these are the things that the next generation will inherit. In many ways, these programs are aimed at the future inheritors of our society through the love of oneself, the love of others, and the love of the environment.

What is the near future vision for HAPI?

Our near future vision is to inspire more people to embrace humanism in as many a way as possible. We aim to educate first and then set an example for them to see that we have real workable solutions to real human problems. If they see this, they can start taking initiatives to be more rational and ethical in their decision making which, we hope, will translate into people being more peaceful and life changing ways to other people as well.

What is the far future vision for HAPI?

We actually hope for a better, safer, more compassionate and caring society in general. In order to achieve this, we just have to keep going on and setting a good example to the people around us, by aggressively (but peacefully) re-introducing the humanist concept now in our (more critically-thinking) country.

Rationality and ethics play a very large role in the government, if we keep pushing and asserting this together with the environmental humanism advocacy, we think we can greatly change a lot of situation now where we are currently trapped, being in a still to be considered as a 'religious' nation that sort of impedes our development. Population control, unhappy homes because on being the only non-divorce country, crimes and addiction, these all should be addressed in a different perspective.

Interview with Vic Wang – President of the Humanists of Houston

December 14, 2016

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

What is your family and personal story—culture, education, and geography?

My parents are Chinese immigrants from Taiwan who came to the U.S. for college in the 70's. I was born and raised in Texas where I've lived my whole life, in Austin and in Houston. All of our family attended and graduated from the University of Texas at Austin, where I got my degree in Management Information Systems.

What informs personal humanist beliefs, as a worldview and ethic, respectively?

I was raised without any religion (which I've come to learn is pretty rare here in Texas), so secular humanist principles have always appealed to me even before I knew what it means to be a Humanist.

And I've always felt strongly that ultimately, the kind of person you happen to be born as, and all of the circumstances that determine who you are as a person—your parents, your gender, your ethnicity, your nationality, really all of the circumstances that make you who you are—are ultimately completely out of your control.

And to me it's that realisation—that you could just as easily have been born as any other person on earth—which underscores the fact at there is really no rational justification to preferentially place your own well-being and desires over anyone else's, and that the feelings and needs of others are no less valuable than your own.

And it's that emphasis on empathy and compassion for others that separates humanism from someone being "just" an atheist, and takes it from living your life free of theism all the way over to a worldview that drives everything you do.

What makes humanism seem more right or true than other worldviews to you—arguments and evidence?

One of my favourite definitions of humanism is living a life informed by evidence and driven by compassion, which means a rejection of the supernatural while striving to help others and actively trying to make the world a better place.

So humanism is somewhat unique in that regard as compared to the world's religions in the way it embraces freethought; if any of your beliefs aren't based on sound reasoning and supported by valid evidence, why continue to hold them?

Instead we should all strive to hold reality-based views on how to improve well-being, for yourself and for others. That makes humanism self-correcting in a way that traditional religions

are not, as we're always learning more and more about the world and how it operates, and improving our perspectives accordingly in light of new evidence and new understandings.

What are effective ways to advocate for humanism?

It's no secret that the non-religious are one of the most distrusted and disliked of all demographic groups, even though the reality could not be farther from the truth. In reality, atheists are vastly under-represented in the prison population, the states in the U.S. with the least religion also have the lowest rates of crime, and the countries with the lowest levels of religion are also those with the lowest crime, the highest standards of living, and the highest levels of happiness in the world.

So I think one big part of advocating for humanism is showing that "hey, we're just like everyone else, and there's nothing to be afraid of just because someone doesn't believe in any gods. We believe in helping others and doing good in the world, even if our reasons for doing so may differ from those with religious motivations".

What is the importance of humanism in America at the moment?

Just within the past few years we've seen a huge turning point as the non-religious are now the fastest growing religious demographic in the U.S. The latest statistics show 20% of the U.S. population no longer hold any religious affiliation (which represents a growth of almost 50% in just the past decade) and among younger Americans, a full 1/3 of millennials are now considered among these "nones".

And even more dramatic has been the growth of those who explicitly identify as atheists, with an increase of over 50% in the past decade. So clearly we're seeing a decline in traditional religious worldviews and a corresponding rise in humanistic, secular views, both in the U.S. and worldwide. And yet despite this, atheists/humanists have typically been on the outside looking in when it comes to national discourse and political representation.

Our representation among elected officials is virtually zero, and for us to even be acknowledged as a group that exists in the world of politics is absurdly rare. But thankfully, organisations like the Secular Coalition for America, American Atheists, and the American Humanist Association are changing this, with an increased emphasis on political activism and fighting for political representation that thus far has been virtually nonexistent in American politics.

What is the importance of secularism in America at the moment?

At the same time that we're seeing a growth in secular Americans, we're also seeing a backlash against that from the religious right (and, more recently, the alt-right). We're seeing more and more theocrats rising to power and trying to impose religiously - motivated legislation on the rest of society, whether through draconian anti-abortion regulations, restrictions on LGBT rights, voucher programs that would fund religious schools with public funding, manipulation of public school curriculums to impose pseudoscience and revisionist history on schoolchildren, or even outright attempts to dismantle the separation of church and state, as Donald Trump has already

done by publicly vowing to repeal the Johnson Amendment which prohibits religious institutions from endorsing political candidates.

I think it's very easy to become complacent as the general population becomes more secularised, while not realising that religious fundamentalism and extremism is—by its very nature—a backlash against the perceived threat that secularism presents. And we're seeing that phenomenon playing out around the country as we speak.

What social forces might regress the secular humanist movements in the US?

In addition to the threat of fundamentalism and the religious right, over the past few years we've also seen a widening rift in the secular movement between those who embrace positive humanistic values and those who don't (and in some cases outright reject them, or even reject the "humanist" label entirely).

Fortunately, it seems that the vast majority of atheists believe in actively working to make the world better, including supporting the fight for equal rights, promoting altruism, and demonstrating compassion for disadvantaged groups. But those who don't share those values seem to be disproportionately vocal—particularly online—which I think leads to a skewed perception of what the freethought community is really about.

What tasks and responsibilities come with being the president of the Humanists of Houston?

As President I oversee all aspects of the organisation, both in "real life" and online across our social media presence ([Meetup](#), [Youtube](#), [Facebook](#), [Twitter](#), etc), as well as our in-person monthly board meetings. I also have a [blog](#) where I write about humanism, religion, and secularism.

How is humanism, especially secular humanism, seen in the larger Houston region?

While Texas as a whole is quite conservative and religious—in some areas overwhelmingly so—Houston is a pretty unique mix of conservatism and liberalism, with an enormous diversity of religious beliefs (Houston was recently recognised as the most ethnically diverse city in the United States, which is apparent just about any time you step outside).

And while there's certainly a huge amount of religiosity in the greater Houston area (Houston is currently in the top 10 cities in churches per capita, and at one point used to be #1), Houston within the city limits is quite moderate and, I've found overall, fairly accepting of humanist views. With a few notable but rare exceptions we haven't encountered much blowback from the local community as a result of our activities, and we've even been invited by the local Interfaith Ministries organisation to be a part of several interfaith events, where we educated the public about humanism/atheism and provided a secular voice to what would otherwise be exclusively religious discussions.

Also, I think the high degree of religiosity in the Houston area (and in Texas overall) has ironically played a large role in our growth as an organisation, as we've quadrupled in size in the

past four years and are now the largest chapter of the **American Humanist Association** in the country and the largest humanist Meetup group in the world with over 3,000 members. And I think a big reason for that is we see the inescapable effects of religion intruding on our day to day lives in a way that perhaps many parts of the country don't.

In many cases we have members who don't even know any other atheists/humanists, and have no opportunity to converse with like-minded individuals outside of our events (I've even had some members tell me they had never even MET a single atheist—to their knowledge, at least—before coming to an HOH event). So I think there's certainly a greater incentive in this area for atheists and humanists to seek out organisations like ours.

What are some of the activities, even initiatives or campaigns, of the Humanists of Houston?

We average 20+ events per month with activities including guest speakers, discussion groups, book clubs, volunteering, activism, and social gatherings. We hold a monthly "Humanist Community Giveaway" of supplies to the homeless, usually serving around 40–50 people per giveaway, as well as regular outings at the Houston Food Bank and other local charities. We've held numerous demonstrations outside the Saudi Arabian Consulate in support of Raif Badawi, the Saudi blogger who was sentenced to 10 years in prison and 1,000 lashes for advocating secular values online.

We've participated in demonstrations for the Black Lives Matter movement in response to the incidents of police brutality around the country. We recently completed a fundraiser for Camp Quest Texas, a summer camp for children of humanist families, where we raised over \$3,000 from our members to help underprivileged children attend the camp, which turned out to be the most ever raised by an organisation in a single year. And every year we have a booth at the Houston LGBT Pride festival as well as a float in the Pride Parade, as well as being active in our support for LGBT rights and equal rights legislation.

For those that want to work together or become involved, what are recommended means of contacting you?

We can always be reached via email at humanistsofhouston@yahoo.com, and the best way to keep up with our activities is through the HOH Meetup where we have our full calendar of events and photos from previous events. We also have a YouTube channel with over 90 of our previous events and guest speakers that can be watched for free. And, of course, all of our events are free to the public so anyone is welcome to come out and check us out anytime.

Interview with Marieke Prien – President of the International Humanist and Ethical Youth Organization (IHEYO)

December 17, 2016

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

What is your familial and personal background?

I was born and raised in Hannover, Germany. When I had finished high school, I spent a year in the Philippines for a volunteer service, then moved to Hamburg to study Cultural Anthropology and Educational Sciences. After getting this degree, I moved to Osnabrück and started studying Cognitive Science. Right now, I am in Oswego (New York) for a semester abroad.

I got involved in Hannover's local group of the youth wing of HVD (Humanistischer Verbands Deutschland, the German Humanist Association) when I was 13 or 14. Since then, I have held different positions in the local and national young humanist organisations and eventually got involved in the **International Humanist and Ethical Youth Organization** (IHEYO), where I was first elected Membership Officer and now President.

How did you become involved in humanism as a worldview?

Pretty much all of my family members are humanists, so you could say my sister and I were raised this way, though I don't remember the term "humanism" being used. Our parents and grandparents taught us about this lifestyle not only with words, but by living and acting according to these values every day. We were encouraged to be sceptical and question things, to think for ourselves, to not prejudge people, to take responsibility for our actions, take care of the environment, and be independent.

Also, my parents love to travel and get to know people from different cultures, and I think my sister and I have definitely profited from that. It made us more open-minded towards new things and different ways of life.

When did humanism as an ethical hit home emotionally for you?

Since I was raised with humanist values, there is no specific event or time that marks this. It was simply the worldview I had. You could probably say I found out about the term "humanism" and actively chose to identify as a humanist when I decided to join our local Humanist organisation and take part in their coming-of-age celebration. The next step was becoming a member and actively volunteering for the organization. By doing this, I dedicated myself to the cause, so to say.

What makes humanism more true to you than other worldviews, belief systems?

I think about these things a lot. Ethics, religion, why do we act and feel the way we do? I try to stay objective about it and approach questions openly. And every time I come to the conclusion that humanism is the right way.

I found that the belief in gods does not withstand reason and never understood why people call religion the root of ethics, morals or values, and why they minimise the horrible things it has caused and is causing. Why do you follow rules that only exist to oppress you? Why would you need religion to love thy neighbours?

Some people will argue that being nice to one another is not a necessity or is even “unnatural”, that not caring about others will not cause them any disadvantages. But this is where love and empathy come in, a wish to live in a peaceful and kind society, something that I believe everybody has somewhere inside them.

To me, humanism is the derivation of being a compassionate and reasonable person.

You are the President of International Humanist and Ethical Youth Organization (IHEYO). It was launched in 2004. What tasks and responsibilities come with this position?

As President, I am taking the bird’s eye view. I know what is going on in the organisation and coordinate and connect people and activities. There are also decisions to be made, but I always make sure to consult with other committee members first because I want to get to know other peoples’ thoughts and perspectives before deciding on something that will affect the organisation and the people involved.

IHEYO works on a broad range of initiatives, and with multiple organisations, including women’s rights, education rights, abortion rights, LGBTIQ rights, human rights. What are some of the notable successes in each of these domains?

Though some events and activities are directly planned by us, our job is more to be an umbrella organisation connecting our member organisations.

For example, in November 2015, we held the charity week “Better Tomorrow”. We came up with the concept and asked our members to contribute with projects they thought of and planned themselves.

There are conferences that are planned by IHEYO in cooperation with the respective local member organisations. We provide know-how and funds for the events. Many of our volunteers are active in both IHEYO and their local organisations so cooperation is made easy. Alone this year there were three conferences in addition to our annual General Assembly.

These conferences were the African Humanist Youth Days (AFHD) in July in Nairobi (Kenya), the European Humanist Youth Days (EHYD) in July in Utrecht (Netherlands) and the Asian Humanist Conference in August in Taipei (Taiwan). During each conference, there are talks and workshops that are somewhat connected to humanism.

For example, during the EHYD we had a workshop on Effective Altruism, AHYD had panels about witch-hunts, and the Asian Conference featured a talk about secular values in traditional beliefs. Some talks/workshops are held by member organisations, others by people from outside of the organisations that were invited.

This way the participants can gain knowledge and know-how while at the same time spreading their own knowledge and letting others profit from their experience. Also, events like that are the best opportunity to network and come up with new ideas. We are a growing community, with growing influence, thanks to this.

So it is hard to measure our impact in numbers or clearly defined achievements. We are more about providing the basis for our members' work and incentives to individuals. A panel like the one at EHYD, with Bangladeshi bloggers who have been threatened and prosecuted because they openly criticised religion, leads to a change of mind in the audience that can eventually bring huge change.

Any personal humanist heroes?

This sounds cheesy, but my humanist heroes are the people that put their free time and their energy into IHEYO or other humanist organisations. There is always a lot to do and it is great seeing so many people work hard for this cause.

Especially work in an executive committee involves some boring and annoying tasks, particularly when handling bureaucratic stuff. Behind every meeting and every event, there is someone writing minutes, someone putting data into spreadsheets, someone handling the numbers and keeping an eye on the finances... I am very grateful for everybody who does this as it builds the base for successful projects.

Any recommended authors?

I have not had time to read a lot of books lately, but I read many blog articles and can definitely recommend that. There is something about articles written by non-professionals who just want to express their thoughts. Especially when you know the person or they provide background knowledge about themselves.

It is so interesting to see their thought process and how they form their opinions. It helps understand why they have this opinion, even or especially if you don't agree with it. Also, many blogs allow to comment on articles and possibly discuss with the author, so in the end everyone can benefit.

Thank you for your time, Marieke.

Interview with Caleb W. Lack – The Secular Therapist Project

December 18, 2016

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

Caleb W. Lack, Ph.D. is a licensed clinical psychologist, an Associate Professor of Psychology at the University of Central Oklahoma, and the Director of the Secular Therapist Project. Dr. Lack is the author or editor of six books (most recently Critical Thinking, Science, & Pseudoscience: Why We Can't Trust Our Brains with Jacques Rousseau) and more than 45 scientific publications on obsessive-compulsive disorder, Tourette's Syndrome and tics, technology's use in therapy, and more. He writes the popular Great Plains Skeptic column on skepticink.com and regularly presents nationally and internationally for professionals and the public. Learn more about him [here](#).

Tell us about your own journey into becoming a secular therapist.

I was never a non-secular therapist! I was already non-religious by the time I started my clinical psychology graduate program at Oklahoma State University, and the program itself was completely secular in nature. As such, all of my training came from an evidence-based, science-back point of view, which I naively assumed was the norm for those being trained in the field of mental health.

It really wasn't until my pre-doctoral internship at the University of Florida and after getting my PhD that I began to be exposed to the fact that the vast majority of mental health clinicians did not practice evidence-based therapies. And it wasn't until I began interfacing with the non-religious community in a larger role that I realised how prevalent the issue of licensed mental health professionals pushing their religious beliefs onto others really was.

Having seen and talked to huge numbers of people who went to a therapist seeking help for depression, anxiety, or marital problems and ended up being preached at and told how all their problems would go away if only they would stop being an atheist, I was very excited when I learned that Dr. Darrel Ray (a psychologist and the founder of the secular support organisation, Recovering from Religion) was leading a new initiative called the Secular Therapist Project.

About a month after it launched in 2012, I submitted an application to be in the database of therapists and was accepted. Several months after that I saw a call for a new member to join the evaluation team of the Secular Therapist Project, which are the people that actually screen potential therapists. I put my application in, and joined the evaluation team in January 2013.

In late 2015, Dr. Ray had decided to step back into a position as president of the Recovering from Religion board and was interested in having someone else become the director of the Secular Therapist Project. I decided that the time was right for me to increase my level of involvement, talked to him about the position, and officially took over my current position in January 2016.

What is the content and purpose of The Secular Therapist Project?

The Secular Therapist Project was designed to be a free service to help connect non-religious individuals who are seeking mental health care with non-religious psychologists, psychiatrists, counselors, and other therapists. However, what's unique about the STP is that we aren't just a database of therapists like you might find at Psychology Today. Instead, we very carefully screen potential therapists who want to become part of the STP.

We screen them to make sure that a) they are appropriately licensed in their state or country, b) that they are secular in nature as well as practice, and c) that they actually use evidence-based treatments, which have been shown to be effective at helping improve mental health problems in controlled clinical trials. This means not only will our therapists not try to preach to you or convert you, but that they are also using the most well-supported types of treatment to help you.

What is your own religious/irreligious view?

I consider myself a freethinking, secular humanist, scientific, and sceptic. That's a mouthful, so let me explain a bit! My worldview is based on a naturalistic view of existence that is best discovered via scientific inquiry. Ethically, I believe strongly in consequentialism, the idea that our actions need be judged by their outcomes and results.

I strive to acquire and spread knowledge with the end goal of making life better for humanity as a whole, and the people I interact with in particular. Professionally, that means I spend large amounts of time teaching critical thinking skills and training other mental health clinicians in the most effective means of helping people with specific behavioural or emotional difficulties.

What tasks and responsibilities come with being a part of The Secular Therapist Project?

After applying and being accepted as a therapist in the STP, an individual's main task is to respond promptly to messages from those seeking services. We don't match those seeking services up with a therapist; instead they have to search our database for therapists who are close to them and make contact.

This all takes place within a completely confidential system that does not reveal names or addresses of therapists or clients. We built this confidentiality to protect those who are using our service, as unfortunately most of our therapists cannot be publicly "out" as being non-religious (atheist, agnostic, freethinker, and so on). Thanks to the negative stigma associated with being "atheist," many of the therapists in our database would likely lose clients and referrals sources if they advertised themselves as being openly secular.

What is the common therapeutic methodology used with those coming for help from The Secular Therapist Project?

People use the STP's website to get help for a wide variety of problems, both related to religion and completely separate from that. On the religiously-related front, people often need help with the transition from being religious to being nonreligious. We frequently have people contact us

who want help in coming to grips with the fact that believed in something for 10 or 20 or 50 years, lived their life accordingly, and now no longer believe it to be true.

We see a lot of people that are angry, especially after being within a highly controlling, perhaps even abusive, fundamentalist background where they were told they were going to hell, or were a bad person because of their sexuality, and so on. We also see lots of sadness too. There's a reason people often use the term "I lost my faith" because it is a loss, of community, of family, of friends, of routines.

Given that we screen our therapists quite carefully to ensure that they are using evidence-based practices, we also have many people who use the site not because they are having difficulties in life due to religion, but instead just want to be assured that they are meeting with someone who is using current best practice. As such our clients seek out help for depression, anxiety, relationship problems, and the full gamut of mental health difficulties.

What has been the reaction from some of the mainstream culture to the initiative?

Overall, we have received very little negative feedback about the STP from the public, which is quite nice. The reaction, though, really depends on where you live. Many people that I've talked to on the East and West coasts of the U.S. are quite shocked when I describe the problems of therapists in the South and middle parts of the country pushing their religious beliefs onto clients. They are shocked because doing so is highly unethical, as mental health clinicians are there to help their clients lead more adaptive, productive lives, not to proselytise to them.

Don't misunderstand me, I'm a non-theist who strongly supports the right of individuals to believe whatever it is that they would like to believe. That right, however, shouldn't extend to trying to push it onto others. I think it is highly unethical for therapists to push their private agenda or belief (religious or otherwise) onto persons seeking help, who are frequently emotionally vulnerable.

The major mental health organisations in the U.S. (such as the American Psychological Association and American Counseling Association) agree, and that is codified in their ethics codes.

Interestingly, the most negative feedback we have gotten has come from clinicians who have applied to be part of the STP, but whose applications were rejected. As I mentioned before, we have a fairly rigorous screening process designed to make sure that those who apply are non-religious themselves, secular in their practice, and using evidence-based therapies. Not meeting that last criteria is the most common reason we reject people, and our numbers over the past few years have us denying between 30-35% of clinicians that apply. They are often upset, as you would imagine.

What has been the most touching narrative, without divulging sensitive information, from someone coming to you, personally, for assistance in professional practice?

Due to my specialisation – which is the obsessive-compulsive and related disorders – I most frequently see people who have been to a large number of other therapists, sometimes for years. For those who have been struggling with things like OCD, Tourette's, or trichotillomania but have not been receiving the most effective treatments, seeing someone who knows what they are doing can be life changing.

I recently had a child who has pretty severe OCD start seeing me, and the parents told me that they had seen more change in three sessions with me than they had seen in the past year and a half of therapy with someone else. That's a major reason why I am such a strong advocate of evidence-based psychology, and why we emphasise that all clinicians who are a part of the STP must practice using those methods.

For those that want to work together or become involved, what are recommended means of contacting The Secular Therapist Project?

Our website is seculartherapy.org, which is where you can register to be either a client or a therapist. People are also free to contact me via the site if they have any specific questions about the process. If you are seeing a therapist who is secular, please encourage her or him to apply! Although we have almost 10,000 registered clients, we only have about 300 therapists at this time, so there is a massive gap, especially in the southern and mid-western states. We will also be expanding more internationally over the next few months with upgrades to our software, which is exciting.

Thank you for your time, Dr. Lack.

The pleasure was mine, Scott. Take care.

An Interview with Dr. Saladdin Ahmed – Independent Scholar and Researcher

December 18, 2016

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

You are a Canadian citizen. You were in Turkey, but complications did not permit working there. What is your story? What were the complications?

In September 2014, I moved to Turkey to teach in the Philosophy Department at Mardin Artuklu University and help found a graduate philosophy program in English. At that point, there was a fragile truce between Ankara and the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK). Mardin, like the rest of Turkey's predominately Kurdish southeast, was experiencing a cultural revival due to the relative increase of freedoms, but it was only a matter of time before the government would resume its extreme suppression of the people of the region.

To the south of the border, in Syrian Kurdistan, or Rojava, the war between ISIS (backed by Turkey) and Syrian Kurds (supported by the PKK) was at its peak. At the university, the same tensions were ever-present. While the student body generally sympathized with the Kurdish liberation movement, the state was growing more Islamist and anti-Kurd by the day.

Near the end of 2014, Mardin Artuklu University became one of the first academic institutions to be targeted by Erdogan's renewed campaign of Islamification and de-Kurdification. The politically moderate rector of the university was removed from his position and replaced with a fundamentalist and open advocate of the revival of the Caliphate system. It was clear that the tide had turned, and we all anxiously waited to see what the new administration's first move would be.

It came in June 2015 when 13 foreign instructors, including myself, were fired without any official explanation. In his social media posts, the new rector insinuated that we were spies and missionaries and expressed outrage that we had taken jobs away from Turks. Despite the mobilization of our students and progressive colleagues against the firing and support from Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP) parliamentarians, we were left with little choice but to leave Mardin.

In the midst of Ankara's renewed war on the Kurdish region, such scare tactics have considerably increased in frequency against progressive academics and public intellectuals in the country since the summer of 2014. Progressive faculty in Mardin, as in other cities across the country, are under increased pressure and scrutiny. Those who have taken public stances against the war, whether through signing peace petitions or speaking to the media, have been questioned by police and, in a growing number of cases, suspended or fired from their positions.

You earned a B.A. in philosophy, M.A. in contemporary continental philosophy, an M.A. in applied language studies, and a Ph.D. in philosophy. What were the research topics within those domains of expertise?

While studying philosophy as an undergraduate student at Carleton University, I became particularly interested in 20th century continental philosophy. From there, I focused on the Frankfurt School and especially Walter Benjamin and Theodor Adorno while doing my MA in Philosophy at Brock University.

In my major essay, I looked at fascist regimes' systematic use of images to create homogeneous spaces control. I argued that mechanically reproduced images not only lack the auratic quality of authentic art, as Benjamin argued, but also destroy the uniqueness of the spaces they invade. I took a different direction with my MA in Applied Language Studies at Carleton, where I used Critical Discourse Analysis to illustrate the nuances of new-racism.

New-racism is more resistant to our traditional methods of diagnosis; contemporary racist discourses do not make direct reference to the term "race," although racists still believe that there is such a thing as race. "Culture" now often takes the place of "race" which results in the anthropologization and othering of non-white disadvantaged groups.

Finally, my Ph.D. dissertation at the University of Ottawa developed out of my earlier research on Benjamin's concept of aura in combination with my reading of Henri Lefebvre's seminal *The Production of Space*. I theorized "spatial aura" and used this concept to build my theory of "totalitarian space."

Essentially, I argued that when space is controlled, it is rendered transparent and flat, stripped of its uniqueness (spatial aura). As such, the inspecting gaze of power and systematic commodification of space have deprived us of auratic spatial experiences.

How have those informed personal and professional critique of religion?

Not a single course throughout my studies touched on anything resembling the critique of religion. Instead, the philosophy of religion comprises a growing sub-discipline. The absence of critical approaches to religion in Anglo-American philosophy schools is merely another symptom of the apoliticality of the discipline.

Indeed, since the 1980s, there has been a tendency to politicize everything that is not political and apoliticize everything that is. The critique of religion is something philosophy simply cannot afford to avoid, if for no other reason than because religion claims authority over the same territories of knowledge, such as metaphysics, epistemology, and ethics.

The religious mystification of those fields will continue to marginalize philosophy and generate fatal social norms. If philosophy is ever to be relevant again to the actual world, it must confront religion.

What arguments seem most reasonable in support of religion?

Religion cannot rely on actual sound arguments, or it would negate its own foundations. If one could put aside the psychological need for a comforting illusion, there is nothing clearer than the fact that the world is Godless, in the sense that it lacks universal justice. The most

fundamental grounds on which religion is founded and embraced are psychological. If not for the psychological barrier, looking at any ethically unjustifiable event would be sufficient to disprove the existence of an all-knowing, all-powerful, all-good supreme being.

Let us take an example.

If we agree that there is absolutely nothing that could justify what has been committed against Yezidis, then we must conclude that there is no God. For if there were a God, he either could not intervene or chose not to intervene to stop the atrocities (including the rape and murder of thousands of children). If God could not intervene, then God is not all-powerful, which contradicts the very definition of God. If God chose not to intervene, then God is not all-good, which also contradicts the definition of God.

Of course, believers would claim that “God” knows things we do not, so he must have had a reason for allowing the Yezidi genocide (and endless other genocides) to be committed. The main problem with such a claim is that it excludes reason itself from the deduction process. To argue that there is a higher reason that would contradict logic and that we should, therefore, accept the illogical assumption is complete and utter nonsense.

You see a problem with Islam, not Muslims, at this point in time. What is the problem with the ideas comprising Islam to you?

I take issue with all collective religious and nationalist identities insofar as they are intrinsically exclusionary and discriminatory. That said, the use of “Muslims” as a category is also deeply flawed. The differences between one Muslim community and another could be far greater than the differences between a Muslim community and a non-Muslim community.

Hence, the label “Muslim” does not say much about people. Furthermore, “Muslimhood” in today’s world is perceived as a racial category. It should not need to be said that a Muslim is a person who believes in the religion of Islam. Just as not every Mathew is a Christian, not every Abdullah is a Muslim.

As for actual Muslims – people who self-identify as such – there are hundreds of millions who do not understand a word of the Quran. Islamists, on the other hand, are Muslims who consciously use Islam for political ends, and Islam as a religion allows for that because it was designed as not only a set of spiritual values and practices, but also as a political ideology for conquest and governance.

From the emergence of Islam in the 7th century all the way to the most recent Yezidi genocide, Islamic authorities have called for, encouraged, or, at the very least, implicitly justified the mass murder and enslavement of non-Muslims.

Because it was founded in the 7th century, the Islamic worldview of politics and governance is naturally disastrous when applied to today’s world. This is the obvious problem of which many Muslims are aware. A less acknowledged problem is that even for its historical time, Islam was not as progressive and tolerant as Islamic scholars would like us to believe. It matters little how

many good moral lessons a belief system expounds if that system is fundamentally sexist, discriminatory, and supportive of the violent conquest of other peoples.

These have been characteristic of Islam from the very beginning. Of course, many other religions have the same problems, and for that reason they should all be rejected. Unfortunately, Islam still dominates many social and political arenas, which poses a direct threat to basic human rights and freedoms.

Why the focus on Islam over other religions?

Because Islam is the main ideological source of Islamism, and Islamism is one of the most dangerous fascist forces in today's world. Again, it should not need to be said that most Muslims are just ordinary people, at least insofar as the followers of any religion are ordinary.

Also, there are numerous none-orthodox interpretations of Islam that stand in opposition to political Islam in general. Still, none of that should mean that it is okay to encourage or even allow Islamic centers. All the good moral teachings of Islam and much more could be included in a secular ethics course.

Some might point to extreme nationalism, linguistic chauvinism, or ethnic superior-ism to support violence or discrimination against others. What makes religious extremism better or worse to you?

I do not think religious extremism is universally better or worse than other ideologies that justify discrimination. In the so-called Muslim world, secular forms of imperialist nationalism have been responsible for numerous genocidal crimes. For example, secular Arab nationalism, such as Baathism, and secular Turkish nationalism (Kamalism) have been just as barbaric as Islamism in terms of genocidal crimes and the brutal oppression of colonized peoples.

There are many Arab nationalists who are no less anti-Semitic or anti-Kurd than Islamist Arabs. Also, let us not forget that European fascism in Italy, Spain, and Germany was secular. Absolutism is fatal whether it is religious or not; non-religious fascism has its own sources of absolutism, so it matters little what those sources or symbols are called. For Nazis, Hitler basically functioned as God, just as for Kamalists, Mustafa Kamal Ataturk, functions as God.

What about the claims of despair? That is, some theologically illiterate individuals feel despair over crimes of Western countries, based on decision and policies of leaders destroying their livelihoods, and justify violent actions based on that context and co-opt religion for extremist purposes and, therefore, religion is not to blame. Does this seem reasonable to you to explain much of the religious extremism in the world?

To me, religion is first and foremost an institution run by a group of people who design its politics, in the broadest and strictest sense of the term of politics. Illiterate individuals are mobilized by religious authorities to do what they do. Those same authorities could distance religion from violence, but when they do not, then religion as an institution is to blame, among other things.

Islamic jihad cannot be emancipatory under any conditions because Islam itself is inherently oppressive, at least in terms of its organization of societal relations. There are many peoples who have been brutally oppressed by Western and non-Western countries, but their resistance remains progressive.

The Kurdish case is indicative of this point: Kurds in Turkey and Syria are among the most brutally oppressed peoples in the world. While Turkey enjoys extensive support from Western powers, the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) is blacklisted by Western countries. Tens of Kurdish towns have been completely destroyed by the Turkish army in the last twelve months alone. Kurdish political prisoners face unimaginable forms of torture in Turkish prisons.

Nonetheless, the PKK remains a progressive liberation movement and has not restarted to targeting civilians. In fact, fighters from the PKK as well as the ideologically aligned Democratic Union Party (PYD) have saved countless minority members from Turkish-ISIS aggressions in Iraq and Syria, including tens of thousands of Yezidis. Religious extremism has been on the rise in the rest of the Middle East precisely because of the lack of such progressive movements.

Any recommended thinkers or authors on the subject of Islamic extremism or religious extremism in general?

I am by no means an expert on the subject of religious extremism, so I am not in the position to recommend sources on the topic. That said, I have tremendous respect for Tarek Fatah, who is very knowledgeable on the subject and consistently takes progressive stances on issues related to Islamic domination. Another critic that I follow is Hamed Abdel-Samad, who is also outspoken about the problems of Islam, drawing attention to the numerous contradictions in the Quran and criticizing Islam's social influence.

There is a great need for more critical voices among white leftists in the West as well. I recently read an excerpt from Meredith Tax's book *Double Bind*, which takes issue with the tendency of many in the Left to romanticize Islamist movements. The fact that the ultra-right in the West demonizes entire populations under the pretext of fighting Islamic extremism should not make the Western Left sympathize with Islamism. The ultra-right will remain racist with or without the Islamist threat. In fact, Islamism and the West's ultra-right have far more in common than either party would like to admit. At bottom, they both rely on fascistic modes of reasoning to demonize the Other. The Left should be capable of rejecting both without any difficulty, which is what the revolutionary Left has done in the Middle East.

Interview with Sikivu Hutchinson -Feminist, Humanist, Novelist, Author

December 20, 2016

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

Sikivu Hutchinson is an American feminist, atheist and author/novelist. She is the author of 'White Nights, Black Paradise' (2015), 'Godless Americana: Race and Religious Rebels' (2013), 'Moral Combat: Black Atheists, Gender Politics, and the Values Wars' (2011), and 'Imagining Transit: Race, Gender, and Transportation Politics in Los Angeles' (Travel Writing Across the Disciplines) (2003). Moral Combat is the first book on atheism to be published by an African-American woman. In 2013 she was named Secular Woman of the year.

What is your family and personal story – culture, education, and geography?

I grew up in a secular household in a predominantly African American community in South Los Angeles. My parents were educators and writers involved in social justice activism in the local community.

What informs personal atheist and humanist beliefs, as a worldview and ethic, respectively? What are effective ways to advocate for atheism and humanism?

Through public education and dialogue about the role secular humanism and atheism can play in dismantling structures of oppression based on sexism, misogyny, heterosexism, homophobia and transphobia.

What makes atheism, secular humanism, and progressivism seem more right or true than other worldviews to you – arguments and evidence?

For me, they are a means of redressing the inherent inequities and dogmas of religious belief and practice, particularly vis-à-vis the cultural and historical construction of women's subjectivity, sexuality and social position in patriarchal cultures based on the belief that there is a divine basis for male domination and the subordination of women. Progressive atheism and humanism are especially valuable for women of colour due to the racist, white supremacist construction of black and brown femininity and sexuality.

Notions of black women as hypersexual amoral Jezebels (antithetical to the ideal of the virginal, pure Christian white woman) deeply informed slave era treatment of black women as chattel/breeders. These paradigms continue to inform the intersection of sexism/racism/misogyny vis-à-vis black women's access to jobs, education, media representation and health care.

What is the importance of atheism, feminism, and humanism in America at the moment?

Over the past decade, we've seen the erosion of women's rights, reproductive health and access to abortion, contraception, STI/STD screening and health education. We've also seen virulent

opposition to LGBTQI enfranchisement, same sex marriage, employment and educational opportunities for queer, trans and gender non-conforming folk.

These developments are entirely due to the massive Religious Right backlash against gender equity and gender justice that's occurred both in State Legislatures across the country and in the political propaganda of reactionary conservative politicians and fundamentalist evangelical Christian interest groups.

Feminism/atheism/humanism are important counterweights to these forces because they underscore the degree to which these political ideologies are rooted in Christian dominionist (the movement to embed Christian religious principles public policy and government) dogma and biases.

What social forces might regress the atheist, feminist, and secular humanist movements in the US?

I have no doubt when I say that the election of Donald Trump and the continued neoliberal emphasis of American educational and social welfare policy will surely undermine these movements.

You wrote Moral Combat: Black Atheists, Gender Politics & Values Wars, White Nights, Black Paradise & Rock n' Roll Heretic. It will come out in 2018. What inspired writing it?

Rock n' Roll Heretic is loosely based on the life of forerunning black female guitar player Rosetta Tharpe, who was a queer gospel/rock/blues musician who influenced pivotal white rock icons like Elvis Presley and Jerry Lee Lewis but is largely unsung. The book explores racism, sexism and heterosexism in the music industry in addition to the fictional Tharpe's rejection of faith.

What is the content and purpose of the book?

The book is designed to shed light on the travails and under-representation of women of colour musicians in a highly polarised, politically charged industry that still devalues their contributions. It's also designed to highlight the nexus of humanist thought and artistic/creative discovery in the life of a woman who had to navigate cultural appropriation, male-domination, the devaluation of white media and musical trends that were antithetical to supporting or even validating the existence of black women rockers.

Thank you for your time, Sikivu.

Interview with Haras Rafiq – CEO and Executive Board Member of the Quilliam Foundation

January 12, 2017

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

Haras Rafiq is Quilliam's CEO and an Executive Board Member. He is currently a member of Prime Minister's Community Engagement Forum (CEF) Task Force and was formerly a member of the UK Government's task force looking at countering extremism in response to the 2005 terrorist bombings in London, as well as being a peer mentor for IDeA – advising regional government. He is also a member of the Advisory Group on Online Terrorist Propaganda at Europol's European Counter-terrorism Centre (ECTC).

Some of the narratives put out can not only be on either side of those in terms of countering extremist narratives and those trying to prop up and promote extremist narratives. Some on the fringes of both of those. Those that are affected are moderate faith members. Where, there can be additional anti-Muslim sentiment as individuals. Of course, there's anti-atheist, anti-Christian, prejudice depending on where you are and it will vary in its means and representation. How does anti-Muslim sentiment increase, in what ways does it increase, in light of some of these concerns on the periphery?

First of all, I'm glad you didn't use the word Islamophobia. Islam is a set of beliefs. It is a set of values. I am a Muslim. I choose to accept Islamic values and Islamic ideas. Not the ones that ISIS or the Muslim Brotherhood have, different ones. I choose those values. In a liberal secular democracy, no idea should be beyond scrutiny, but no individual should be beyond dignity. This is a mantra at Quilliam.

It means that Islamophobia is a term that is defunct and is a term quite often used to stifle criticism particular interpretations of the faith, and particular organisations.

Anti-Muslim hatred is real. Now, the problem we have in the UK is anti-Muslim sentiment can be on the increase, but you know what it is not as bad as it is in the US or mainland Europe. That is because in the UK we do have a growing number, not enough – we need more, people who are ordinary Muslims who aren't Islamists and who aren't extremists, who aren't fundamentalists, who are starting to help portray that not every single Muslim is the same as Anjem Choudary or Shakeel Begg (who sued the BBC and lost).

The problem is we have the regressive Left and the Far-Right that are actually at war with each other, virtually. Both claiming these particular types of Islamist Islam is normative Islam. Therein lies the problem; in the UK and the US more so, we have these regressive Left and Far-Right people who are trying to claim that the real Islam is Islamists Islam. It doesn't help.

It takes people out of the middle ground and moves them to this polarisation. ISIS said very, very clearly that they want to create anti-Muslim sentiment in the West. In their magazine, Dabiq, they want to take people out of nuance and debate and move them into binary positions. The problem is when we don't have enough Muslims and non-Muslims coming out and

unequivocally not just condemning Islamism in general, not just ISIS or al-Qaeda or Muslim Brotherhood, and saying we do have people moving to the extremist positions.

This is a problem. If we didn't have ISIS, al-Qaeda, the Muslim Brotherhood, or people saying, "In an ideal Muslim country, if people commit adultery, then don't stone them to death." There wouldn't be anti-Muslim sentiment. We didn't have anti-Muslim sentiment when I was growing up.

I think there will always be an element of racism, and people who are xenophobic and bigoted. I think it has moved over to being anti-Muslim sentiment. I think that's more of what civil society needs to take on, but we as Muslim communities and others, collectively, need to help to show to ordinary people that as it was in the past. Groups that like the Muslim Brotherhood, al-Qaeda, ISIS, etc, don't represent us at all.

What about moderate Muslim scholars coming forth and assisting and providing that more moderate narrative?

First of all, I don't like the term *moderate*. I'll tell you why. Right now, in the UK and in the world, there are a group of so-called moderate scholars calling for the activation of the blasphemy law. There are people in 2006, who I remember taking to Tony Blair. When he asked me to bring him the moderates, I said, "Here are the moderates."

They aren't Salafists They aren't Islamists. They are another denomination, and they happen to be the majority in the UK." There was a guy named Salmaan Taseer in Pakistan who was a politician and who was killed by his bodyguard. The killer, Mumtaz Qadri, was praised as a martyr when he was found guilty and executed. I don't agree with the death penalty, but he was executed and praised as a martyr and somebody who was a qazi – praiseworthy – because he killed somebody for being blasphemous.

This was being called out by people who would be known as moderates. Some of the traditions that I come from. So, I don't like the term first of all. I would use the term ordinary Muslims. Those who reject, from a human rights perspective, certain interpretations that don't fit into our values that we believe in. The universal or human values. I don't like to call them British values. They are universal values. Human values like human rights, secularism, and so on. There are a number of scholars that have started to shift that way. There's an Arabic Quranic concept:

إصلاح

Islah means reform. Reform through reasoning, ijtihad. Salafis and Islamists don't want this to happen, but there are more Shaykh Bin Bayyah and Shaykh Hisham Kabbani, and a number of others, who have an international platform and are starting to gain a little bit more traction now and a bit more support. They can't do it themselves.

I'll tell you why scholars aren't the sole solution. I'll tell you an anecdote. I've got tons of anecdotes, been doing this for 12 years! I was doing a lecture of Prevent. There was a leading shaykh/scholar. I asked him to do the religious stuff. The assistant warden said that he's got a

person who has given him a bit of grief, radicalising other people, and asked if we had time to talk to him.

He came 45 minutes late, pale – absolutely pale. I made a joke, “Did you radicalise him?” He shook his head. I leaned over him. He said, “The guy’s got a point.” He went in with his version of theology, moderate theology, and said he’ll see you with my version. The shaykh told me that he won the debate on theology. I trust him that he won that.

But then the guy hit him with the intellectual, the ideological, the social, and the emotional, and the scholar had nothing. He was used to living in a bubble all of his life, living in a seminary. He couldn’t cope.

(Laugh)

Instead of offering the other guy some form of critical inquiry, he ended up deflecting on some critical inquiry himself, but they do need to be involved. They are part of the solution. That’s why we’ve fully taken on Shaykh Salah al-Ansari at Quilliam, who is from Al-Azhar University, used to be the Imam from the largest mosque in London, most prestigious, in the UK. He is a good reformer. Shaykh Usama Hassan and other, we are getting people to help stimulate the debate and reform. More needs to be done. On their own, they are not the solution.

As the CEO and executive board member for Quilliam, what tasks and responsibilities come along with this position?

I was the managing director for a number of years. I was responsible for sustainable growth in the UK. We’ve done that. When I first took over as managing director, we had 6 or 7 full-time staff. Now, we’ve got 20 in the UK. The problem that we face is the problem of global jihadist insurgency. The problem is around the world. It cannot just be dealt with in the UK, but needs to be dealt with around the world.

Adam Deen used to be a former extremist himself. My job is to help set up Quilliam offices and the Quilliam model in other countries. We are a 501(c)3 in the US, but we haven’t had a physical presence. We finished the paperwork to be set up as an NGO in Canada. My aim is to set up physical offices and presences in North America. Also, I am looking in other countries.

My job is to make penetration on policy makers and in the messaging to Muslims and Muslim communities. The third is to make sure that we do this, so that we have sustainable growth and bring in business models to make sure the business is viable and sustainable.

Finally, the keeping of the best staff. I think that as we grow we need to employ, train, and maintain the best staff. We’ve got a number of projects ongoing in Europe and North Africa, as a network, which are coming together to combat this phenomenon. We want to reach out to Europe, Africa, North America, and other parts of the world as well.

Any thoughts or feelings in conclusion?

Conatus News is great. I think it is a fantastic initiative. It is really important that we get this vital work done. It is important that we make sure that as a civil society – I remember in 1972 going to my first football match with my brother; I was 7 years of age. It was the home team. 15 minutes before the end, we had to leave because there was racism that the home team supporters were going to beat us up.

Now, premier football stadiums that doesn't happen. There is racism, but it is nowhere near as bad as it used to be. Why? The reason why is civil society and trans-media activism, projects and campaigns to kick racism out of football through celebrities and other people tried to educate and tackle this phenomenon means there's been a shifting of social norms. I want to get to the point with Quilliam as part of the solution, where civil society is much stronger on the issue of tackling Islamism.

We want to get to the point where civil society reacts the same way to Islamism as they do to racism, sexism, and fascism. People talk about jihad. This is my jihad. This is my struggle to combat extremism, and extremism of all sorts.

Thank you for your time, Mr. Rafiq.

Interview with Scott Blair

January 29, 2017

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

What is your family and personal story – culture, education, and geography?

I had a classic American beginning. My father was a General Motors Engineer; my mother was a nurse (until starting a family – this was the late fifties). We were a TV-like family of five in an all-white community in southern Michigan. We attended a Presbyterian church. My parents were committed to this – volunteering, serving as Deacon, church treasurer, and such, but it was not an oppressively religious household; questions were explored not squashed or averted.

I spent eight years in and out of college, working factory and construction jobs, and traveling the continent on an old motorcycle. I eventually graduated from University of Michigan after some fraction of my collection of course credits seemed to form the requirements for BS in Biology. Then I fell into wastewater, that is, I chanced to have entered the wastewater treatment profession, a great place for a science oriented generalist with a desire to be useful to fellow humans and the world we live on.

I managed wastewater treatment plants for most of my career and have tried to attend to the human component of an operation along with the technical.

When did humanism become self-evidently true to you?

I learned the term Humanism somewhere in my education and remember thinking it seemed a completely sensible perspective, but it did not dawn on me to adopt and own the label at the time. I have been a Humanist most of my life but just seized the identity in the last half dozen years. Humanism is simple.

If one rejects the idea of a deity that directs earthly affairs, believes that the best way to understand the world is to carefully and dispassionately observe it, and desires to live a meaningful life in a functional society with other humans, then one is a Humanist. My belief in God evaporated by the time I started college. The usefulness of dispassionate inquiry as a tool to understand reality has been apparent to me from early on.

And, I am inclined by my nature to care about humankind and to want to build and be part of a society where its members generally can flourish. Humanism is simply where one lands if one can't accept supernatural explanations and cares about others. I have been there since the religion I was taught as child fell away.

What is the importance of humanism in America at the moment?

The increase in recent years in the number of Humanist organisations in this country and elsewhere is a very good thing. For decades, I was a Humanist but without any connection to other Humanists. I learned about and joined the GTH just as it matured out of the founders' living rooms and started meeting in public places.

I was enjoying a good life before GTH but I came more alive upon becoming part of this group. I now had people, thought-mates! It was a relief and a pleasure to be with friends with whom conversations on deep questions would begin with what is real as best as we can determine it, with no reliance on ancient magical myths.

It is energising to be with others like one's self; it engenders a feeling that even while a minority, we are not irrelevant. We can have an impact. I know that the emergence of other Humanist groups across the country gives opportunities for thousands of others to find "their people" and have the experience I am having.

There are other versions of secular communities such as Free Thought groups and Sunday Assemblies; it isn't all found under the name Humanism.

Some groups are activist and some focus more on social meet-ups. But to the degree that Humanists meet and organise, we are bound to influence the broader culture. And that is good; Humanism can be a foundation for functionality in our society. People can make better collective decisions when not bound to imagined revelations of a supernatural rule-maker and are free of delusions that exempt them from responsibility for our future on earth.

Most Humanists are realistic about the rate at which a clear-eyed human-centric philosophy can displace deeply held supernatural beliefs as a guide for social decisions, but Humanist principles do have influence and I think their impact is increasing. Humanistic thought is on the rise, not just among the "nones;" it also shows up even within organised religion.

There is a strong secular Jewish tradition in the US, the Unitarian Universalists embody many humanist principles, and in many liberal Christian churches, one finds virtual Humanists among clergy as well as parishioners – people who advocate for the rights of all, support separation of religion and government, recognise our obligation as stewards of earth's natural systems, and even, when questioned directly, do not insist on the magical claims we often associate with the very definition of Christianity.

I have met people like this while representing Humanism in local groups such as Pub Theology and Area Council on Religious Diversity (ACORD). So, the growth of Humanist ideas, even among those who do not identify as such, is a counterbalance to the vocal and visible conservatism that unnerves so many of us today.

What is the importance of secularism in America at the moment?

It is very important. We hope that the religious also recognise that that government and public functions must not include or defer to religion or none of us will have freedom of religion, or freedom from the religion of others. We can all tolerate the traditions of others expressed in public, but government must not represent or appear to favour religion.

The workplace is a more difficult space; it is appropriate to accommodate some religious requirements of workers, but not to impose religious sensibilities of owners or managers on

them. Functions that serve the whole community (such as hospitals) should certainly not apply religious rules.

What social forces might regress the secular humanist movements in the US?

The destructive parts of our own human nature. With the world's population at 7.1 billion and climbing, there is increasing tension between peoples and stresses on resources. With the internet and the availability of customised sources of "belief verification," we become more polarised.

When societies are stressed, human nature moves them toward feeling and behaving like competing tribes. We feel more suspicious of others and protective of those like us. Ironically, as "Humanists," we try to suppress part of our Human nature. We need to wilfully act on the vision of how we can function together rather than drift into the dysfunction that is (somewhat) natural.

Conservative religions and politicians will not hurt us. The unseemly elements of our own nature (imparted on us by our evolutionary past) can hurt us. I see it expressed even among liberals and professed Humanists.

What is the humanist culture like in Michigan? What activities, campaigns, and initiatives take place there through the GTH?

The backbone of our local organisation is our regular monthly meetings. We feature a speaker on topics that include science, philosophy, art, or issues of community interest. Often these bring in people from the community who are interested in the speaker or topic, who have no affiliation with Humanism.

Sometimes the monthly lecture is a platform for an organisation that works for something Humanists tend to support. We may in that circumstance help with raising funds and contact sharing. GTH supplies a group of volunteers one evening each month to usher, take tickets, and make popcorn at a local community theatre that shows non-mainstream films.

A contingent of GTH volunteers at Safe Harbour, a program for housing our town's homeless on winter nights, and others participate in an annual work bee at Planned Parenthood. We have supported the high school science fair with prize money (and I have served as a judge). We have a get-together called "the Hungry Humanist" at a different restaurant each month just for socialising.

We've organised member road trips to conferences of the American Humanist Association, Reason Rally, and other out-of-town Humanist or atheist events. Contacts from these have led to some great speakers at our monthly meetings. GTH Book Club reads and discusses nonfiction and occasional novels that give us tools for understanding the world around us (subject matter has included psychology, science, religion, justice and politics).

Book Club events sometimes morph into very nice dinner parties. We have regular GTH bike rides, seasonal parties, and occasional campouts or ballgame excursions.

What tasks and responsibilities come with being the vice president of the Grand Traverse Humanists (GTH)?

Our board of seven meets at least monthly. We exchange ideas for GTH programs, seek and secure meeting speakers, and plan our meetings and events. Usually we do these chores with a glass of wine and intersperse them with philosophical side discussions and a few laughs. I and a couple others take turns presiding at monthly meetings. I sometimes represent Humanism and GTH at forums outside the group and to classes and media.

It also falls to us as a board to continuously assess the collective desire of the group regarding what we want to be. To what degree do members want GTH to be an important source of support and community for one another? Do we make it our business to know when members are ill or struggling and send casseroles?

Or do we just provide interesting lectures and social events? To what degree do we want to serve a function for each other often fulfilled for the religious through church membership? Some members shudder at anything like mimicking church. Others miss the community and ritual they gave up when they stopped believing and left a church.

As it happens, we are in the middle. We stay away from the vibe of a church congregation, but members do deliver a casserole from time to time. Another common decision: shall we be activists for our philosophy, interjecting ourselves into local, regional, or national political issues? How can we know if we can do so on behalf of all our members? Or should we just meet each other's needs for like-minded camaraderie?

What is the current size of the GTH?

We have 83 dues-paying members, 176 participants in our closed Facebook group and 239 people who have signed up for GTH emails. Meetings have between 30 and 80 people; the larger events usually include some non-GTH attendees.

For those that don't know, and many simply won't because grassroots work is learned through action, what difficulties arise in the midst of grassroots organisation of a chapter?

We find that the average age of a GTH member is rather high. We would like to have a membership that is a cross section of generations just as we hope Humanism has traction with people in all stages of life across the country and the world. We are not sure why it is this way. To be a group of our size in a community the size of Traverse City is a success, but we often discuss a desire for greater age diversity nonetheless.

We work on selecting our tone. We think some have left the group out of exasperation with those who are inclined to be too tolerant of religion. Others have ceased to attend after

perceiving that others in GTH may have been too disrespectful of the religious. Many members were once believers.

Some feel kindly toward those they left behind in their former church scene and some are wounded and angry and receive hostility from their former fellow congregants and religious families. Who we select as speakers or the intensity of round-table discussions can affect who we retain and who does not return.

What about the eventual emotional difficulties and rewards?

Humanism is important to me; it is something I am glad to commit effort advancing. Other kinds of organisations I have participated in do not inspire me to get involved at a planning /serving level. GTH does.

GTH people, Humanists, tend to be deeply interesting and caring people; they are pleasant and stimulating company. My wife Suzette and I hosted a GTH Book Club discussion at our house a few weeks ago, soon after the election.

The election was not a topic of the night, in fact there were only a few side conversations about it, but there was a sense of support and common feeling. Humans crave that. When all had left, I told Suzette, “you know, these are the people I want around me when things get weird.” I am more alive and energised about life because I have these people around me.

What personal experiences tend to inform personal humanist beliefs, as a worldview and ethic, respectively, based on interactions with other humanists? Some might note ecstatic experiences, improvements in personal relationships, and so on.

Motivation for Humanist ideals comes ultimately from the better parts of human nature, from the evolved feelings that lead us to care about and support one another. Experiences support this in giving people a foundation for empathy.

For some Humanists who had been involved in religion, a departure from religious belief, a de-conversion if you will, is a powerful experience. It is not the emotional rush of a reported religious experience, rather it is a clearing of illusion, a relief from the tension of defending incoherent positions. It is freedom from trying to discern the will of an intangible capricious being and execute it to his satisfaction.

It is the new knowledge that one is not being watched all the time. It has been described to me as “finding peace.” Some Humanist who came through this experience resent the deep connection formed in people’s minds early in life by religious indoctrination, that the ability to believe fantastic things is inseparable from goodness. That psychologically persistent fusion of ability-to-believe and goodness, is a harm that informs some Humanist’s regard for religion after they are out of it.

Also, intellectually, what makes humanism seem more right or true than other worldviews to other humanists based on conversations with them – arguments and evidence?

Humanism has no “revealed” doctrine, no myths passed down from ancient times that we contort perceptions to defend. Humanism is interested in understanding what is true, whatever it may be, to the degree that we can. We go where our best dispassionate, evidence based, inquiry takes us and we are comfortable with what we are not yet able to know. Humanism commits to honest careful pursuit of the questions while religion starts with answers.

Humanism recognises humanity as part of, and a product of, nature. This is key to a Humanistic view. We evolved as groups of cooperating primates. Our brains are a product of this evolution. In them resides the basis for our emotions and behaviour. We evolved to have the feelings that cause us to care about and support each other because cooperation within groups had selective utility. Self-serving instincts obviously also had selective utility.

Competition with other groups lead to instincts in us that are at the root of suspicion and hostility toward those least like us. The good and bad elements of our nature were conserved in our evolution in balance and tension with each other.

So, Humanists know that good and evil are not forces directed by God and Satan in a supernatural battle in which we are soldiers. Rather, our better angels and our darker motivations are part of being a natural creature.

This view also equips us to understand our limitations. Adopting the dispassionate perspective and viewing humanity from the outside, leads to a fuller understanding of our nature and gives Humanists insight into the fallibility of human thinking and perceptions. The brain, the organ with which we apprehend the world, is an evolved tool.

Evidence shows that we are prone to many kinds of thinking and perception errors; understanding this puts a person in a position to better recognise fallacious thinking in others. It also reminds us to be careful and humble about what we assert to know ourselves (Daniel Kahneman, Jonathan Haidt, and E.O. Wilson have been GTH Book Club reads).

This dispassionate examination of human nature as an evolved phenomenon gives a Humanist a very usefully lens to better understand human emotions, the culture wars, politics, religion, and interpersonal relationships.

Humanism is more likely to be right and true because we look for our car keys where we are likely to have dropped them rather than looking under the lamp post because the light is better.

For those that want to work together or become involved, what are recommended means of contacting the GTH?

Our website is gthumanists.org. Upcoming events are listed there. An email address that reaches all board members is info@gthumanists.org. We meet at the Traverse Area District Library at 7:00 pm the second Monday of each month. Other events vary in time and location.

Thank you for your time, Scott.

Interview with Andrew Copson

February 1, 2017

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

Andrew Copson is Chief Executive of the British Humanist Association (BHA), a position he has held since January 2010, and former Director of Education and Public Affairs at the BHA from 2005 to 2010. In 2015, Andrew Copson was elected President of the International Humanist and Ethical Union, the global umbrella body for atheist, Humanist, sceptic and secularist organisations. He has worked for a number of civil and human- rights organisations throughout his career in his capacity as executive committee member, director or trustee and has represented Humanist organisations before the House of Commons, the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe and the United Nations.

In brief, what is your family background – geography, culture, language?

I'm from a town called Nuneaton, in the Midlands of England, and from a poor, white working class background. I grew up in a difficult time for my hometown and county, living in the 80s, when all of the industry had been or was being wound up. But there was still a lot of social solidarity and community feeling around the old industries.

It was a very non-religious society, too. Social services and welfare, and other amenities: these were provided by the secular civic authorities or by the industries or by non-religious community groups. It wasn't at all like a country like the US.

The area was, like most of the England at the time and still, dominated by one ethnic group. But, as a result of the manufacturing and industry around the place, it was also relatively ethnically diverse. I grew up with children from diverse backgrounds, ethnically and religiously. This affected my schooling at the primary level: the schools I attended as a young child were secular because they had to cater to a wide-range of children and they educated us about a lot of different beliefs. So, my first culture was this white working class one.

My second culture was the one I found when I was whisked out of state school by a government scheme called the 'assisted place scheme' which took bright children from poor families and paid for them to go to academically selective private schools. At my secondary school, and then at Oxford, where I studied Classics and Ancient and Modern History, I experienced a very elite academic culture, and a world of ideas.

You have mentioned *secular* a couple times. You have not mentioned humanist. What was the turning point for becoming, by label, an explicit humanist?

I would say my family were all humanists, some of whom knew the word, some didn't at the time (my parents, my grandparents, my great grandparents), and whenever I came across the term myself consciously I found that it reflected the values I was raised in and have developed since. I think the culture of social solidarity that I grew up in and the enlightenment culture of my education are both equally humanist: certainly their basis was entirely non-religious.

Some have labelled many others in societies as tacit humanists. Does this seem correct to you?

There are a very large number of people who base their ethics on authority, commandment, hard rules, and discipline. They think the meaning of life lies outside of this world, and they think that science isn't the way to explain the world. They also think that certain supernatural explanations describe the world. But, certainly there are just as large a number who believe the opposite of this. For example, in Britain a good third of the population has firm humanist beliefs and values; but only about 5% of the population calls themselves *humanist*.

So, there is a big mismatch between the humanist values in practice that people have and humanist identity. It is not terribly surprising. The word "humanist" is not an identity label; it is a post-hoc word to describe a certain set of attitudes, values, and beliefs.

When I think about the advertising of the term "humanist" and other irreligious labels – though humanist is not necessarily irreligious, terms like secularist, atheist, agnostic, freethinker, and so on, in the United States, in the pulpits, those terms are generally denigrated by leaders of particular religious groups. Do you think that might have some part to do with the negative valuation humanist and other irreligious get?

I suppose so. We don't really use the word *secularist* in the UK to describe a non-religious person. That's really a North American thing. Obviously, atheists and humanists are denounced in the pulpits here but not many people are listening.

In the UK, early in the 20th century, there were Christian clerics and others who lined up to denounce humanism. Mary Whitehouse, a famous moral crusader who wanted to clean up public broadcasting, once denounced the 'gay, humanist conspiracy' in British life.

In a way, those religious denigrators of humanism do it a favour by bringing it to greater public attention. I don't see the term as something in disrepute in the UK. In some countries, of course, humanism and atheism are denounced from the pulpits, not just of religion, but of government. The Prime Minister of Malaysia, just two years ago, denounced 'humanism and human-rightsism, and secularism' as "incompatible" with Malaysian values.

This sort of denunciation hasn't done humanism any harm in the West.

What do you consider the more vulnerable humanist sub-populations in the world? I suspect some countries have populations with much less receptivity to humanism. That is, there needs to be a moderating and liberalising of religion as pre-conditions.

You're right. The liberal tendency in Europe and the wider West has certainly allowed humanist organisations to grow and flourish and humanists to live according to their consciences to a greater or less extent. In other parts of the world, specifically those countries with Islamic states, for example, it is very dangerous to be up-front about your beliefs if you're a humanist.

In some parts of a world, it is illegal to be a humanist openly. You cannot have a non-religious identity on your identity papers in countries such as Indonesia and Saudi Arabia. There are other countries where it is possible to exist, but not possible to organise: countries that don't let you set up NGOs around these ideas.

To the Islamic states, you can add countries like China and Russia, who also create great difficulties for humanists to organise. In other countries, it is possible to organise, in theory, but there is still official persecution and social disadvantage to being humanist or generally non-religious.

Of course, it is difficult for some people in many parts of the world. The International Humanist and Ethical Union publishes the annual **Freedom of Thought Report** detailing this. It looks country-by-country at the whole world to describe the social, political, and civil situation in those areas for the non-religious. You only have to read that through to see that in many parts of the world it is extremely difficult.

Speaking of organising, when you entered university, did you find some form of camaraderie, forms of clubs or groups, even attached to the university, that provided some place to meet people of like mind?

When I entered university, there weren't any humanist organisations on campus in the UK. They were strong in the 60s and 70s. Then they had somewhat diminished as religion diminished, actually, and humanism took a backseat to the other political and social issues. Now, of course, there are, in the UK, many more humanist societies on campus.

And I hope people do find a fellowship there, but, then again, I didn't really feel like I needed to. I was a student and came of age in that very very brief hopeful time between the end of the Cold War and 9/11, where everything seemed to be Utopian and rational progress the order of the day. Religion had all but disappeared. Humanist values, democracy, liberalism, rule of law, a rational approach to ethical issues, freedom of conscience, and so on, were about to go universal.

So, at that time, of course, humanism seemed normal and common-sense. In a way, they were common sense. I think very few people at my university college had any sort of religion. This is really still the case in the UK society now, of course. Very few younger people have any religious identity, practice, or belief, and levels are declining all the time for all the disproportionate media attention given to religions.

With respect to young people having those kinds of identities, what about the subject of faith schools? What is your opinion on that?

Of course, I am completely opposed to any state funded religious schools. Religious groups running these state schools is completely wrong. It was the campaign against state schools that first got me formally involved in the British Humanist Association. That's when I first joined as a member. The government in England (it didn't happen in the wider UK) had the intention to increase the number and type of state-funded religious schools and I thought that was madness.

The BHA was running a campaign against this and that activated me. Schools should be places, especially state or public funded schools, where future citizens come together to learn not just with one another but from one another, and grow up in that inclusive environment.

Public bodies like schools should not have a religious identity. They should be places that emphasise children's shared identity, shared values, commonalities. They should encourage intellectual inquiry with a range of religions and other worldviews like humanism. What is more, they should make sure that such things are learned about and explored critically. They should not be places where one limited belief on life, value, and meaning is given top billing.

Do you think in the long run those schools have a corrosive effect on the social order in the sense that individuals find themselves as somehow other than the wider society?

I think they do, especially in hyper-diverse societies like the UK, and many other countries that are open to globalisation – those societies which are becoming increasingly diverse, especially among people of parental age. I think in that situation, one in which you have many more different ethnicities and religions in society, to have them separate themselves from each other is foolish. In so doing, you compound the social, economic and cultural separation that those groups are already subject to, which is a big mistake for the long term.

You were a director of the European Humanist Federation. What tasks and responsibilities came along with that position?

The European Humanist Federation is an umbrella group for nationalist humanist organisations, not just in the European Union countries, but in the wider continent of Europe and, of course, including Russia. So, it really is an opportunity to do two things. One is to politically organise on the European level.

So I led delegations to international institutions like the Council of Europe, which is an important regional human rights body for the continent of Europe, and went as a delegate to other agencies like the OSCE, the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, in Vienna, to advocate freedom of religion and belief as a human right and equality and non-discrimination on grounds of religion and belief.

They are not just international norms, but European norms and values. Given a policy platform to humanist organisations, the ones that argue for equality, dignity, and freedom of conscience for everyone: that is an important function of the EHF.

Another important function is to bring the European humanist organisations together for networking and mutual benefit to learn from each other. Humanist organisations across Europe are not just providing political advocacy for the causes that they care about, but they are also providing a wide range of services such as ceremonies, pastoral support, counselling, schools, teaching, social care, old people's homes, confirmation ceremonies, and other educational work in public schools about humanism and non-religious approaches.

So, there's a lot of learning that the personnel at those humanist organisations can do for each other. It was very enjoyable. It was very much a lesson in how diverse humanist organisations can be, and also how unified they can be.

You were a director and trustee of the Religious Education Council, the Values Education Council, and the National Council for Faiths and Beliefs in Further Education. Between those three, what were the thematic consistencies in the tasks and responsibilities?

Interesting. All three organisations were and are fully inclusive of non-religious perspectives, but they were all involved in education in different ways. I think there's a strong case to make for every child to be educated in religious and non-religious worldviews, such as humanism, because they are the basis for so much of human culture: they tell the human story.

Children, everyone, need to have an understanding of these different approaches. Secondly, to understand the world today and to be local, national, and global citizens, young people need to understand the motivations of other people. Their reasons for acting and behaving as they act and behave. That's very important. Thirdly, it is useful to young people in developing their own worldviews, which will be quite syncretic and composite because real-life worldviews are.

To have access to these different ideas, thoughts, and values, to test their own against them. The work of the three organisations you've mentioned is vital. My role in all of these was to make sure non-religious young people or young people who would grow up to be non-religious were not left behind or left out of those subjects.

Although those organisations that you've listed all strive to be inclusive. In the UK as in many countries, organisations like them are dominated by the historic churches. There's also therefore a question of privilege that needs to be raised when you're involved there in addition to introducing non-religious elements. Also, it is to take on the privileging of those Christian views in particular.

What do you consider some of the more prominent examples of the privileges that they get?

For example, in schools in England and Wales, every school is mandated by law to have an act of Christian worship every morning. Now, many schools don't comply with this law. Some schools interpret it so that it is quite inclusive. But many comply. Perhaps, the most egregious example of religious privilege in schools, and also in general, is this disproportionate emphasis on curriculums and the philosophy in Christianity.

Of course, it has historical importance in Britain, but it is not the only approach to life that has historic importance. It has modern adherents in Britain, but the vast majority of people don't go to church or worship in a Christian place of worship. Most people don't have Christian beliefs. Young people certainly don't. They don't even have a Christian identity as many older people do.

Now, you are the president of the International Ethical and Humanist Union (IHEU) and chief executive of the British Humanist Association (BHA). Those are two very prominent

positions. In brief, what would you consider some of the general tasks and responsibilities? What is the personal importance to you?

Oh dear, that's a very broad question. First of all, on the international side, it is the duty of anyone who is lucky enough to have the sort of freedom that I have had in Britain in the 20th and 21st centuries to try and support people who don't have that same freedom, and don't enjoy the human rights that I think of as being universal.

My first involvement in international work and in IHEU was formed by that idea. I thought it was an opportunity to give something back to the world in light of how lucky I've been.

That is part of the work that IHEU does. It uses the capacity and resources of more developed humanist organisations to assist those who are more recently beginning and struggling in a different way. But I learned pretty rapidly that it is not one-way traffic.

I have a lot to learn from humanist organisations in those developing countries in Africa and Asia, especially from the way they frame humanism, think about it, and their experiences. I think in the end that ended up shaping a lot of my views. So, I think the importance of working in international humanism for me is that mutual exchange that occurred.

The networking of humanist organisations together from very different cultural contexts unlocks an enormous amount of potential from all of them. It is a fruitful exchange. Also, I am an internationalist in terms of my attitudes to the world.

I think that IHEU's support for international institutions, and that we're present at the UN and other international bodies to make a case for international human rights, in particular freedom of belief, is vital in a world where freedom of belief and freedom of religion, particularly freedom of beliefs, are under threat by the Islamic states, by China, by Russia, now by the US, and by other countries that don't want to accept them as universal anymore, if they ever did. That's the international work.

The importance of the British work is, of course, different because the UK is not a very religious society in terms of the population, but we still have a constitution and legal regime that privileges, in particular, the Church of England, but increasingly a large number of religions in a disproportionate way. I think it is important that the non-religious have a voice to challenge that, to make it clear that there is that enormous mismatch.

Even though many laws might seem to be medieval clutter or dead letters, as long as they are on the statute books like, for example, the law of worship, they have a direct and negative impact on people's lives. They disadvantage them. They create an unfair society. In the long term, such a society cannot be completely peaceful.

So, Britain is an important place to work for humanists.

The non-religious are, by definition, unorganised. They don't affiliate to one institution. As a result, in areas like ceremonies, funerals, weddings, in areas of pastoral support, in the hospital,

or at the end of life, they don't have access to the same resources as members of organised religion. I think there is an important role for humanism and humanists in Britain to provide those services, too. I think that's a role of central importance to the BHA today.

And of course, although most non-religious people suffer no social disadvantage, there are increasingly large numbers of non-religious people from very religious backgrounds who have a very hard time. We're there for them as well.

We talked about faith schools, assisted dying, secularism, humanism, previous roles, and so on. I want to cover some fresh territory with the campaigns of the BHA. With respect to assisted dying, physician assisted dying, or euthanasia, depending on the place there will be different terminology, what is the situation for assisted dying at the moment in Britain?

Assisted dying is unlawful across the UK – assisting anyone to take their own life remains a crime. There have been attempts in the Westminster Parliament to undo the criminal law in England and Wales, but they failed repeatedly.

An attempt to go via the courts has been partly successful in pointing to a possible future route for legalisation that would take place through the courts, but it hasn't borne any fruit yet. There would need to be further cases before that could be achieved.

Are there any countries that you note that are leading the way in assisted dying being legalised?

Every country is quite different. Approaches to assisted dying differ as to the history of medicine in that country, the different legal arrangements that suicide has been subject to in the past, and, therefore, that assisting suicide has been subject to the past. There are countries that see this as a medical problem. Others through the lens of equality. Equality of choice for people with, for example, incurable conditions. I wouldn't like to say there's one legal regime in the world that I would want to emulate.

When it comes to the UK, what I think will be best by way of a system here will be one where people, with the consent of doctors and being agreed to be of sound mind, can have medical assistance to end their own life at a time of their own choosing. I think people would need to be psychologically able to make that decision. I don't think mental illness should be a reason for having physician assisted suicide as it is in other countries.

I don't think it should be limited to people who are terminally ill, as it is in some countries. I think terminal illness is one dire situation. Another is incurable suffering – for example, in the recent case of Tony Nicklinson. He was not terminally ill, but was incurably suffering. He had locked-in syndrome. He couldn't move at all. He applied to the court to get assistance to end his life. He was unsuccessful. I think people like Tony should be brought within law.

I believe in the universal human right to dignity, and the right to choose to end your life with dignity, and this is universal. But I think there are specific legal arrangements that each country will put in place to realise this right in different ways for their population.

You have a campaign against pseudoscience through the BHA. What are some of the counter-forces against pseudoscience in the UK provided by the BHA?

All of our campaigning work in terms of political advocacy is about the involvement of the state. So, for example, we don't have a problem with people purchasing homeopathic remedies for their own use. It is unfortunate, of course, because their health will not improve as a direct result of taking those remedies. And it's good that there are organisations that campaign for public awareness of that.

Also, we campaign for the end of state funding of those things through the NHS. We support the work of specific organisations like the brilliant Good Thinking Society in the UK, which takes on these cases directly with individual NHS bodies. So that's an important area. We've also campaigned against the state funding of pseudoscience schools. Obviously, creationism was a big issue these last ten years in the UK. We've campaigned successfully for government guidance against the teaching of creationism.

Then we had a second successful campaign to put evolution on the curriculum for primary schools. That was a good development. That was to have each type of creationism funded in state schools. And we campaigned against the funding of Steiner schools in the UK in particular, which teach a whole range of bogus approaches to human biology and the environment.

Those are important campaigns. When you are dealing with the future generations that are upcoming in an ongoing knowledge economy, if they don't have the proper tools for understanding the basic principles, not even just necessarily the full details of the natural world through understanding the fundamental theories of different disciplines, it can be an issue. Are there any religious thinkers that have inspired you?

Generally, I think it is important that humanists remember the fact that a humanist approach to religions is that they're all human inventions. Many religions think of themselves as being divinely inspired or extra-human in origin, but I can only believe that they're the creations of human beings. As a result, they provide human reflections on the human experience, which, of course, have valuable things in them.

They are mostly versions of the same general principles, and this is not coincidental at all. They are the principles of non-religious people, as well, because they are the principles that human beings need to apply if they are not going to kill each other and have their society collapse. So I don't think humanists should be ashamed of finding inspiration in texts that religious people think of as being *divine*, because they really are just human creations after all.

Having said that, I can't say I have found anything particularly inspiring in them to compare with the humanist writings of classical India, ancient Greece, or ancient China, or enlightenment Europe and the world. Instead, I've found a lot that is uniquely pernicious. The idea of sin, when it was first explained to me, I found profoundly shocking. And the amount of damage to human beings by such a horrible idea as that does continues to horrify me.

Interview with Matthew Rothschild

February 11, 2017

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

To begin, how did you become involved in progressive movements? What was your moment of political awakening?

Well, I come from a family of liberal democrats, who are Adlai Stevenson democrats in Illinois. They worked for Adlai Stevenson in his campaign for governor and then in his campaigns for president.

My mum was a local civil rights activist in the 1960s during the Fair Housing Movement. There were clauses in real estate contracts in the suburbs of Chicago that prevented you from selling your home to a black person.

It was the same for Jewish people too, in some areas. I grew up in Highland Park. There were these things on the real estate documents which said you could not sell to a black person. My mother and father were lawyers and helped to change that. I was a precocious political geek. I was passing around literature for George McGovern in our town when I was 14, in 1972.

Later on I eventually I went to college. I was active in the anti-apartheid movement. I worked for Ralph Nader. There wasn't one eye-popping experience, but, certainly, when I went to college and studied political philosophy and got involved in the anti-apartheid movement I became a little more active.

For about 32 years, you were both the editor and publisher of the Progressive Magazine.

I was there for 32 years. For most of the last 25, I was the editor and publisher. I started there at 24 as an associate editor and worked myself up.

Who was running the magazine at that point in time?

A very interesting, intelligent, fascinating man name Erwin Knoll. He was a refugee from Austria. He and his father, mother and sister barely escaped the Nazis. He was extremely intelligent and gifted with language. So much so that when he was 15 in Brooklyn he was editing the high school paper in English. When he was in his 20s, he was working in the Washington Post. He was an amazing journalist and editor.

You have written some texts or books: *You Have No Rights: Stories of America in an Age of Repression* (New Press, 2007) as well as *Democracy in Print: The Best of The Progressive, 1909-2009* (University of Wisconsin Press, 2009). For the first text, where does that phrase come from – “you have no rights”?

This was interesting. This was a phrase. It was after 9/11 in New York City. There were some police officers who had apprehended some Muslim-Americans and brutalized them behind bars, banging their bodies against the wall, etc.

One of them said to the guards, “You’re violating my rights.” The guard retorted, “You have no rights.” That was such a stark statement in the United States, where we’re all supposed to have rights protected by the Bill of Rights. It stuck in my mind. We put it in the book.

Does this reflect the increase in hate crimes against Muslim-Americans as well?

The book chronicles the crimes against Muslim-Americans, Arab-Americans. People who look like a Muslim or Arab-Americans.

(Laugh)

(Laugh)

A lot of violence was going on, after 9/11. There were civil liberties infringement across the board. People being spied on. In the introduction to the first chapter, there is what I called the Edifice of Oppression, which George W. Bush helped assemble, when he was in power, through laws, through changes in policy, through executive orders.

I am worried that Donald Trump could seize upon, grab a couple fig leaves and destroy what we have left of our democracy.

Some of the picks for those that would be both powerful and in close workings with him. Many of them have not only anti-scientific views, but many deny substantiated enough things as to be basic truths such as climate change and evolutionary theory.

For climate change, how does this concern you when it still is the most powerful nation on the planet? Also, with respect to education, how does the denial of evolutionary theory concern you?

Both concern me greatly. To have an EPA, an environmental protection agency, that’s run by climate deniers such as Scott Pruitt. Trump himself is a climate denier. It is not just scary. It’s criminal, and this is a huge setback for everyone around the world that has been working so hard in this battle against global climate change.

That’s a major setback. We’re at a real crisis point for the country and for the world right now with global warming and climate change. Trump is setting us way back, turning the block way back. We need to turn the block to fast forward. This is a major setback. As far as evolution, it is the reign of the know-nothings. You have people who deny evolution of all things. You have Right-wing ideologues throughout the Cabinet.

Also, you have people, high-up, who have said vile things about freedom of religion as it relates to Muslims. Mike Pompeo, the CIA nominee, said, “Jesus Christ is our saviour and the only real solution for our world, and make sure that we pray.”

This is Christian fundamentalism. You have the same thing with Michael Flynn, who has been

nominated for national security advisor. He says not all cultures are morally equivalent and that the West is more civilized. This is the clash of civilisations, which even George W. Bush – for all of his faults – didn't dabble in.

He defended Muslim-Americans rights, at least rhetorically. This is a very alarming turn for the worse here.

What about the Supreme Court picks, which will influence American court decisions for decades?

That is another frightening prospect in the reign of Trump. That he will be able to put on 1, 2, or 3 new justices. He has vowed to have them in the mould of the most Right-wing justices that there were and have been. So, it is one reason a lot of people didn't like Hillary at all, from the Left, voted her anyway because they were worried about Donald Trump's influence on the Supreme Court bench. It looks like the imprint is going to be large there.

What about reproductive health? That is, what about reproductive health rights for women? As noted by Human Rights Watch, "...equitable access to safe abortion services is first and foremost a human right." So, within that perspective, positions against provision of safe abortions for women, especially in developed nations where the funding is readily available, it would be a violation of reproductive health rights, and so women's rights.

Women's rights are on the chopping block as well. The nominee to be secretary of health, Tom Price, has called Planned Parenthood's practices 'barbaric'. Everywhere you look across the board, the people Donald Trump has appointed to the Cabinet are appalling and Neanderthal.

So, every day there is a new headline about another horrible story about Trump taking the country.

Women, since 1973, thought they had the right to an abortion in the United States. They may wake up one day and may not have that. Donald Trump has been pretty blasé about that. He says it will return to the states. But is it a right or not a right?

The US Supreme Court in *Roe v. Wade* said it was a constitutional right. For the health department secretary to say Planned Parenthood practices are barbaric shows a level of ignorance that is astonishing since it gives reproductive health information to women and cancer screenings for women.

It's not like all they do is give abortions. It is hardly the majority of what they do. Millions of women have benefitted from Planned Parenthood. I hope they still will. But if these Right-wing ideologues have their way, and it seems they're having a heyday now, it is going to be a hard time for women, especially poor women.

Who are, of course, disproportionately minority women.

Absolutely. Trump went to Minnesota and Michigan at the end. He tried to rile up white voters about the refugees in their midst. He started a campaign, of course, against Mexicans and Muslims. It is all of a piece right now.

Also, I believe women got the right in 1918 in the UK, 1919 depending on the province in Canada, and 1920 in America. So, this pullback, this semi-repeal, somewhat already in culture, not necessarily in law or in funding at the moment, are deep concerns. At the same time, those would be coming from, as you noted, Right-wing ideologues. What about concerns in terms of reaction from those on the political Center-Left, Left, and Far-Left?

What I am hearing from people is a lot of fear, a lot of despondency almost, but then there are those who are being really wise about the need to get out there, act together, regroup, and resist, because that's really important. The idea that we need to give Donald Trump a chance and wait until he does something really atrocious is foolish because, number one, we know who he is, he's told us who he is, and he's telling us who he is by telling us who he's appointing in his Cabinet.

It might be too late before he does something really disastrous. Frankly, I am worried about fascism in the United States. Democracies can go down really fast. Chile had democracy for over a century, and it went down virtually overnight. So, the idea that we need to wait is foolhardy.

The first thing we need to do is prepare to protect people today who are going to be in his crosshairs on the day he gets inaugurated. That means we should prepare for sanctuary, for immigrants, for Latinos, for African-Americans, for Muslim-Americans, and for people who would be tops on his list.

Sanctuary cities, places of worship say they are sanctuaries as well, individuals should consider a possible new underground railroad. If police come to break up Latino families in the United States, 11,000,000 people he wants to deport, people of good will should make an effort to get to know their neighbours and to offer shelter.

That's what it is going to take. There is an effort in Madison, Wisconsin, here where I live, by one of the leaders in the Muslim Madison community, to set up an anti-hate registry to respond to the Muslim registry that Trump is proposing to have. If that doesn't wake people up to the fact that this guy's a fascist, I don't know what will.

What about reactions from one population that you did not note? You noted African-Americans, Mexicans, immigrants, Muslim-Americans, and so on. What about Native Americans and supporting them in various protests and various occupations against, one recent mild success, the North Dakota Access Pipeline?

Native Americans, and Indigenous peoples, are leading the fight in the world against climate change. It is important to support them in those efforts and link arms with them in those efforts. At some point, there is going to be a collision between Trump and oil people in his Cabinet (it is filled with oil people) and people who are protecting the Earth – chief among them the Native Americans – and others in the environmental movement.

That is going to be a confrontation that we need to be planning for and be aware of, and non-violently help our Native American friends and everybody in the environmental movement to prepare for this and to keep protesting non-violently to make sure Trump just doesn't roll over us.

There are similar pushbacks from Indigenous peoples in Canada (First Nations, Métis, and Inuit). Also, I think, some of the main things people can argue from, through simply writing articles and talking, is the UNDRIP and the ILO C-169, which are the two major ones that I know of that argue for and instantiate Indigenous rights.

Those might be two things people can look into.

The other thing is, Native Americans have good law on their side. There is good federal law that should be protecting Native law and land, and for clean air and water.

So, any thoughts or feelings in conclusion?

The rise of Trump corresponds to the decay of democracy that we've been seeing in the United States for a long time, and I think it was a contributing cause. We see capitalism devouring our democracy, where it doesn't deliver the goods to the people anymore – so they're resentful economically.

Thank you for your time, Matthew.

Interview with Nicole Orr - Branch Manager at CFI-Portland

February 16, 2017

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

Working with youth has always been very important to Nicole. In her teens, Nicole was an assistant team leader for a Search and Rescue Unit. There, she taught young people wilderness survival skills, as well as crime scene protocols. As an adult, Nicole strongly advocates the written word. She has helped run and participated in National Novel Writing Month for ten years and has been a freelance children's author for five years. Nicole moved to Oregon from Indiana because it was the farthest she could get from that kind of religious mentality without hitting the ocean. In 2012, Nicole temporarily moved to Brisbane, Australia, and became fascinated at the religious differences culture to culture.

As the branch manager for CFI-Portland, what are your tasks and responsibilities?

I'm definitely a Jane of all Trades when it comes to my job description! On a daily basis, my responsibilities tend to be putting puzzle pieces together. If I'm trying to get an event organised, that means I'm getting the speakers to talk to me and the venue to talk to the speakers. If I'm trying to create new flyers, I'm communicating with the rest of the Members of the Board on what's the best message, what is the best way to get our ideals out into the world? It really is just making sure events happen, questions get answered and that everybody on the Board stays on task. In a line? I'm the one keeping the Portland CFI ship sailing smoothly, while trying to make sure nobody sees me doing so!

CFI-Portland is comprised of humanists, rationalists, and sceptics. What are some of the common 'pulls' for people to come, attend, join, and stay in CFI-Portland?

There's a unity in being religious and going to church. There's a community to it, a feeling of, "Oh good, they believe what I do. I belong here." Humanists, rationalists, sceptics, all of them are still human and still want that sense of being among those they can relate to. This is the reason that Unitarian Universalist Churches exist. It's the reason that CFI exists. It's all in the hope of making sure that everybody has someplace they can go and say "I'm comfortable here. I belong."

What are some of the activities, educational programs, and lectures provided by the organisation?

Each branch of CFI is totally different when it comes to the events it chooses to host or the speakers it invites. Here in Portland, we thrive on both socialising with the already like-minded, as well as educating those that are religious and thus unfamiliar with us. Labels like "humanist," "rationalist," "skeptical," and especially "atheist" often come with a lot of negative associations. CFI Portland invites people to interact with those labels in lecture halls, at potlucks and picnics, or even just at a pub over a beer.

What are the positive changes seen from the activities of CFI-Portland in the Portland area?

I'm relatively new to the CFI Portland team, but one thing I can tell you is that every time CFI Portland inspires a new Facebook group for atheists, we've won something. Every time a campus is open to us having a controversial debate in one of their rooms, we've won something. Every time we can sell out on tickets to a Richard Dawkins event, we can sleep easy knowing that we're making a difference in our city.

Where can people find the campus outreach? How long have they been in place? How many members are there? What have been the impacts on campus for those universities with a presence to some degree?

CFI Portland has been focusing far more on its effect on campuses in the past several months. The main reason for this is that the younger demographic has shown themselves to be more open to conversations on controversial topics such as God, faith and an afterlife. With this in mind, CFI Portland has tried to host lectures and discussions in venues that appeal to the younger crowd. We have a monthly 4th Friday at the Lab event where a speaker presents a controversial subject. After it's over, everyone sticks around for a debate on what they were just presented with. There's beer, there's pizza and there's connection.

For example, on January 27th 2017, we're having an event at PSU called "The New Campus Thought Police." Two of the topics we'll be covering are safe spaces on campus and free expression. We're offering this free to all students, because we believe that their voices are some of the most important in Portland right now. We want to hear them speak out and inspire the older generation. ([Link](#) to January event)

CFI works for to fight against political turmoil and anti-intellectualism, and to protect reason, science, and civil liberties. How does CFI-Portland continue to fight against and protect those things, respectively?

We know what it's like to be a minority and so we want to speak for the minorities out there still in the closet. To this end, CFI Portland is an advocate for same-sex marriage. We continually endeavour to keep religion out of schools. We've even put forth a bill to give CFI secular celebrants the legal right to solemnise marriages just as clergy are able to.

However, if I had to come up with just one way that CFI Portland protects reason, science and civil liberties, it would be creating safe spaces for people. Whether we're meeting at the pub, having a potluck or hosting a Richard Dawkins event, we're inviting people to sit up, stand up and raise their voice. We're inspiring people to doubt, to question, to debate with others and to debate with themselves. Our job, in a nutshell, is to make Portland a place where "Keep Portland Weird" also means "Keep Portlanders Free to Decide What That Means."

Thank you for your time, Nicole.

Thanks for yours Scott.

American Soft Power and Abortion Policy Implications

February 22, 2017

Scott Douglas Jacobsen and Phoebe Davies-Owen

Times are changing, and fast, especially regarding reproductive technology, rights, and, in some dominant areas of the world, the repeal of women's reproductive rights and technology. It's rather extraordinary on both sides of the proverbial moral coin. Extraordinary to see the implementation of women's rights in areas of the world with women and girls in exceptional circumstances, e.g. war ravaged countries or cultures with female genital mutilation practices.

Extraordinary to see the repeal of those same rights, hard won and fought for, in countries with the wealth, freedom, and citizen leisure to implement them. The global situation is all over the map. Same with the United States. But there is a definite direction. This trend in the United States (US) is a reflection of the erratic and fecund hand of President Trump to issue executive orders. Recently, in a series of swift executive orders by the American President, the landscape of American political and socio-cultural life has begun to shift.

One huge detriment is the immediate decline in available money for women's reproductive health services in the form of funding for NGOs providing abortion services in the world, which were previously provided resources by the US. America is a nation of zeal. It wants to export its values, whether directly or indirectly. Whoever holds the levers of power and influence, they will set the tone for the values to be sent out into the world.

Any funding for reproductive health services is an internationalist value because, as stated unequivocally by Amnesty International (AI), "...equitable access to safe abortion services is first and foremost a human right." My Body My Rights was a campaign devoted to awareness of this, by AI. The Trump Administration defunding has been termed the "global gag."

That is, global reduction or elimination of funding for NGOs and other organizations providing abortion services, whether directly, e.g. safe abortions, or indirectly, information about abortions. When abortions are made illegal, women will resort to unsafe abortions, which is a common phenomenon because of the taboos against abortion as a super-minority procedure within women's reproductive health services. The World Health Organization (WHO) says, "Women, including adolescents, with unwanted pregnancies often resort to unsafe abortion when they cannot access safe abortion."

An estimated 22 million abortions occur each year with 47,000 women dying in complications associated with unsafe abortions. Not only outrageous in the number of deaths, some 5 million women suffer from disabilities associated with the unsafe abortion. This is, frankly, outrageous. It's at once unfair and unjust. Progressive actions in the advancement of contraceptive use have made "impressive gains" in the reduction of unintended pregnancies and, by implication and therefore, have resulted in the reduction of complications with unsafe abortions because women will not resort to them. Therefore, there has been more contraceptive use with unintended pregnancies prevented, which is a good thing for the mother and the child.

Simultaneously, there are still unsafe abortions with tens of thousands of deaths and millions of disabling conditions as a result of these risky procedures. “To the full extent of the law, safe abortion services should be readily available and affordable to all women. This means services should be available at primary-care level, with referral systems in place for all required higher-level care.”

WHO recommended, “Actions to strengthen policies and services related to abortion should be based on the health needs and human rights of women and a thorough understanding of the service-delivery system and the broader social, cultural, political and economic context.”

G. John Ikenberry in *Foreign Affairs* described how Joseph S Nye, Jr. created the term ‘soft power’ in the 1980s.

That’s the core of the conversation here. The ways in which American hard power, military and economic dominance since the end of the Second World War, and its flourishing exporting of its culture, its soft power, have consequences. “U.S. culture, ideals, and values have been extraordinarily important in helping Washington attract partners and supporters.” Ikenberry said. That is, American society arguably sets some, but not all, international standards.

If something happens there, then other international actors will justify their actions within the framework of behaviour set by the United States. Abortion remains the same. Yet, even with Northern Ireland and the Republic residing within the sphere of soft power influence that the US dominates, it still has the most restrictive abortion laws in Europe, more so than even Poland, which has traditionally taken a hard line on abortion.

Terminations within the jurisdictions of the island of Ireland are only permissible on the grounds that the foetus threatens the life of the mother, in contrast to equally as strict Polish laws where abortion is banned with the exceptions of: there being a severe and irreversible damage to the foetus, a serious threat to the mother’s health, or when pregnancy is the result of rape or incest.

Most abortion news has been distressing if not depressing, especially for women and girls, since even the ongoing 2010s. Chile has moved closer to decriminalization of abortion. El Salvador has a total ban on abortion, which is harmful to women and girls. The Dominican Republic Senate postponed the vote for decriminalization of abortion while women’s rights activists have been receiving increasing pressure from conservative and religious groups.

Even in the general Latin American region, the “draconian abortion laws and policies” continue to, punish millions of women. On the other side of the world, in East Asia, South Korea penalizes doctors for performing illegal abortions. There remain issues in Spain and Portugal too. Abortion is still a contentious issue. Portuguese women are required to pay for a termination and undergo rigorous testing.

There were plans in Spain to further tighten abortion accessibility – making abortion illegal except in the case of rape, risk to the health of the mother, and having two doctors verify the conditions – but were scrapped after numerous demonstrations in 2014.

The US may set an example, but it is rare that it is kept to, even in its own states. Neil Gorsuch, Donald Trump's nominee for Supreme court justice, has not made any current declarations as yet on his position on reproductive rights, but previous statements would suggest that he would take a stand against Roe vs. Wade. His positions on abortion are opaque, but possibly inferable from other views.

On assisted suicide, he views "intentional taking of human life ...is always wrong," according to reportage, on a book on the subject by him, by Forbes. And considering the views on abortion rights coming from Trump's administration, it doesn't hold out much hope for the women of America.

Religion News in Brief 24th February 2017

February 24, 2017

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

Pope seen as exemplar of religion

According to Crux Now, a Muslim refugee has proclaimed Pope Francis an example of religion to her. Nur Essa, a Syrian Muslim refugee, was surprised at the openness of the Pope to the Muslim refugee. That openness was expressed in tolerance of other faiths.

“(He is) very open to all of the cultures, all of the religions,” Nur Essa exclaimed, “and he sets an example for all the religious people in the world, because he uses religion to serve the human being.”

Essa described the Pope as a very simple and modest individual, which was seen by her, and her husband, as a positive thing. The family was chosen to see the Pope after travelling from Damascus to Turkey, and then Turkey to Greece.

Migration changes religion

The Anxious Bench reports that migrants carry their religion with them and the lands that the religions are brought to do not remain unchanged. The author of the report used Oscar Handlin’s *The Uprooted* to quote and make a point.

Handlin wrote, “Once I thought to write a history of the immigrants in America. Then I discovered that the immigrants *were* American history.” The report makes the argument that migration, firstly, encourages people to form new communities, typically religious.

As well, it tends to sever those individuals from their homelands, where there is a “special spiritual significance” to it. Both “taken together, these factors stir both religiosity and religious innovation.” So migration changes religion.

Religion education changes to happen in Greece

Greek Reporter states that the Greek Education Minister, Constantinos Gavroglou, announced the new changes to be made in the education surrounding religion in Greece in the near future.

The change will be in “History, Ancient Greek, and Mathematics.” Gerasimos Kouzelis, President of the Institute of Educational Policy, told the outlet, Proto Thema, “That there will be radical changes in Religion classes and in the beginning of the new school year.”

“We will try the new material in the new (school) year and make an assessment,” Kouzelis said, when he was explaining that “Greek Orthodoxy will be prominently presented, as it is the nation’s official religion.”

Politics in Brief February 25th 2017

February 25, 2017

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

Manning says politicians need to respond to populist sentiments, rightly

According to CBC, Preston Manning “who once successfully harnessed populist sentiment in Canada into political success is warning that much is at stake if today’s political leadership fails to do that.”

He is the founder of the Reform party. Manning asserts that the biggest difficulty for leaders in politics in the “disenchantment with government, mainstream media and politics” among the general citizenry. That’s understandable, especially the part about the media.

So that means politicians should address voter alienation while channelling “negative political energy” for more beneficial end goals.

Corbyn disappointed by Copeland

The Telegraph reported on the breaking of one of the “immutable rules of British politics,” which is that “Her Majesty’s Opposition does not lose a seat to the Government in a by-election.” It happened. Tears were shed. I’m sure. The rule parties did not win a sitting Opposition midway during the term.

However, the Conservatives did it with the by-election of Copeland, who took a seat held by Labour circa 1983 – when the constituency formed. It’s been called historic. Since the Second World War, the Governing party only won four by-elections “from the main Opposition.”

Copeland won for the first time in 35 years. Last time, it was the Tories capturing the marginal seat of Merton, Morden, and Mitcham (1982). ‘I’m disappointed about Copeland but I’m not standing down,’ Jeremy Corbyn said.

Sam Ronan: Millennial, Progressive Candidate

Paste Magazine stated, “Sam Ronan has become a dark horse candidate in the race for DNC Chair due to his bold, unapologetic progressivism. Thus far, he is the only candidate to openly pledge to get corporate money out of Democratic Party politics.” Some might say, “About time for unapologetic progressivism.”

The magazine notes that this is the bold, progressive politics that the Democrats have been missing in the United States. Ronan has had trouble acquiring money for his political work as an underground “grassroots insurgent.”

As well, this is different than those that are more established such as Keith Ellison and Tom Perez. The observation has been made that the “groundswell” of Millennials can change things. That generation is more progressive than other generations. It has the potential to change America, significantly, in a socially progressive direction.

Nagaland and the Constitutional Provisions for Equality

February 26, 2017

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

Nagaland, the land of naga or festivals, has been in the news, so it's a case study, too. What is it? It's a mountainous state in Northeast India and bordering on Myanmar. It's been quite well-known as the "State that always carried the image of treating women with equality," but the 'image' has been 'shattered' due to the 'revolt from the civil societies' based on women candidates attempting to run in politics. Presently, there is a concern over women's rights and gender equality.

What all of this means is that this is an area of minor regress in the political arena. It might seem obscure as a place, and it is, but women's rights matter in any place as their rights are often the most violated by individuals, groups, even states – at least as far as I'm concerned. As Human Rights Watch has succinctly, and pointedly, described:

...women and girls around the world are still married as children or trafficked into forced labor and sex slavery. They are refused access to education and political participation, and some are trapped in conflicts where rape is perpetrated as a weapon of war. Around the world, deaths related to pregnancy and childbirth are needlessly high, and women are prevented from making deeply personal choices in their private lives.

Of course, denial of equal treatment in political office isn't the same as child marriage, but the progression towards equality happens step-by-step. Politics is one area of middle-stage equality, where regression from it is still morally outrageous to principled people of good conscience.

A 57-year-old, Hukheli, who was awarded the North East Peace General Award in 2009 for her contribution to society "has been extremely active social activist and instrumental in several peace talks in the past three decades in Nagaland."

Yet, even someone as outstanding as a public servant and woman in the community serving from her 20s into her 50s, who has decided to run for political office, Hukheli chose to run as an independent candidate "from ward No. 9 of Dimapur Municipal Council elections" and this caused a raucous response based on 8 of 23 seats in the DMC being reserved for women. I feel the same in the opposing direction.

That is, I support Hukheli for the outstanding contribution to her local society as a civil servant and the other women who deserve those 8 seats. It's not equal, but it's a step in the right direction.

Civil society groups were up in arms over it. What's the deal? In my opinion, and just opining here, my moral sentiments are to have that number as either 11 or 12. There is a claim that there is a constitutional imperative for conducting local body elections, which is good because there is – it's the deal with the 8 of 23 reserved seats.

However, controversy comes from the State's attempt to bypass the constitutional imperative, which associates with gender equality and woman's rights. When the attempt was made to exempt the State from constitutional provisions, there was absurd gender inequality implications for women because the exemption was based on the rights of women.

Hukheli, emotionally and even crying and wiping away tears said:

When there is war...for example Dimapur is a war zone...then they call us to pacify the parties fighting to stop the war. I am the president of Naga Women Hoho also and I have travelled abroad also to talk to higher and collective leadership to stop the war at various times, to not to kill our own brothers and we used to tell them not to fight and maintain peace also. I have also negotiated with K for peace in the region, even have helped organization at various intervals.

...There are so many orphans and widows...women are the worst sufferers because its only we who can suffer. Men do respect us but when it comes to point of 33% reservation they oppose us.

When we were campaigning together for the past seven years together there were no issues, but as soon as we contest elections the protests started. All parts of Nagaland has become deadly against us and we don't understand if the implementation is only an issue. We don't know clearly what is it? Only for women reservation or anomalies in law in the state.

There was widespread rioting, even intimidation of female candidates; and this is, not so extraordinarily as in many societies, where mostly men run the civil organisations and standard institutions are found in the society. In the wake of that intimidation, the government "walked away" from upholding the standards for all citizens.

So the civil society opposition is, in actuality, comprised of men who run the civil society organisations, a male opposition to the 8 of 23 seats reserved for women. Nagaland's Chief Minister, DR Zeliang, resigned based on the fallout from anti-reservation violence. It's a male-dominated society, in other words, because men at the helm. It's the same standard, morally outrageous, shtick. What is women's empowerment, after all?

Toshinaro Imchen has written about women's empowerment. "Women empowerment, in the simplest of words is basically the creation of an environment where women can make independent decisions," Imchen succinctly declared, "Without having any restrictions on their personal development and accepted as equals in society."

Imchen wrote some general factual notes on women's equality within Nagaland in particular. "Generally, women are not allowed in the traditional village councils, they are not recognised or accepted in the inheritance rights, early forced marriages or employment and the likes." Imchen said.

“Although 1,110 villages in Nagaland have implemented 1/4th reservation of seats for women in the village development boards, most of it are only in papers as the mindset of women being inferior is still prevalent and taking up the accountability for its implementation is far-fetched.”

The main emphasis, according to Director of the Human Rights Commonwealth in The Tribune, is for the upholding of the law for all regardless of sex or religion. I agree with both The Tribune and Imchen. Why should there be unequal treatment of women in political and government stations? I haven't come across a good reason with evidence to date.

I have come across instances in news reports of the same occurrences in these themes and contexts. Women harassed and treated with separate and higher standards. My concern is the government is calling for the abrogation of an aspect of the constitutional framework.

The constitutional provision states that all ministers from the government who have assumed office can do so without “fear or favour.” Question remains, “Is the implementation there?” I mean, does it actually exist? If not, then it's just paper; it's either enacted and means something or is not enacted and does not mean anything.

So even if there's a paper trail, *potentiality does not equate to actuality*, but the structures are in place in theory without the requisite culture to support it – which is an exceptional case-in-point about the need for legal, social, cultural, and political structures to be aligned for equality to flourish.

Women's Rights News in Brief February 26th 2017

February 26, 2017

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

Amnesty International reports on women's rights

The Media Express reports that Amnesty International has released a 2016/17 report that described the “disturbing” situation in Iran with regards to women's rights. There have been crackdowns on women's rights campaigners and other problems for women living in those areas.

Those crackdowns have targeted both human rights and women's rights defenders. There has been the absurd increased in popularity associating human right defenders and women's rights campaigners, and so on, as criminals. Or their activities as criminal.

Even further, this lead to actions against activists. They were “subjected to lengthy, oppressive interrogations by the Revolutionary Guards.” Many women will not only be rightly remonstrating such unfair treatment, but will surely be asking themselves: A) Is this fair? B) How is this just? and C) How is this solving anything?

KQED provides some resources for Women's History Month

KQED reported on Women's History Month, which is upcoming for next month. It is a firm reminder of the need to work for women's rights. Some highlights from the resources were Elizabeth Cady Stanton and the right to vote.

There's been a strong focus on the right to education through Mary McLeod Bethune and citizenship education too. There's also been a focus on the civil rights leader Dorothy Height.

For African American lenses, there's Ella Baker who founded the SNCC in addition to the right to health care and the pill in addition to women's right to choose. It closes with Title IX and the 1972 education amendment. (All of the information is provided in the hyperlinked text at the start)

Participants in a Community of Practice meeting in Amsterdam focusing on strengthening girls' and young women's activism and leadership. Credit: Mama Cash

Funding for women's rights

50.50 has stated that, “We see examples of feminist organisations working well together where funders have needed to catch up.” The article describes numerous examples of ways that women's-rights organisations and coalitions can come together under one banner.

For example, for sex workers: there is the Red Umbrella Fund, as well as the FRIDA | The Young Feminist Fund. Both of which are participatory funds which assist the rights of sex-workers. Other general examples are face-value analysis that some governments are increasing funding for civil society.

The Global Philanthropy Project commissioned research that brought to bear the necessity for “power dynamics” to be “transparent and equal, and where [civil society organisations] can not

only co-design project design and implementation, but also overarching funding policy and strategy.”

South Dakota Anti-Science Bill 55 Shot Down

February 27, 2017

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

The National Center for Science Education (NCSE) has stopped another attempt—of the many tired, stammering, unrelenting attempts—to block modern education, burn it to the ground, and from its ashes build wrongheaded ideas for an educational framework for the young. The NCSE was working on behalf of South Dakotans this time. NCSE does important work, I think.

It continued its activist work on February 22, 2017 for South Dakota, too. In a report on the finalisation of this particular case, they said, “South Dakota’s Senate Bill 55, which would have empowered science denial in the classroom, was defeated in the House Education Committee on February 22, 2017.” Not bad; in fact, it’s another victory.

It’s another notch on the belt—a rather long belt—concerning attempts to introduce non-scientific ideas into the American educational system. But the scientific community, represented by the NCSE, continues to win.

The motion for passing the bill was shot down 6-9 during the vote. However, there was another motion to “defer further consideration of the bill” to a time that would ‘kill it.’ It worked with a 11-4 vote.

Senate Bill 55 (SB 55) stated:

FOR AN ACT ENTITLED, An Act to protect the teaching of certain scientific information.

BE IT ENACTED BY THE LEGISLATURE OF THE STATE OF SOUTH DAKOTA:

Section 1. That chapter 13-1 be amended by adding a NEW SECTION to read:

No teacher may be prohibited from helping students understand, analyze, critique, or review in an objective scientific manner the strengths and weaknesses of scientific information presented in courses being taught which are aligned with the content standards established pursuant to § 13-3-48.

I Googled ‘Legalese-to-English Translation.’ My computer froze. But! I have some introductory legal training – not really, so this makes some sense. Senate Bill 55 speaks to ‘common sense’ (not really), or the appearance thereof (really). ‘Science teachers should be able to teach science’ is, more or less, the purported translation. However, it doesn’t seem like the case. That is, as stated by the NCSE in the report, “South Dakota’s Senate Bill 55...would have empowered science denial in the classroom.”

As with the long ignoble history of attempts to move against the rapidity of scientific progress—book burning, training only the religious elite, restriction of education to men, the exclusion of important points in the scientific *oeuvre* that are politically unpleasant or theologically

incongruous—up to the present, here-and-now, the attempt at legal implementation of anti-scientific training seems like another instance to me.

Representatives from the Associated School Boards of South Dakota, the School Administrators of South Dakota, the Associated School Boards of South Dakota, the South Dakota Education Association, Climate Parents, and the state department of education testified—and that’s a good team roster—*against the bill*. They knew what was up.

They teach the kids, manage the community, and design the curriculum. Who would know better than them? I can’t think of many. Maybe, some of the super-involved parents. Even so, there was a “groundswell” leading up to the day before the event. These included “science education, civil liberties, and environmental groups.”

The Associated Press “reviewed the controversy.” Governor Dennis Daugaard saw the bill as not needed in South Dakota. “Teachers, parents, and scientists” took issue with SB 55. By this point, of course, it’s clear everyone, but a few, were against outright or took concern with SB 55. Some even called it “weasel-worded.”

There have been similar bills such as “Indiana’s Senate Resolution 17, Oklahoma’s Senate Bill 393, and Texas’s House Bill 1485. South Dakota’s was unique. It passed in the legislature chamber and the first to “die.” It is another bill of about 70 introduced since 2004. Thankfully, NCSE is on the case.

Religion News in Brief February 27th 2017

February 27, 2017

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

Pro-Trump pastor opines that lesbian community baiting straight women

According to [Pink News](#), a very prominent pro-Trump pastor, who is also a radio host, said softball prevented his daughters from becoming lesbians.

“Our two daughters played college softball... Every time I’d go to the ball games, I kept an eye on my daughters to see if they’d taken the homo bait yet... and they hadn’t,” the pastor said, “they didn’t have to because they weren’t cropped-haired wide-bottomed girls. They were pretty girls, godly women, they didn’t take the bait.”

The implication being that the lesbian community, *as a whole*, actively lures and recruits heterosexual women, according to the pro-Trump pastor. Others might doubt that assertion, of course.

Pope prefers atheists to bad Christians

[CNN](#) states that the Pope is concerned about *fake* Christians. He prefers atheists rather than fake Christians. The sermon was based on the Thursday Mass readings. It included parts of the Gospel of Mark.

Jesus Christ, in the Gospel of Mark, said, “It is better to be drowned than to cause others to sin.” So this includes the ‘encouragement of fraud by business leaders, agitation of students by teachers, and manipulation of people away from moral values.’

Pope Francis has been a critic of the excesses of capitalism and greed in business people. This critique is in line with his standard line of criticism. Those Catholic Christians who would be hypocrites to their creed would be less preferred than atheists to the current Vicar of Christ on Earth.

Australia’s most famous cult makes the news

[Daily Mail](#) reports that 14-year-old children – yea – were given LSD. That’s quite remarkable and tragic for children to be forced to have mind-altering substances without consent and in cult circumstances.

Those tragic circumstances were in Australia by their most infamous cult, apparently, called *The Family*. Creepy. Former police officer, Lex de Man, headed a task force to investigate The Family confirmed the LSD story to be true.

‘When they [the children] were administered the LSD at night and the room was dark, Anne would appear at the doorway with a bright light behind her with dry ice in a bucket... and through the hallucinogenic process they would wake up and believe they had seen Jesus Christ,’ Mr de Man said.

Arts News in Brief 28th February 2017

February 28, 2017

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

Bay of Plenty as arts and culture hub

According to Bay of Plenty Times, there are attempts underway to turn the Bay of Plenty area into an arts and culture hub. The goal is to boost creativity and innovation through the increase in the arts and culture community and tourism.

Dawn Hutchesson, a national creative sector specialist, said, “Many cities have had great success with creative strategies from London to Brisbane to Auckland.” That’s the goal for these too.

The arts and culture strategies will work together to boost the community and strengthen their economies in turn building “engaged communities and encourage innovation.”

St. John’s is a cultural “hotspot”

The Winnipeg Free Press reported that the St. John’s is a cultural “hotspot.” The owner of the Leyton Gallery of Fine Art, Bonnie Leyton, said, “We get loads and loads of tourists...They all comment on what an amazing city this is.”

Leyton noted that the place is a “creative place” with lots of storytellers. For Newfoundlanders, it is posited as a way, historically, to entertain themselves, which might go “back to the isolation of outport communities.”

It’s becoming more important too with the offshore oil earnings sinking. The arts became more important. 75,000 people visited museums in 2016. Indeed, visitors around the world come to gather some taste for the culture, according to Christopher Mitchelmore (Tourism Minister).

Australia’s most famous cult makes the news

The West Australia stated that on “Monday February 20, the Chamber of Arts and Culture WA hosted the 2017 Arts Election Debate as part of its Arts Improves Lives campaign.”

Four main political party representatives were present—Labor, Liberals, Nationals, and Greens. “The Chamber of Arts and Culture WA promotes, and advocates for, the importance of arts and culture,” which is a powerful statement for arts and culture in their 2017 policy platform.

Over the next four years, there will a whopping \$100 million injected into arts activities. Also, small investments will help with the cultural infrastructure for “access issues” and to “support economic, employment and tourism outcomes.”

An Interview with Adalet Garmiany – Founder, Curator, and Chief Executive of ArtRole

February 28, 2017

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

Adalet R. Garmiany is a British & Kurdish Iraqi artist, curator and Chief Executive/Founder of ArtRole, an International based contemporary arts organisation developing international cultural exchanges with the Middle East. Adalet has been forging important cultural and artistic relationships between Iraq, Middle East, UK, across Europe, USA, and the rest of the world facilitating artistic dialogue, exchange and mutual support.

You were born in Kirkuk, Iraq in 1973. What was the original interest in performance art, music, and cultural productions?

My interest in music most probably came from the Qadri Sufi ceremony. I loved chant and the Daf musical instrument, and I still play even to this day. The Qadri Sufi ceremony is considered one of the most ancient spiritual ceremonies for Kurds. I was fascinated by Kurdish traditional weddings, colours, dancing and singing – all of which live within me and has thus become a part of my work.

As for visual art, I was fortunate enough to be given a special talent: I was one of the most talented at drawing pictures in my primary school. I would draw relentlessly – I would even draw on walls without knowing how to use brushes and colour.

Then, in 1989, I joined the Institute of Fine Arts in Mosul. Regarding culture productions, after working with international NGOs in Iraqi Kurdistan in the Nineties supporting culture industry in the region, and after I moved to live and study in the UK, I realised, personally, making only artwork wasn't satisfying me enough, especially after seeing all the conflicts and devastation from my region.

The arts environment in the UK helped me realise that I wanted to work as an art director and curator. I subsequently founded and helped establish a number of art and culture groups and organisations, one of them being ArtRole.

Previously, you were a sculptor and painter. Why did you leave those for other interests?

I believe this has more to do with my nature. I have experienced all kinds of visual art forms as a painter and sculptor. In 1995 I considered creating an installation in Iraqi Kurdistan, then I started to read and write about postmodernism during the latter half of the Nineties whilst in Iraq, and in 2000 I started my BA in the UK and worked as artist which disclosed to me the various different ways in which I could understand, practically, new media and conceptual art.

Later I realised I wanted to work in a larger 'play space' with more materials. I did this by way of a mixture of performance, installation and sound art – all of which brought my spiritual background in unison with all these elements. I managed to express myself more through these

forms of art. Indeed, I expressed myself through the medium of public art on the street, art in nature, etc.

Also, you performed in a Qadri Sufi Group. You were a Kurdish drum (Dervish Def) player. What is the personal fulfilment and expression that comes from playing in a Qadri Sufi Group?

The area I grew up was dominated by the Qadri ceremony, and I was born in Qadri's Holy town in Iraq. This spiritual Sufi ceremony helped me keep my balance and it protected me from getting lost in the chaos of decades-long wars. These wars caused untold distractions to everyone living there, and fostered, of course, a totally violent environment with houses constantly ablaze. About 80% of my family were killed by the Saddam regime.

My entire childhood memory photos were destroyed. Many of my family members were imprisoned for no other reason than for being Kurdish. However, none of this makes me hate or vengeful because I didn't allow myself to be the victim of their fascist agenda. Instead, I have tried hard to understand what it means to be human and to act as human in the most civilised way possible. This method of spiritual living that comes from within has built my personality and has found its way into my art and culture work.

What was the inspiration for the foundation of ArtRole?

Well, I worked with many civil society groups and NGOs, in Iraqi Kurdistan and in the UK, and I established the Kurdish Tradition Dance Group HATAW. AHRK was the main idea that I acquired during my time in the UK which was inspired by the work I did with the French NGO 'Dia', which works in the Kurdistan Region, with the co-creator of the Kurdish-Yorkshire Music group.

Then, after the second Gulf war in 2003, when I was in the UK, I thought I needed to act internationally and get engaged with the conflict zone through the medium of art, culture and educational programmes. I believed strongly that through art I can have a role to play in those massive misunderstandings that exist within and between communities, especially the connection between the Middle-Eastern and North-Africa region and the western world.

Here the idea of ArtRole materialised, and with support of some passionate people such as Justine Blua, Mark Terry, Rob Gawthrop and Anna Bowman I established ArtRole on July 2004 in the UK in my small bedroom. This became an international organisation that extended across the globe.

ArtRole created platforms for hundreds of artists, academics, activists, diplomats, curators, art and culture managers, art students, human right and civil society groups, etc., in order to establish a mutual understanding and dialogue between them and local authorities in the hope of creating unity concerning the value of culture and how people are connected despite apparent differences.

What are some of the eventual emotional difficulties and rewards in the creation of artistic exchanges with international creative communities?

There are many examples through our twelve years of continued work. One of the situations that was emotional for me occurred in 2009 when I organised a Post-War Art & Culture Festival in Sulaymania city, in the Kurdistan region of Iraq, at a venue called the *Red Jail*. The Red Jail used to be the security prison for Saddam Hussain's regime which imprisoned thousands of Kurdish people – many of whom were tortured and executed.

The Red Jail became the National Museum and one of the main artistic spaces in the whole of Iraq. During the time I was at the Red Jail, a time in which my mother visited me often, I created a performance called "Memory Game" which featured over 50 people participating – including international artists such as Richard Wilson and Anne Bean from the UK; ex-prisoners; my mum, etc. It was a very emotional moment.

However, it was also rewarding to transform the building into a space which allowed people to freely walk back into it without coercion. Instead, people would enter for different reasons: to heal, to find optimism, and to look forward to a better future.

You are the founder & cultural director of AHRK (Asylum seeker & Refugees of Kingston-Upon-Hull). What is the content and purpose of this initiative?

I went to the UK as a political and humanitarian Refugee, and I was granted refugee status very quickly. In a matter of months, I met a very good amount of English people who suggested that I establish a group to support Asylum Seekers. The idea came together very quickly and I started a committee to run the group.

As culture director, I proposed that we organise a culture event to introduce the group and refugee-culture to the public, which was a huge success. So the main idea was to help those who needed help by assisting them claim asylum, help them find a job, and even help them enrol in college courses (and many others kinds of support that they needed).

Also, as the AHRK cultural director and ArtRole Chief Executive, what tasks and responsibilities come with these positions?

Such things I could list include, but is not limited to, helping people and communities despite their differences; creating a platform to bring people together; establishing dialogue; and establishing mutual understanding through the medium of art, culture and education.

What is the probable future of Iraq, artistically and culturally (even in its basic existence as a state)?

Because there is a lack of infrastructure and a lack of political and social stability, as well as a lack of economic sustainability, there will be no real artistic and cultural environments growing from inside that area.

Your work focuses on the cultural ideas from the Middle East such as the historical, political, religious, and spiritual views. What brings these together in your professional work? How do you unite these varied perspectives in productions?

In the middle east, the religion and political division have had an extreme influence on people's lives, especially those who are ethnic minorities. I have attempted to see these elements in my work through an artistic and cultural perspective.

The spiritual views have given me a balance in which to see the things having substantial affects on our lives in a wide, horizontal dimension. This is the amazing thing concerning art and culture, i.e. there is no limit one can reach and no limit to which things can be brought together. That is why I managed to go as far as possible in bringing together those elements within and to metamorphose them in different ways.

For those who want to work together or become involved, what are the recommended means of contacting ArtRole, or you?

First, they will need to ask themselves what they want to accomplish. Anyone who wants to work in ArtRole will need to have a strong motivation and courage to work in the kinds of environments that ArtRole works in, environments that are both challenging and effectuate different ways of understanding what is happening in a given environment.

The most important thing concerning people who join us is that they are contributing to these situations, contributions that have real affects on the lives of others. That's what we have been doing voluntarily for many years, and why we always welcome people who have an interest in joining us.

Thank you for your time, Adalet.

Science News in Brief 1st March 2017

March 1, 2017

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

Dengue vaccine future uncertain

According to Science Magazine, the very promising dengue vaccine is facing a topsy-turvy future within Brazil based on statements from scientists. This is owing to the dismissal of a prominent immunologist that was the oversight for clinical trial preparations.

The São Paulo government “removed Jorge Kalil as director of the Butantan Institute, following accusations of administrative wrongdoing leveled against him by a former colleague.” Kalil’s dismissal happened on February 21.

Anna Durbin, Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health in Baltimore, Maryland, said plenty of progress had been made with the leadership of Kalil and “this momentum may be ‘reversed by the removal of his leadership of the Butantan Institute.’”

Scientists work against biases

ScienceNews reported on the nature of a scientific study for scientists, and scientist biases. They’re human, too. The possible biases that can arise could ruin the validity and reliability of the eventual results.

An applied ethologist at the University of Bern in Switzerland, Hanno Würbel, said, “I think we’re getting increasingly better at identifying these risks and identifying clever and practical solutions.”

With each experiment and study, scientists work to identify and counteract their potential biases, and “other potential sources of bias,” for the best results that will be written up and presented to colleagues for scrutiny.

Trump signs bills supports women in science

CBC News: Technology and Science said, “U.S. President Donald Trump signed two House bills on Tuesday ahead of his first address to a joint session of Congress, both addressing the roles of women in science.”

It was a bill called Inspiring the Next Space Pioneers, Innovators, Researchers, and Explorers (INSPIRE) Women Act. It “directs NASA to encourage women and girls to study science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM).

In addition, it is to encourage women to take on careers in space and aerospace-relevant sciences. Promoting Women in Entrepreneurship Act was the second bill. It amends the Science and Engineering Equal Opportunities Act. The second bill is to “encourage and support” women in the laboratory and the commercial world.

In Conversation with Professor Jim Al-Khalili (Part 1)

March 1, 2017

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

Professor Jameel Sadik “Jim” Al-Khalili OBE is a British theoretical physicist, author and broadcaster. He is currently Professor of Theoretical Physics and Chair in the Public Engagement in Science at the University of Surrey.

Scott Jacobsen: One longstanding phenomena in the dissemination of pseudoscience and non-science into the popular culture is the deliberate construction or unthinking repetition of words with specific meaning outside of their proper context. Two prominent words are “quantum” and “energy.” With your expertise in physics, what are the proper definitions of quantum and energy in context, in physics?

Professor Jim Al-Khalili: The word *quantum* comes from the Latin *quantus*, meaning ‘how great’, and came into general use in physics in the first few years of the twentieth century to denote the *smallest indivisible piece*. Now, when we use the word ‘quantum’ we mean something very specific. A quantum process is one that follows the rules of quantum mechanics that were developed in the mid-1920s. Such rules differ dramatically from those of classical, or Newtonian, physics.

Particles are defined by mathematical quantities called probability amplitudes. In the quantum world, processes are probabilistic and fuzzy and behave in waves that are very counter-intuitive. What is fascinating is the boundary between the quantum and classical worlds. Ultimately, everything is made of atoms and quantum particles, but that does not mean that we see quantum behaviour in the everyday world.

The word ‘energy’ is in far more common usage and you might think it far less obscure. Yet, it is probably abused far more often than ‘quantum’. If you think deeply about its meaning you realise that the concept of *energy* can be quite slippery. But we can do a good job of tying it down. Firstly, the sum total of energy in the Universe is conserved. It cannot be created or destroyed. But it can be converted into matter, and vice versa.

We see this on the quantum scale where pairs of particles can be formed from pure energy and a particle and its antimatter partner can annihilate entirely in a puff of energy. We can also think of energy as the ability to do work. Energy can convert from one form to another and there are many different forms, such as light (electromagnetic energy), gravitational energy, kinetic energy (due to motion), sound etc. Some types of energy can be traced back to something more basic.

So, sound energy and heat energy are no more than energy of motion: vibration of molecules.

Scott Jacobsen: What are one or two common ways these are used to justify pseudoscience and non-science?

Professor Jim Al-Khalili: Well, quantum mechanics is weird and counter-intuitive; there’s no denying that. This has meant that those who don’t understand it have been happy to use it to explain anything they find mysterious, whether it is telepathy, certain types of alternative

medicine, like homeopathy, and all manner of spiritual phenomena. It's sloppy and intellectually lazy thinking to ascribe anything we don't understand to quantum mechanics.

Even worse, when it comes to energy, we encounter downright nonsense. People use terms like negative energy or spiritual energy or auras. These are not scientific and it is very easy to show that if any of these notions were true then they would mean a complete overhaul of the laws of physics. You can't have working cell phones *and* ghosts in the same universe.

Scott Jacobsen: Where are schools failing in combating this?

Professor Jim Al-Khalili: I think what is missing from school science curricula is teaching about the scientific method itself – that science is about testing hypotheses and theories to destruction, and being prepared to alter our views in the light of new evidence. That way, children can learn the difference between slowly evolving scientific consensus and evidence-based enquiry as opposed to mere 'opinion'.

Scott Jacobsen: What methods to combat this have failed?

Professor Jim Al-Khalili: I think that some societies have confused scientific debate and opinion, and the way scientific ideas evolve, with other ideologies that form a part of human discourse and thinking, such as politics, art, sport, religion, and a wide range of cultural views. They assume that science can also be a matter of subjective opinion, or that science is just a way of thinking and that there are always two sides to any argument, view or concept.

Science is *not* like that. Yes, some scientists can stick dogmatically to their theories, even in the light of evidence to the contrary, but that doesn't last. Science strives for objective truth. Unlike religious faith, a good scientist will give up his view if faced with evidence to the contrary.

We see for example broadcasters falling into the trap of always needing opposing views on matters. This may be useful in political debate, but not in science. A simple example is the following: If 99% of climate scientists argue that climate change is happening and due to mankind and 1% disagree, you should not be having a 50/50 balance in a debate.

Scott Jacobsen: What methods have been successful?

Professor Jim Al-Khalili: I don't know about the US, but in the UK, school children are taught evolution in science lessons. They learn that it is not 'just another theory' alongside religious beliefs like creationism. Sure, they should learn about the various ideological views people in different cultures and times have held, whether the Abrahamic religions or capitalism, communism, fascism, liberalism, humanism etc. But thankfully our education system does not lump the scientific method in with these.

Religion News in Brief 2nd March 2017

March 2, 2017

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

Islam to become largest world religion by 2070

According to the Daily, the sole religion with a growth rate faster than the global population is Islam. It has an expected growth between 2010 and 2050 of 73%. It contrasts with only 35% for the global Christian population in that same period.

The main growth centres are going to be Bangladesh, India, Indonesia, and Pakistan. The new research comes from the Pew Research Centre, which operates out of the United States of America.

“The estimations, compiled from figures from a number of Pew reports, found if both faiths continue to grow at the same rate, [then] there will be” approximately 2.76 billion Muslims and 2.92 billion Christians by the year 2050. Islam will have a bigger following than Christianity by 2070.

Hate crime on Pagan shop

CBC News states that an attack on a Pagan store can be considered a hate crime. A University of Winnipeg religion professor stated that the attacks on a West End shop, which sells spirituality products, can be considered “hate crimes.”

A self-identified witch, Dominique Smith, owns the alternative spirituality store, Elemental Book & Curiosity Shop. It was “spit and urinated on, broken into and had its windows smashed over the past six years.”

Smith wanted the acts investigated as a hate crime—the recent incident. Winnipeg Police Service said a hate crime that involves property requires the “commission...to be based on bias, prejudice or hate based on religion, race, colour or national or ethnic origin.

Believers’ ‘Black Market’ in China

The Globe and Mail reported that “Under President Xi Jinping, followers of many faiths have been pushed ‘to operate outside the law and to view the regime as unreasonable, unjust, or illegitimate,’ says *The Battle for China’s Spirit*.”

The Battle for China’s Spirit is a recent report from Freedom House, which is an NGO based in Washington. It advocates for civil liberties. Based on the report, Christians are “barred from gathering for Christmas” and “Muslims are jailed for praying outdoors.”

Buddhists are forced to take patriotic re-education. Officials in China have banned holiday celebrations and have had places of worship desecrated. The security forces throughout the country “detain, torture, or kill believers from various faiths on a daily basis.”

Education News in Brief March 3rd 2017

March 4, 2017

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

President Trump touts school choices

According to the Catholic News Agency, President Donald Trump on March 3 praised a Catholic education system while visiting a Florida Catholic school. He is in support of school choice programs.

Trump said, “You understand how much your students benefit from full education, one that enriches both the mind and the soul. That’s a good combination,” to Bishop John Noonan of Orlando.

President Trump “toured the pre-K-8th grade school, located in Orlando’s Pine Hills neighbourhood, and spoke with students, who presented him with two cards.” He reportedly told a girl “she’s ‘gonna make a lot of money. But don’t run for politics.”

The Assembly of First Nations meet on the educational gap

CBC News: Calgary reported that the “Liberals pledged billions” to fix the education problems for First Nations. Hundreds “of First Nations leaders across the country are gathering in Calgary to talk amongst themselves about how best to tackle the perennial problem of education on reserves.”

The Assembly of First Nations national forum has been examining the educational problems in addition to novel education models. The goal is to close the gap in K-12 and postsecondary education between non-Indigenous and Indigenous students in Canada.

Economist, Don Drummond, estimated First Nations schools get 30% fewer funds compared to others in the provincial jurisdiction throughout the country. Darren Googoo, director of education for the Membertou Mi’kmaq First Nation in Nova Scotia, said, “The goal is to create and open a dialogue amongst First Nations across the country.”

Sex education to be compulsory in every English school

Elite Daily said, “In awesome growth and progress news, the UK just announced that in 2019, sexual education will be compulsory for every English school and the reasoning is beyond amazing.”

It is an amendment to the Children’s Work and Social Bill, which required the children from age 4 and up to have education on healthy relationships. As the pupils develop, their sex education will develop along with their age to be appropriate to that stage of development.

Some of the curriculum will focus on the online world as well. Emphasis on the online world will include teaching students “how to stay safe and smart in an ever-increasing online world.”

An Interview with Roy Speckhardt – Executive Director of the American Humanist Association

March 4, 2017

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

First, there's so much terminology on the Web: secularist, progressive, secular humanist, humanist, Unitarian Universalist humanist, atheist, agnostic, even bright and freethinker. What is the standard, straightforward definition of a humanist?

Humanism is the concept of being and doing good (for yourself and others) without reference to any gods or other supernaturalisms.

What is “humanist” in your sense? Definitions depend on individual.

In my book, *Creating Change Through Humanism*, I explain that humanism rests on three pillars. First, humanism's epistemology, or how humanists know things, is the scientific method, relied upon because experience proves it to be the best method for gaining reliable answers to any questions. Second is our compassion for humankind and the world at large. Third is our egalitarianism. Both compassion and egalitarianism arise from our empathy for humanity.

When did this become the worldview for you? The preferable philosophical and ethical take on the world and human beings' relationship with it. What was the moment or first instance of humanist awakening?

Becoming a humanist was a gradual process for me. As I learned more about the world, I replaced religious stories and concepts with scientific theories and facts. As I learned more about people and the problems many confront in their lives, the more I recognised our inherent equality and developed empathy and compassion for them.

What seems like the main reason for people becoming humanists in America?

With the “nones” as one of the most rapidly growing segments of US society, life without faith or religion is becoming normalised. Humanism provides the answer to those asking, “Now what?”, for humanism is the reality based philosophy that points folks in a direction of progress for ourselves and others.

What is the best reason you have *ever* come across for humanism, e.g. arguments from logic and philosophy, evidence from mainstream science, or experience within traditional religious structures?

There are so many good arguments for humanism and for discarding religion in favour of other non-theistic approaches. One can start with the problems of religion, such as their disprovable mythologies, contradictory claims, violent histories, corrupt leaders, or simply outdated approaches. Or one can start with humanism itself recognising its firm basis for provable

thinking, focus on making life demonstrably better for people, and recognition of our society's need for better, fairer, ways to live.

You are president of Washington's DC Atheists, Humanists and Agnostics & the executive director of the American Humanist Association. What tasks and responsibilities come with these distinct positions?

As leader of the local group of 1,500 DC Atheists, Humanists and Agnostics, I have so far helped the group focus on downtown social events like happy hours, dinner meetups, and occasional entertainment events. I intend to expand the group to include more traditional lecture and discussion events in the near future.

As executive director of the American Humanist Association, I spend about a third of my time engaged in writing and coordinating outreach efforts to help increase public awareness of humanism. I spend another third of my time managing staff and working with leadership groups that fall under the AHA umbrella of organisations.

The last third is spent more directly outreaching across the country via local group lectures, media appearances, conference talks, and one-on-one meetings with members, political leaders, and allies.

What are some weekly or monthly, and popular, activities provided by Washington, DC Atheists, Humanists and Agnostics?

Our first Wednesday of the month happy hour at James Hoban's Irish Pub in Dupont Circle is our most consistent and popular event. While folks are united by their rational approach to life's big questions, it's populated by who are diverse in their ages, ethnicities, and backgrounds.

The American Humanist Association is huge, just really big. What are some of the demographics of the organisation? Who is most likely to join either the Washington, DC Atheists, Humanists and Agnostics or the American Humanist Association compared to other American sub-populations? (Age, sex, sexual orientation, and so on.)

The American Humanist Association, like just about all organisations whose base of supporters were developed primarily through direct mail, has its demographics skewed older, whiter, and male(r). But in recent years as online members/supporters went up over 50,000 and the numbers on Facebook over half a million, the demographics have come closer to the general population.

We are planning on a survey for later this year, so that conclusion relies on experience rather than hard numbers, for now. Judging by past surveys about half of humanists are dedicated Democrats, but the other half, instead of being Republican tend to be independents—only 2-3% of our members vote Republican.

What have been the largest activist, educational, and social activities provided by both organisations? What have been honest failures, and successes?

The American Humanist Association has had a string of significant impacts that span the gamut from events like our participation in Reason Rallies, that drew thousands to the National Mall, to our 75th Anniversary Conference last year in Chicago that attracted several hundred members and awarded luminaries like Jared Diamond, John de Lancie, and Medea Benjamin.

We've had victories on Capitol Hill with the introduction of Darwin Day legislation and the passage of the International Religious Freedom Act and its specific protections for humanists and other non-theists. We continue our remarkable ninety percent win rate on our legal cases that most frequently challenge religious discrimination in public schools.

And the numbers keep skyrocketing for those making humanist donations, chatting rationally online, meeting non-theists locally, leading secular invocations, celebrating humanist weddings, and more.

We haven't always been successful in our efforts, such as when the AHA closed a New York City bioethics office, when we lost our "Under God" case against those words appearing in our Pledge of Allegiance, or when we failed to convince any of the current nontheists in Congress to be completely open about their nontheism, but I see such setbacks as overwhelmed by our successes, which gives us reason to be optimistic for the future.

My sense of the public perception of humanism in the US, and agnosticism and atheism is either not knowing about it or disliking it. What's behind this?

Among the faithful, there's a deep-seated fear of those who claim to be good without a god, both because people fear the unknown and also because they feel threatened by a concept that is diametrically opposed to their own faith that all goodness derives from their god. Just existing, being good without a god, suggests there's something fatally wrong with the faithful's faith.

Even worldly people ask me how I can be moral without a biblical foundation because they believe that is the only foundation for morality, not realizing the lessons of psychologists like Piaget who explain how nearly everyone develops morality through experience, not ancient books. As more and more atheists and agnostics come out and people get used to their presence, the prejudice will fade.

Who/what are the main threats to humanism as a movement in the US?

Donald Trump and the many Religious Right supported leaders he's put in place are a dire threat to progress for humanists in the US. Not only are we already seeing efforts to reverse gains toward church-state separation, but the intentions to go further than ever before have been made clear.

Among the worst of them is the legislation supported by the Administration that would repeal the Johnson Amendment, which prevents churches and other religious organisations from getting involved in electoral politics. If the repeal went through, it'd be like Citizens United on steroids as all current campaign finance laws become superseded by the change.

Most electoral money would be instantly funnelled through the churches where they'd be limitless, anonymous, and tax deductible. The AHA held briefings on the Johnson Amendment issue in both the House and Senate, and we are poised to mobilise numbers to prevent its repeal.

How can people get involved with Washington, DC Atheists, Humanists and Agnostics or the American Humanist Association?

Folks can get involved with the AHA in many ways, perhaps none more impacting than being counted as a member by joining online. People can follow us on Facebook, Twitter, and other social media. Those interested in meeting people face to face can join the DC AHA meetup online, or seek a local group elsewhere in the US. Others may want to use a celebrant for life events or inquire about becoming one themselves. There's also opportunities for interning/volunteering.

Thank you for your time, Roy.

Thank you for your outreach.

Philosophy News in Brief March 5th 2017

March 5, 2017

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

Philosophy still a “great major”

According to Patch, an oft labelled “useless, pretentious, counterproductive, ridiculous and self-indulgent” undergraduate major might have a strong defender.

As per a new website, created and maintained by Jack Weinstein, professor of philosophy at the University of North Dakota, argues that philosophy continues to be a “great major.”

On the front page, it says, “Philosophy is a great degree to help you get your first job...It’s a fabulous degree to help you get your second, fifth, and eighth.”

New course incorporates video games into philosophy

Stevens Point Journal reports that many video games such as “Bioshock Infinite,” “The Legend of Zelda,” and “The Walking Dead” are not only popular activities for younger people.

In fact, they can even be used to teach how they “influence thoughts, morals and decision-making.” The University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point is offering a course entitled “Video Games and Philosophy.”

This will be offered to high school students, or those of that age, “to both play and think critically about popular video games...Campers will develop argumentative, rhetorical and logical skills to become better at written and oral communication.”

The philosophy of Westworld, robot rights and more

According to the A.V. Club, Westworld is great, enjoyable science fiction with many layers of philosophical debates. It looks at the nature of consciousness, free will, and so on, in between in its many shootout scenes.

One main question, for example, is “whether the park’s hosts should be thought of as sentient.” Another is the “debate between predestination and free will.” Do we have a choice in guiding our destiny, or not?

What does that mean for morality? As well, the show’s philosophical bent looks at the nature of consciousness and free will as they relate to suffering. Do we need suffering for consciousness or free will?

An Interview with Anders Stjernholm

March 7, 2017

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

Anders Stjernholm is Chairman of the Atheistic Society and outspoken critic of religion and belief, or as he puts it “*fervent anti-theist*”. Anders is also a stand-up comedian who debuted in 2005 on *Comedy Zoo in Copenhagen*.

What’s the short of the long regarding coming into atheism for you?

I was raised as pretty standard Danish “culture christian”. My family used to be members of the state church, which is called *folkekirken* (people’s church), but we only attended church for ceremonies (we didn’t even attend on Christmas day).

In my early 20’s I started observing the effects of religion on society and on the individual. Adding up the score pretty obviously pointed towards the negative. Two of the most obvious effects were the stifling of free expression and critical thinking.

That interest initially found expression in my jokes – I do comedy as a stand-up comedian. Later, however, it brought me to start working for the Atheist Society ([Ateistisk Selskab](#)).

In your experience, what seems like the main reason for people becoming Atheists?

I think there are two main reasons:

- 1) The claim of divinity doesn’t bode well with the Danish youth, who are rather well-educated with a healthy dose of scepticism.
- 2) The use and personal association with the rituals provided by the church since the 70’s now have secular alternatives with increasing popularity. For instance, adulthood can be celebrated with a mini-camp on a humanistic platform with a ceremony in which young people present their newly acquired insights to their families, and new children are often given their name which is celebrated without clergy and temples.

What makes atheism seem more natural, and simply true, to you than other worldviews?

I see the methods of critical thinking and the value given to evidence and empiricism as the most successful “dogmatic” mindset. When these methods are applied to the claims that gods exist, that religion is advantageous for the individual or beneficial for society, etc., the answer is a rather clear “false”.

What is the best argument for atheism you have ever come across?

I see it as a collection of arguments that make a strong case for the unlikelihood of the religious claims on all levels of the debate. The validity of the scriptures, the effects of practicing your religion, the cultural influence of religion and, as of late, I have really come to acknowledge the psychological research on the cognitive reasons and expressions of religion.

You are the chairman of the Ateistisk Selskab (Atheistic Society/Danish Atheist Society). What tasks and responsibilities come with being the chairman?

My work focuses on communication – representing the arguments and opinions of the group – and also building the organisation.

What are some of the demographics of the organisation? How many members are in it? Who is most likely to be an Atheist and join the organisation?

We have just under 1000 members. Half live in Copenhagen, and most of the rest are concentrated around bigger cities. 85% are men – how we can appeal more to women is a challenge for the future.

Has the group taken up any activist causes? What were they? What was the outcome?

We have made the website www.udmeldelse.dk in which we have made it easier for Danes to cancel their membership of the state church. Most are registered as members by default – this happens when people are baptised and we know from surveys that a significant proportion of these members do not wish to be so. The website was launched in March 2016. We just learned that the website has resulted in a record number of members leaving the church last year: 25.000 people. We hope to improve on that number next year.

How can people get involved with Ateistisk Selskab?

You can contact us on info@ateist.dk. We have a pretty quick response rate. More info on www.ateist.dk.

Twitter: @ateistdk

Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/ateistiskselskab.dk>

Thank you for your time, Anders.

License and Copyright

License



In-Sight Publishing and *In-Sight: Independent Interview-Based Journal* by Scott Douglas Jacobsen is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License.

Based on a work at www.in-sightjournal.com.

Copyright

© 2012-2017 by Scott Douglas Jacobsen, and *In-Sight Publishing* and *In-Sight: Independent Interview-Based Journal* 2012-2017. Unauthorized use and/or duplication of this material without express and written permission from this site's author and/or owner is strictly prohibited. Excerpts and links may be used, provided that full and clear credit is given to Scott Douglas Jacobsen, and *In-Sight Publishing* and *In-Sight: Independent Interview-Based Journal* with appropriate and specific direction to the original content.