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Scott Douglas Jacobsen



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Scott

International Women's Day and Women's History Month – A Canadian's Take, and Give

March 8, 2017

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

I feel happy at the advancement of women in the important areas of life: arts and culture, education, politics, science, and religion. In order of presentation: women in the arts and culture, from the Canadian perspective – that I know best and not even that well – which is, frankly, individual arts and culture incubators – both of which herald in new eras in Canadian society such as Alice Munro, Joy Kogawa, Lee Maracle, Margaret Atwood, Nellie McClung, and some others.

For specific sectors of Canadian society, women and girls have earned (e.g., Lee Maracle, whose narratives focus on Indigenous women and feminists), through hard work and hardship, the broad praise of the arts and culture community in Canada, especially the longstanding, prominent, and productive hands of Alice Munro and Margaret Atwood, both of whom appear to garner respect and dignified approval outside of the borders of Canada. A mark of truly outstanding lives.

Some women, recently, up-and-coming such as Madeleine Thien, who won the prestigious Giller Prize, recently, come to the fore. As well, the intimate work written by Tracey Lindberg entitled *Birdie*, which tells another important Indigenous story. Arts and culture remains integral to the Canadian identity, which seems plural—dominated by some based on time and quantity of people with the history—and more, and more, diversified in voices.

Education remains another important domain of female, or women's (a more personal and preferable term), achievement in this sweet country o' mine. In the world, women tend to have fewer opportunities for education; and if chances for education, then fewer odds of advanced education without discrimination in it. **Women and Education** by Statistics Canada states:

Women have progressed considerably in terms of education and schooling over the past few decades. Just 20 years ago, a smaller percentage of women than men aged 25 to 54 had a postsecondary education...Education indicators show that women generally do better than men. This gap in favour of women is even noticeable at a young age, since girls often get better marks than boys in elementary and secondary school.

As well, more girls than boys earn their high school diploma within the expected timeframe and girls are less likely to drop out. More women than men enrol in college and university programs after completing their high school education. A greater percentage of women leave these programs with a diploma or degree.

Most Canadian praise this, and share concern for boys and young men in education—which seems like a valid, important concern in developed nations, but, in an international analysis of the issue—on International Women's Day, Canada does well in the education of girls and women in contrast to other nations.

In politics, ‘because it was 2015,’ the Canadian Prime Minister instantiated both the tactical political and equality maneuver for the first 50-50 sex-split Cabinet in Canadian history. And, as far as I can discern, the first legacy Prime Minister—following in the cut brush of Pierre Trudeau, or his father—in Canadian history is the second Trudeau, the historic, and politically savvy motion, presented Canada to the world as a place of political equality.

When I think of science, some women exist in the history books, who seem less known—and I had to look some up, such as, in 1938, Elsie MacGill became the Chief Aeronautical Engineer at Canadian Car and Foundry where she was selected to assist in the construction of the Hurricane aircraft for the British Royal Air Force and Roberta Bondar with extensive training in neuroscience and medicine and selection for NASA based on the numerous academic credentials earned by her.

Lastly, religion, or irreligion for those so tended, Marie Morin was an exemplar. One woman who was the first Canadian-born woman that became a religious sister. In fact, she became a bursar and superior at Hospitalières of Montreal. Lois Miriam Wilson was the first president, who was a woman, of the Canadian Council of Churches. And to the famous Canadian atheists, many exist: Kathryn Borel, Patricia Smith Churchland, Wendy McElroy, Hannah Moscovitch, and, of course, the wonderful Reverend Gretta Vosper.

Whether arts and culture, education, politics, science, and religion, International Women’s day as one peak to Women’s History Month is an important reflection, and, from one obscure Canadian’s view, this appears praiseworthy to me.

Politics News in Brief March 8th 2017

March 8, 2017

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

Israeli women in politics surpasses US

According to Jerusalem Post Israel News, on International Women's Day, there is an important note on women in politics for reflection, which is the fact that a total of 33 female MKs serve for the Knesset.

One study, published last year by Ofer Kenig at the Israel Democracy Institute, described the representation of women in the Israeli Knesset, which showed it is higher than the US Senate at 20% and the House of Representatives at 19.4%.

In other words, "...Israel only slightly lags behind the OECD average when it comes to women's legislative representation."

Russian energy minister declares non-interference in US politics

CNBC reported that the Russian energy minister denied the allegations of Russian interference in the American political system. Alexander Novak, the energy minister, said, "We did not interfere in U.S. domestic politics..."

"...and we prefer that every country be independent in resolving its domestic issues" Novak continued. It is in the wake of the OPEC output cut, and Novak "talked about Russia's cooperation in the process, calling the coordination between OPEC and Non-OPEC producers historic."

Apparently, this is historic because of the dual OPEC/Non-OPEC countries as signatories to the agreement.

Obamacare, but worse

Salon stated that after "more than half a decade of breaking promise after promise to produce some sort of legislation to "replace" the Affordable Care Act, congressional Republicans have finally unveiled an actual health care bill. And boy oh boy, is it terrible."

Paul Ryan, house speaker, served legislation that "replicates Obamacare." However, it is significantly worse than Obamacare in important ways. Fewer citizens will be covered. There will be less magnanimous subsidies for citizens.

The sick and the poor will be worse off. The rich will have tax cuts. The health insurance companies will get big doled out monetary funding, so the rich will be better and the poor will be worse with this system.

An Interview with Tyler Owen, President of Tri-State Humanists

March 10, 2017

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

What's the short story regarding your coming into humanism?

I've found that many Humanists come from a Christian background, and I'm no exception. I was raised as a conservative Christian in Middle-America, but even as a child I found that my church seemed more interested in self-aggrandising and sermonising than in applying itself towards making the world a better place.

In college, I was exposed to a wide variety of new secular and progressive ideas that really resonated with me for the first time. I lost my faith and, ironically, found a new sense of self and purpose in atheism. But for me, atheism wasn't enough. It described only something that I *didn't* believe. I didn't believe in God anymore, but there were plenty of things I *did* believe in. I still believed in freedom and equality, in providing well-being to those in need, and in a pursuit of knowledge through science.

Eventually my wife and I moved to Burlington, Iowa and we met a group that seemed aligned with those same ideals. They called themselves Humanists and that was one of the first times I had been exposed to the term. It just seemed like a perfect fit. We started coming to meetings and getting more involved and now we help to organise and plan for the group's future.

What makes humanism, or secular humanism, seem more natural to you than other ethical and philosophical systems?

For me, Humanism is the perfect intersection of emotion and reason, and it is very utilitarian in that respect. Empathy for other humans and the world we inhabit is the primary emotional driver that guides us, but we are also willing to admit that we are fallible and susceptible to bias. So, we must rely on science and reason to translate our empathy into action. Many other ethical and philosophical systems rely on too many assumptive externalities. They embrace our human fallibility as some sort of positive attribute, or portray it as some impassible barrier between us and a greater future of our own design. Humanists refuse to accept this. We desire to maximise happiness and minimise suffering for this one life that we have. We may not always know the best path to achieve those goals, but relying on science and reason are the best ways we know how.

You are the President of the Tri-State Humanists. Although, as we discussed in correspondence, the term "President" is difficult with the group being small. Nonetheless, you have noted the discussion group nature of the Tri-State Humanists. How do you lead the discussions?

For our group, the term "president" is more of a formality. I'm more of a spokesperson and contact representative. I think that works well for us since we are still relatively small, but we are

growing every day. We focus on providing a safe place for non-believers and knowledge-seekers to voice their thoughts during our discussion group meetings.

What are some notable topics, even articles or books, in the discussions for the group?

We cover a wide range of topics including religion, education, politics, and science. But recently we hosted an educational public event for Darwin Day. We had members and people from the community come to hear my wife Frances, a biology and environmental science graduate and

Naturalist for Des Moines County, give a talk on all the discoveries that have been made about evolution since Darwin's publication of "On the Origin of Species". Evolution really is a wonderful story of how we are all connected. We had a wonderful turnout and there was a lot of interest in continuing the topic in later discussion groups.

Has the group taken up any activist causes?

This past holiday we took on our first charity mission to raise funds for a book donation for our local public library. We exceeded our modest goal and raised over \$200 to purchase several science education books for young children. It was great to give back to our community and support an institution that advocates tirelessly for open access to knowledge. As our group grows we hope to take on even more advocacy missions.

What is the upcoming discussion topic for March?

I believe we will be discussing the intersection of religion and politics. Precisely what legal rights are religions and religious adherents entitled to in this country and in what ways should, or could, those rights change in the future? With the increasing political divisions between parties what impact will religion play in coming elections?

How can people get involved with Tri-State Humanists?

We are currently organising all our events and discussion group meetings via Meetup.com <https://www.meetup.com/Tri-State-Humanists/>. But we also recently started up a Facebook page which you can find at <https://www.facebook.com/Tri-State-Humanists-722197934627224/>. We encourage anyone or any religious background to come and visit with us and join our discussion groups.

Thank you for your time, Tyler.

Thank you!

Religion News in Brief March 10th 2017

March 10, 2017

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

Church attendance makes you seem trustworthy and popular

Based on a news report by the Daily Mail, there is research suggesting that going to church can make attendees appear more trustworthy and popular, which seems like an obvious benefit to going to church. However, this is public perception rather than a necessary reflection of a reality, of course.

80% of people identify with a religion, according to Pew Research. Some researchers have looked into the evolutionary benefit(s) to, or from, religious practice. The research began in the early 2000s. At the Santa Fe Institute, Dr. Eleanor Power looked into it.

Power found that “active religious participation may benefit practitioners by strengthening social bonds.” That is, “lab-based experiments have suggested that religious behaviour may increase prosocial qualities like generosity and trustworthiness, few researchers have studied this question in a real community.”

Change in religious demographics in Europe, via baptisms

Patheos – Cranach reported that many, many Muslim immigrants into Europe are converting to Christianity, through baptism obviously, and this is having a noticeable effect on the growth and attendance at churches in Europe: “See this, this, and this.”

“For the last few decades, churches have been almost empty on Sunday mornings. But congregations that have evangelised Muslims are coming back to life. For example, the Trinity Lutheran Church in Berlin, which we have blogged about, used to have 150 parishioners. Now they have 700.”

That is, this is a phenomenon in major international economic and cultural centres such as England too. There has been an estimation by an Anglican bishop that as many as one out of four confirmations done are performed on Christian converts who used to be Muslims.

Epilepsy-religious experience link draws closer

Science Daily reports that, “A relationship between epilepsy and heightened religious experiences has been recognised since at least the 19th century. In a recent study,

researchers from the University of Missouri found a neurological relationship exists between religiosity — a disposition for spiritual experience and religious activity — and epilepsy.”

Brick Johnstone, neuropsychologist and professor of health psychology, described how past research shows how humans have distinct tendencies towards spirituality. It is natural. So the tendency to religiosity has a semi-firm neurological foundation.

Co-author and assistant professor of religious studies, Daniel Cohen, asked, “If a connection [between the brain and religious experiences] exists, what does it mean for humans and their relationship with religion?” Indeed.

EVENT NEWS: Atheist Union of Greece Hosts Event – March 11

March 10, 2017

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

The Atheist Union of Greece is hosting an event on March 11, 2017. The Atheist Union of Greece sets a distinct priority for the firm establishment of the separation between the state and the church with equal treatment of citizens without regard for the religious or philosophical proclivities of the individual citizen.

The event that the Union will be **hosting** on March 11 is a workshop entitled “State and Church: Approaches (Human Rights, Economy, Politics).” Bear in mind, Greece is a highly religious nation with 98% of the Greek population being Orthodox Christian. So the Greek general population, as a heuristic, is principally – that is, primarily – Orthodox Christian. These are synonymous titles within the Greek demographic landscape.

So the topic of church and state, and the separation thereof, remain integral components for the Atheist Union of Greece core priority, which is that separation between church and state – within an economic, human rights, and political framework. The Atheist Union of Greece is a member of the Atheist Alliance International and the European Humanist Federation.

At the event, there will prominent academics and speakers who will describe the various problems that arise in virtue of Greece embracing a lack of separation between of Church and state. The political parties were provided invitations to openly state their positions after the workshop, the event. It will run from 10:00 to 15:00 today, March 11.

What is the event in general?

A conference regarding the relations of State and the Church, will take place this Saturday 11-03 at Panteion University in Athens. It is entitled: “State and Church: Approaches” (Human Rights, Economy, Politics), and is co-organised by the Department of Sociology at Panteion University, the Atheists Union of Greece and the Hellenic League for Human Rights.

Where does this initiative originate?

It is an initiative of the Atheists Union of Greece, member of the European Humanist Federation and the Atheist Alliance International, a Non Profit Organisation that promotes secularism in Greece.

What is the Atheist Union of Greece?

AU was founded in 2010 and currently has about 1800 members all over Greece and abroad. The AU undertakes various campaigns one of the most notable being a proposal for separation of church and state in the form of a questionnaire sent to the political parties.

What is the main topic of the conference?

The conference brings forth the problem of the state and church embrace in Greece. It comes after a long, misleading, populist and scaremongering monologue by regressive voices, now it is the time for the voices of reason and science to set the grounds correctly for a public debate about the problem.

It examines it from all of the various aspects that it has. Never before has an overview of the problem by distinguished academics and other speakers been organised in the country. It aims to inform all citizens that the state-church separation is a reform that suits all people, even the religious ones.

AU believes that political will is essential in solving the problem. Unfortunately, so far, the political parties seem reluctant to even discuss it as demonstrated by the poor response to the above mentioned questionnaire.

The conference, therefore, besides its informative character, is also a political intervention as political parties have been invited to attend and asked to contribute their views and commitments.

Thank you for your time, Fotis.

For those with further interest in becoming involved or contacting **The Atheist Union of Greece**, one very good means is the website, where you can become involved with them. Another means includes the **Facebook** page, which has an active membership and over 10,000 likes. Event details by the International Association of Free Thought **here**.

An Interview with René Hartmann – Chairman of the International League of the Non-Religious and Atheists

March 10, 2017

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

How did you become involved in atheism or irreligiosity in general? Was there a family background?

I used to be a member of the Lutheran Church of Germany – as were my parents, but my family was not very religious. I left the church when I was at the university.

You are the chairman for the International League of the Non-Religious and Atheists. What tasks and responsibilities come with being the chairman for the International League of the Non-Religious and Atheists?

My main responsibilities are political communication, which includes press releases, the website, social media, and international contacts.

Based on the membership of the International League of the Non-Religious and Atheists and from personal experience, who is most likely to be non-religious/an atheist?

It is hard to give a simple answer to this question, as our membership is very diverse. There are people who had a religious family background, and sometimes even suffered from their religious education. There are also people who never had much to do with religion, but at some time discovered how strongly the churches also affect the life of non-religious people, and decided to do something about it.

What are some of the main campaigns and initiatives of the International League of the Non-Religious and Atheists?

Beyond advocating the separation of state and church in general, we especially campaign for a religious-neutral school. Together with other organisations, we also oppose making assisted suicide unlawful.

In the Political Guide, there is an important note that over one billion members of the global community does not belong to any church or religion with 150 explicit atheists. That's a lot of people; still a minority compared to the global population, but a significant number of people rejecting the supernaturalist claims in gods or God. What is the scope and scale of the International League of the Non-Religious and Atheists? Who are some of its most unexpected allies?

Our activities focus mainly on Germany and the German-speaking countries of Europe. Globally, our most important ally is the Atheist Alliance International (AAI) and with other atheist/secularist organisations.

Not all churches or religious organisations want to be privileged by the state, and some take a similar stance on church-state separation as we do, but I would not go so far as to call them allies.

What is the best argument you've ever come across for atheism?

I think one of the most compelling arguments is summarised by the following quote for which I unfortunately cannot give a source: If God has spoken, why is the universe not convinced?

As well, churches have privileges in law. That amounts, by implication, to religious bias in law against the secular; religious privilege equates to irreligious inequality with the religious. What is the most egregious legal privilege for the religious over the irreligious?

The most egregious privilege is probably the enormous amount of taxpayers' money that flows into the activities of the churches, especially religious education, but also the salary of bishops. Also unacceptable is that the churches are the only exception to the rule that only insulting people is punishable, not institutions or convictions.

In general, what are the perennial threats to the practice of atheism globally?

First, I want to stress that we don't 'practice' atheism in the same way religious people practise religion. The biggest threat for atheists and non-religious people in general is religious intolerance, not only people who are openly fundamentalist, but also by people who actually don't practice religion very intensively, but take it for granted that the state has to support religion.

What have been the largest activist and educational initiatives provided by International League of the Non-Religious and Atheists? Out of these, what have been honest failures and successes?

We are trying to promote our aims using the media, the internet and social networks. There is also a prize that we award every two years. This year it will go to Ateizm Dernegi, a Turkish atheist group. The event will take place June 3 in Cologne.

Although we were not yet able to influence the law-making process significantly, we already had representatives participate in hearings of state parliaments. And recently non-religious groups got a joint seat in the body that oversees the public radio and TV corporation of North-Rhine Westphalia.

How can people get involved with the International League of the Non-Religious and Atheists, even donate to it?

On our website [**www.ibka.org**](http://www.ibka.org) one can find information on how to become a member and how to donate.

If you are living outside Europe, you may consider becoming a member of Atheist Alliance International.

Thank you for your time, René.

An Interview with Shari Allwood – Executive Director of SMART Recovery

March 11, 2017

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

What's your own story? How did you get into the recovery business?

To be honest, in 1994, it started out as simply a part-time job. I had a full-time job, but my former boss was hired by SMART Recovery as SMART's Executive Director, and I would work about 4-6 hours/week trying to help get the organisation off the ground. It wasn't long before we learned there weren't ample funds to pay his salary, so he departed. I thought SMART was a great organisation, so I stayed on. I transitioned to full-time and accepted the role of Executive Director in 2005. And here I am 22+ years later.

SMART Recovery (Self-Management and Recovery Training), is based on self-empowerment and science-based processes to assist with addiction coping and recovery. What are the main steps to this system of recovery?

As you correctly note, SMART is a self-empowering, science-based program. As opposed to steps, SMART Recovery uses a 4-Point Program®:

Point 1: Building and Maintaining Motivation

Point 2: Coping with Urges

Point 3: Managing Thoughts, Feelings, and Behaviours

Point 4: Living a Balanced Life

Each of the 4-Points has tools and techniques that our participants use to overcome their addictive behaviour(s). The tools are terrific – they're great for recovery, but many of them are truly life skills that can be used time and again through life even once someone has overcome their addiction.

As well, it caters to believers and non-believers alike, and does not require belief in a higher power. How does this differ from some other programs?

You're exactly right – SMART Recovery doesn't require a belief in a higher power. That's not to say people who are believers can't combine their faith with the SMART program – we have people who have success with SMART and do just that. But our meetings and program don't have a spiritual component. I think everyone reading this interview is familiar with AA and other 12-step programs, which rely on a belief in a higher power. Such programs work for them, and the same can be said for people using SMART Recovery, LifeRing, Women for Sobriety and others that have been offered for many years. We all offer proven programs, but they won't all appeal to every individual seeking recovery. There are many pathways to recovery, SMART being a great choice for many. We believe that it's important for people seeking a recovery program to learn about all of the available pathways, and one (or, in some cases, a combination) that works for them.

What is the main line of evidence in support of the SMART Recovery program?

SMART is based on six principles that underlie proven and effective treatment programs:

Self-empowerment – people take control of their recovery and assume responsibility for its success.

Mutual support – recovery works best when the challenges and successes are shared with others, typically at meetings. People learn that recovery is possible by observing and following the example of others in the group.

Motivation – building and maintaining motivation is the first point in SMART's 4-Point Program®. The program uses methods from Motivational Interviewing, a standard practice in more than 90 percent of addiction treatment programs today.

Coping with urges – the second point in the program helps people identify all the triggers to use and how to resist them. Over a short time, they learn that urges grow less intense and occur less often.

Managing thoughts, feelings and behaviours – point three teaches how to calm extreme anxiety and avoid relapses by growing aware of the beliefs that control feelings and acts. This concept is drawn from Cognitive Behavioural Therapy, also used by more than 90 percent of treatment programs.

Leading a balanced life – the fourth point helps secure recovery through the creation of a new lifestyle to replace the one associated with addiction.

The truest measure of effectiveness is its widespread and growing use since the program was founded in 1994. SMART currently hosts 2,200 weekly meetings in 19 countries, including 30 online gatherings that people anywhere in the world with an internet link can attend.

In addition, numerous recovery professionals are incorporating SMART into their practices and launching meetings. In 2016, professionals comprised 61 percent of the 2,500 people who signed up for SMART's facilitator training course.

Leading medical and government authorities worldwide endorse SMART for recovery support in best practice and quality care guidelines for people seeking to overcome addictions.

How does the program differ in the outcomes for its treated recovering addict sub-population from the general untreated recovering addict (control) sub-population?

As much as this question is debated, the honest answer is that it is difficult to scientifically measure outcomes for people using mutual support models such as SMART Recovery and 12-step programs. Addiction scientists have tried but meta-analyses of the research on both programs have been inconclusive. These are not treatment programs in which attendance can be easily measured and tracked. Attendance is anonymous. Large numbers of participants are

coerced to attend meetings, especially 12-step programs. As a result, it is extremely difficult to conduct randomised controlled trials measuring the effectiveness of such programs.

How is this more effective than other forms of recovery? Also, what are the other kinds of—ineffective—addiction recovery programs/systems?

There are numerous potential pathways to recovery, including ones that use no treatment or recovery support program at all. I don't feel comfortable suggesting that SMART is more effective than other forms. That's why part of SMART's mission statement reads "To support the availability of choices in recovery".

I've had the privilege of witnessing many people's lives change when using the SMART program. I also know that it won't appeal to all people seeking a recovery support group. The same is true for AA, Women for Sobriety, LifeRing, etc. We are all going to attract and help people, but we'll have the most success when people know their options and select the one that best meets their beliefs and needs. Some people will benefit by combining SMART Recovery and inpatient or outpatient therapy. Others find combining mutual-support meetings helpful.

Some find becoming involved with art or yoga/meditation helpful. Recovery can take on many forms and we feel individuals should determine a program that will be most helpful to them.

Now, you are the executive director of the SMART Recovery. What tasks and responsibilities come with being the executive director?

That's an interesting question. I have a heart for people – I love to see people succeed, and I love being in communication with our volunteers and the people who come to SMART Recovery for help. I'll admit that, as the organisation has grown, there are duties and responsibilities that now require more of my time – fiscal responsibilities, organisational development responsibilities, helping to ensure the organisation stays vibrant and continues to grow and keep up with technology, etc. We have a small staff because we rely so much on volunteers, so it's challenging to keep all of the plates spinning. But we have amazing volunteers and staff, which makes my job both challenging and rewarding!

If I were a recovery addict, and if I came to SMART Recovery, how would I be introduced to SMART Recovery?

Our 2016 survey concludes that nearly 50% of our participants find SMART Recovery via an online search. Over 20% were introduced to SMART while in a treatment program, and nearly 20% were referred by a counsellor or therapist. Interestingly, more than 10% found SMART when it was recommended by a friend or family member. Once they find us, we encourage them to attend a face-to-face meeting (if there's one in their area) or to become involved in our online community, which has 30 online meetings per week, highly active message board forums and a 24/7 chat room.

What would be my typical struggles on the path to recovery? What would be the chances of recovery?

I believe that the typical struggles encountered by anyone in recovery are covered within our 4-Point Program®:

1. Building and Maintaining Motivation – Nobody will change based on someone else wanting them to change. Each individual needs to identify motivating factors that will help see them through their recovery process. (SMART tool examples include: Cost/Benefit Analysis and Hierarchy of Values.)
2. Coping with urges – You won't give up an addictive behaviour without experiencing urges, so having coping mechanisms in place is key to one's recovery. (Tool examples include: Urge log and ABCs of Rational Emotive Behaviour Therapy.)
3. Managing thoughts, feelings and behaviours – As someone is going through recovery, there are all sorts of opportunities to reflect on one's thoughts, feelings and behaviours, and to assess which are helpful, unhelpful and need to be changed. (Tool examples include: ABCs of REBT for emotional upsets and Role-playing.)
4. Leading a balanced life – So often the drug or behaviour has really taken over an individual's life. Everything had revolved around time spent planning for or involved in the addictive behaviour. Returning to a balanced life can be a challenge. (Tool examples include: Lifestyle Balance Pie Chart and Vital Absorbing Creative Interests – finding helpful activities to replace the former unhealthy/unhelpful activities.)

As far as chances of recovery, I'm sure that there are statistics out there somewhere regarding the number of people who succeed in recovery. From my perspective, if people are truly motivated, and are able to achieve the 4-point program noted above, the likelihood of success is great. And a reminder that people's personal recovery journeys vary, so for some, combining SMART Recovery and other groups or activities may increase the chances of achieving recovery for that individual.

Are there appropriate supports for the recovering addicts as they transition back into normal life and as they have entered into a new non-addicted lifestyle?

We choose not to use the term "addict" or apply labels to participants. We help people who are struggling with addictive behaviours. We offer meetings and online support for as long as the individual deems them to be useful. As far as other supports, i.e., job-skills, transitional housing, etc., we leave that to other organisations and agencies. Our goal and mission is to provide mutual support meetings that encourage cross-talk, allow people to learn the SMART tools and techniques, and allow participants to learn from one another's experiences – both success and failures.

What are some of the main social and communal services of the SMART Recovery, if any?

Social activities vary from meeting to meeting. Some meetings allow for a half-hour social gathering at the end of the meeting. Others have some planned activities – a bowling night, a recovery walk during Recovery Month, etc. I've always found it interesting how much of a community spirit there is within our online activities. We have people participating from all over the world, and most have never met the others with whom they're in online meetings, posting on the message boards, or chatting within the chat room. But they really are a cohesive group that find inspiration and help from one another.

What is the scope and scale of the SMART Recovery? Who are some of its most unexpected allies?

Growth and awareness of SMART Recovery continues to increase with more than 1,000 new meetings launched in the past three years. (I'll share a growth chart which makes it easier to grasp, if you'd like to include it.) And our international expansion is also continuing, even to the point of us creating a new SMART Recovery International organisation, with what was known as Alcohol & Drug Abuse Self-Help Network, Inc., d.b.a. SMART Recovery, soon to become SMART Recovery USA. And, of course, online activities know no boundaries and our online registrations continue to grow each year.

I, of course, believe everyone should be an ally of SMART, with none being unexpected (laughs). We have volunteers who are peers, professionals, and a growing number of non-peer/non-professionals. Mums and Dads who have children who have struggled with an addiction and they feel a need to provide choice in mutual support meetings, so they train and start meetings.

We have a nice partnership with other non-12-step groups including Women for Sobriety (WFS) and LifeRing. We have a growing number of treatment centres that are ensuring that SMART Recovery meetings are available to their clients. SMART was recognised by President Obama and Michael Botticelli during our 20th anniversary celebration and conference in 2014. I think even some of the "hard core" 12-step people are beginning to realise that there truly are multiple pathways to recovery, and the importance of people having choice. This isn't a competition – there are plenty of people in need with different backgrounds and beliefs and they need choices like AA, WFS, LifeRing and SMART Recovery.

With the current Trump Administration, do you see new threats to the practice of science-based and self-empowering recovery programs?

It's not yet clear to me if or how the new administration will impact addiction in the US. SMART Recovery will carry on with our message and program regardless of the level of support from the administration.

What have been the largest activist and educational initiatives provided by SMART Recovery?

All of SMART's activism and education has been devoted to creating the best possible recovery support program, including meetings and educational materials, for the millions of people

worldwide who need help overcoming addictions. We have focused intensely on educating the volunteers who facilitate our meetings, developing a rigorous 30-plus hour training program. We are now training 2,500 people a year. Our facilitators are hosting well over than 100,000 meetings a year in countries from Australia to Canada to the UK and Uzbekistan, including more than 1,200 in the US alone.

SMART hosts meetings in correctional institutions and Veterans Administration medical centres. Since 2010, we've held meetings for the family members and friends of people with loved ones suffering from addiction. Our Family & Friends program is based on the highly effective model known as Community Reinforcement and Family Training or CRAFT.

As much as we'd like to engage in activism in the conventional sense of term, our time and energy is best spent focusing on our mission.

How can people get involved with the SMART Recovery, even donate to them?

I'd suggest a wander through our extensive website at www.smartrecovery.org. (Our new site will debut soon!) If you'd benefit from using the program, there's lots of information about the program and tools, as well as a meeting list, access to our online activities, etc. If you want to serve your community by starting a SMART meeting, you can visit our training page. If you'd like to donate to SMART, you can

visit <https://secure.processdonation.org/smartrecovery/>. (Note, that link will likely change with our new site, but a visit to www.smartrecovery.org will connect you to a donation button.)

Any closing thoughts or feelings based on the discussion today?

We're always so grateful for the opportunity to help acquaint people with our 4-Point Program and tools, and I want to thank you for providing us with this opportunity to do so. I want to encourage anyone who is struggling with an addiction to visit www.smartrecovery.org and see what SMART can offer you. If you have a loved one struggling, our Family & Friends program is an amazing resource. If you're involved in serving people with addictions in a treatment setting, or court, or government agency, I encourage you to become familiar with SMART Recovery to recommend it to your clients and constituents.

Thank you for your time, Shari.

Thank you again for this opportunity!

Science News in Brief March 12th 2017

March 12, 2017

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

NASA science head interviewed

According to Science (AAAS), in an interview with NASA Head, Thomas Zurbuchen, focused on the Trump Administration and the importance of the return-on-investment of payments into science.

Zurbuchen, in October, 2016, left the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor, to “take the reins of NASA’s science directorate, was raised in a deeply religious family, where he says he was comfortable asking hard questions.”

In the interview, there’s more discussion on NASA, Europe, and China intending to have rovers on Mars by 2020 and the relevance of immigration for science, and his own reasons for coming to America.

The beginning of the future of concrete neurolaw, maybe

According to The Guardian, neuroscientists have begun work on spotting the differences in the brains between criminals and non-criminals. The purpose of the research will be to separate on-purpose crimes and reckless behaviour crimes.

Each has distinct cognitive processes behind them. “It is the first time that people’s intentions, or otherwise, to perform criminal acts have been decoded in a brain scanner.”

In the Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences, the researchers said, “In most cases, when someone is committing a crime they are not doing so while inside a scanner.”

UK researchers prepare for the big shift from hard Brexit

Science (AAAS) reports that for “months after the United Kingdom voted last June to leave the European Union, many British scientists clung to hopes of a ‘soft Brexit,’ which would not cut them off from EU funding and collaborators.”

However, this might not be the case. Why? PM Theresa May will trigger a 2-year process for leaving the EU. That’s “sharp,” not soft. Researchers in the UK are faced with a tremendous challenge now.

James Wilsdon, science policy expert at the University of Sheffield in the UK, said, “People are bracing themselves for a bumpier and more abrupt landing.”

Iceland, the Place of Firsts

March 13, 2017

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

Human rights are a new invention. Same with women's rights. Have you heard the phrase? 'Women's rights are human rights,' it's a darn good phrase, I feel—wish I'd thought of it.

There's more details, but those come from more knowledgeable, experienced people than me — like 'women's rights are *a subset of, and partially distinct from*, human rights.' Anyway, that's a tiresome, boring, and over-precise slogan, right? I agree.

The **UN Charter** was signed on June 26, 1945, so was instantiated only 71 years ago. It's young. So both modern human rights and women's rights are young. Many citizens of the world come from times without the charter, the imagined landscape of, by simply being human, deservedness—of rights, for humanity, and its women and children.

Imagine that: a world without rights. Well, we live in one naturally, but socially, culturally, even societally. Heck, they're pretty darn important. Human's, children's, and women's rights help enforce decency.

Those times without the charter and similar documentation do have a response, I suppose. With validity and bumpy consistency, which can be applied to some sectors of some nations and some whole countries today, places without them, knowledge or implementation. Scary.

Women earned the right to vote in the US in 1920. Pretty good. In Canada, 1919, depending on the province, little better; in the UK, 1918, even better, and so on, Saudi Arabia only in 2015. Technically, our democracies are young.

Lots of societies deny children and women rights. Children and women, even some men, in sections of a society without rights, or other citizens as second-class citizens, non-persons, simply *persona non grata*—an unwelcome person.

"Why are you here? And while you're here, you will not have the rights and privileges of us. Got it, buster!" Not fun. But there are other cases. Societies as exemplars with some outstanding standards and people. Bars are set by them. Precedents are made by them. Iceland is one of them.

It's a land of firsts, I feel.

As described by Kirstie Brewer from Reykjavik, in 2015, about 40 years ago—as delineated at the time—women in Iceland went on strike. That wasn't the first strike ever; however, it was a preliminary salvo.

When November, 1980, swung around the corner, Vigdis Finnbogadóttir ("dóttir" as in daughter, of "Finnboga" back in the day, I assume) won the presidency in Iceland. To boot, and to break taboos, Finnbogadóttir, or more properly Vigdis, was a single mother. Not bad; so that was a first, and an unlikely first because single mothers tend to be near the bottom of the social strata.

Not only for the region, but for the world, Vigdis was a first for democratic elections. She was the first female or woman democratically elected as a head of state.

There's a common sense saying about a woman leader then influencing girls with the assumption of *all* girls. I doubt that, but think some, even most, girls saw president Vigdis as an representation of possibilities. It's a good thing, but not an all-encompassing inspirational deal. Many women and girls do succeed without the need for prior representatives, but, for others, helps give a beacon. Different strategies for different women and girls for women's and girls' empowerment.

And Iceland, not only is a place of firsts, it is #1. The World Economic Forum (WEF) **Global Gender Gap Index 2016** states the nation is first in the world for the gender gap as well. **The Guardian** has reported on it, too. They say, "The Icelandic government has pledged to close the gender pay gap by 2022." Also, a first, as far as I know, and the short list here likely extrapolates to other unlisted aspects of Iceland, the place of firsts.

An Interview with Mikey Weinstein – Founder & President, Military Religious Freedom Foundation (MRFF)

March 13, 2017

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

This interview has been edited for clarity and readability.

To begin, for those that don't know, what is the brief statement of what the Military Religious Freedom Foundation is, and why was it founded in the first place?

We are a civil rights organisation. We have one specific purpose; that is to protect the constitutionally protected separation between religion and state, or church and state, in the most lethal organisation (technologically speaking) ever created by our species, which is the US military. We represent in excess of 50,100 active duty members in the US military. These are sailors, soldiers, marines and airmen, as well as National Guard and reservists, and veterans, and we started in early December of 2005.

We are technically in our 12th year now. 96% of our clients are actually practising Protestants or Roman Catholics themselves who are oppressed for not being “Christian enough.” We also represent veterans. Currently, 954 members of the LGBTQ community in the military are MRFF clients. We also represent about 18% of all Muslim-Americans in the US military.

As well, organisations such as Campus Crusade for Christ. They have a central message for evangelising the US military, which breaches separation of church and state. But they have, apparently, been very successful in their attempts. Are there underhanded methodologies that they use when they go about doing this?

Let's be clear, we don't really care about anyone's religious belief or lack thereof. What we care about is the time, and the place, and the manner, Scott, in which they feel they must deploy their faith. Now, it is called *Cru Military*, **Campus Crusade for Christ Military Ministry**. We've been fighting them for a very long time because they completely and totally disregard—they and those associated with the military fail to recognise—any constraints that have come down from the US Supreme Court directly interpreting our Constitution.

By that, I mean the First Amendment separation of church and state as well as Clause 3 Article 6 in the body of the Constitution, which states we will never have a religious test. They often ignore the Constitution. They often ignore the federal and state caselaw of the Constitution and often wilfully ignore and flout the Department of Defense which has directives, instructions, and regulations directly on point. They are one of, probably, 3 dozen fundamentalist Christian ministries that run rampant through the US military with people turning a blind eye to others in command promoting their pernicious, fundamentalist Christian agenda of “join us or we will destroy you.”

I understand that there are some colleges that have actually banned them from showing up on campus, even in a civilian perspective, because they target freshman who are still very innocent and naive coming straight out of high school, so it's another source. But that's not what we focus on. We focus on things of tremendous financial heft, power, and prestige in the military as a force multiplier for their fundamentalist Christian doctrine that it is very much about one thing, which is "bend your knee and confess our version of Jesus Christ as your only Lord and Saviour, or you will not only be destroyed in this life. You will be set on fire and burn forever in hell after you die."

So "our way or the highway." If they wanted to preach their particular faith position in a time, place, and manner that supports the Constitution and the military regs, we'd have no issue with that, but, oftentimes, they do not and that's why we get involved. I think we sent you a video we have of the Cru organisation from a number of years ago at the Air Force Academy showing the leader with that little look of superiority and arrogance on his face.

They made it clear that when cadets leave the Air Force Academy—which is, incidentally, my alma mater and the alma mater of four of my kids – that the government is paying for missionaries for Jesus Christ. Really? We don't think so. That's why we went to war with them and the other parachurch organisations out there.

Also, you did document in the text, *With God on Our Side*, the single-handed battle against Evangelicals' "utter disregard for the separation of church and state." So this has been an ongoing battle, which you have documented. You are, pretty much, the main starter of the fight against it. Who have been some of the best, and some of the unexpected, allies, in this fight?

Thank you for that position. My wife and I, when we started MRFF, we saw Mel Gibson's movie *The Passion of the Christ*, or as we called it, *The Jesus Chainsaw Massacre*, or, *Freddy versus Jesus*.

[Laughing]

When that came out on February 4, 2004, Scott, we knew that there was a problem when our kids who went to the Air Force Academy were essentially being forced and inundated from their officer and cadet command chains to go see that movie. For nearly 2 years, we thought about the foundation until we reached out to the Anti-Defamation League, Americans United for the Separation of Church and State, and the ACLU.

These are all good organisations in their own way, but they don't focus with laser-like precision where all of the weapons, and weapons of mass destruction, and the drones, and laser-guided weapons are, which is the US military. It is incredibly, culturally tribal, adversarial, communal, and ritualistic. It's not their mission to do that. Our family has a very strong military background in it. So it kind of made sense for us to lead this fight.

Our allies have clearly been the Southern Poverty Law Center and, in a very major way, Americans United. In the last couple of weeks, the ACLU in San Diego. We've worked with the National Organization for Women. Again, all of these organisations are wonderful in their own

way, but when it comes to protecting the civil rights of religious choice or no choice, in the US military, trying to tell your military superior, even if you're being gently evangelised, Scott, "To get the hell out of my face sir or ma'am" is not an option for you, so they come to us at MRFF. We are very militant and aggressive in the support we provide our clients, which is AARP:

Anonymity, Action, Results, and Protection. If you've ever had a cat or a dog and ever cared about the rights of their animal rights, every town has a humane society. They do great things. They have bake sales and cookie sales. They're on the far Left. They're wonderful. Everyone loves them. On the far Right, you have PETA. We're PETA.

That requires an aggressive and militant methodology and MO. You can get this job done. We get this job done a lot. We are proud of it. We have over 330 people who work here. Many of them are part-time or full-time volunteers, which is common for civil rights organisations. It is the only way we can fight back, like getting in the media such as we're doing right now, or getting into federal or state court.

Also, you wrote *No Snow Flake in an Avalanche*. It is a deeper updated look at religious extremism – both in the military and in the US political infrastructure. So what were some of the main questions that went into writing that book as well as what came out of it—some of the answers?

I wrote two books. The first was *With God on Our Side: One Man's War Against an Evangelical Coup in America's Military*. It is no longer one man's war, like I said. We've gotten pretty large. I probably should have been more precise because we have plenty of Evangelicals on staff. Evangelicals become bad, like any individual, when they become fundamentalists. As soon as we find a fundamentalist Atheist, Jewish, Agnostic, Native American spiritualist, Muslim or Hindu we will let everyone know, but, right now, it almost always comes from one source, which is Evangelical Christians who demand to follow the Great Commission, Mark 16:15 and Matthew 28:19, completely irrespective of time, place and manner restrictions as prescribed by law.

The Great Commission is one of the last things Jesus is supposed to have said to his disciples is 'go and make disciples of all nations.' If they believe they can do that with no restrictions, then they are constitutional outlaws and violating these civil rights. They're rights. Everybody gets them. They aren't just civil privileges. Even if you're an asshole, you get civil rights. The second book I wrote was *No Snow Flake in an Avalanche*. The title for this book is taken from the phrase, "No snow flake in an avalanche ever feels responsible."

To answer your question about my books, the purpose was to educate. There's a great quote from HG Wells, Scott, it says that "civilisation is a constant race between education and catastrophe." We're trying to educate. The best way to do that is to be very upfront and to expose, both in the media and, if necessary, through litigation, what it is that needs to be accomplished to make sure we don't create a Christian version of ISIS in our own military.

It is extraordinarily serious and rampant. It was terrible under Bush. It didn't get much better under Obama. It is literally off the scale under the idiot Trump.

As well, Muslim-Americans, who are entering to train to become soldiers or who are already soldiers, will experience anti-Muslim prejudice, some or most, and, as well, they will hear anti-Muslim rhetoric. What have been some notable cases that come to mind for you? And what are some of the major concerns that arise for you?

If you go to our website, we have submitted Congressional testimony for our Muslim-American clients. Islamophobia is out of control in the US military. There's no question about that. There are too many cases to discuss in the time here for the interview. Recently, there was a story about the 7th infantry Division at Joint Base Lewis McChord in the Tacoma/Seattle area that the new Head Chaplain will be an Imam, which is terrific. We tremendously support that. I have been in contact with this new Lieutenant Colonel Khallid Shabazz and he sounds terrific!

Unfortunately, many in the military who are a part of the Islamic community feel that they have to walk on eggshells. We understand that. We took some of our Islamic clients on the TV show *Nightline*. Also, a lot of what we do is behind the scenes. We don't want to go to the media and have them threatened to go to court. We want to have people understand that in this country that we don't judge the value of a human being—their honour, integrity, character, intelligence, honourability—based on what religious faith they have or lack thereof.

Now, if your faith tells you that you must force your faith on others irrespective of their rights, and irrespective of time, place, and manner constraints, then *you* are the problem. You are the *enemy*. If you are a member of the military or a member of the chaplaincy and believe being gay is a choice, that's great. That's fine. You have 3 choices. You can hold your tongue. You can change your attitude.

And if you can't do either of those, you need to fold your uniform and get the hell out of the military. That's where we are in the US military in the year 2017. We will not have people suffer the indignities of this Christian, fascistic tidal wave that is out there. So we have to fight and fight very hard. When you do that, you get a lot of support and concomitantly make a lot of enemies, which is why we have to live with a ton of security to include body guards and German shepherd, working dogs.

We carry a lot of weapons and utilize protective cameras et al. I'm not going to reveal all that we do for security obviously. I do a lot of speaking around the country, but it doesn't always work out because it requires extremely specialised security for protection. Sometimes, it is exorbitant when they are asking me to speak, but I am not going to go somewhere unless we have the appropriate security intact.

Last question, how can people get involved? What is the single greatest concern for 2017 with regards to religious freedom in the military and separation of church and state?

First of all, I appreciate that. The best thing to do is to donate to us. We are a 501(c)3, IRS approved, charitable organisation. So any donation is a 100% tax deduction/write off. We already have the machine in place. So help us out, we don't run on chocolate sauce. If you are in the military or have family or friends in the military, let them know we're here, so they have a place to go if their religious rights are being trampled on, or their right to be non-religious.

The biggest issue was that we, very simply, have to prevent an unconstitutional alloy from forming between fundamentalist Christianity and our weapons of mass destruction—our nuclear arsenal. I am extremely concerned that this particular Commander-in-Chief on his best day appears to be an entitled, privileged, cretin and a megalomaniac. When you realise that the 3 most dangerous leaders in the world appear to be Duterte in the Philippines, Kim Jong-Un in North Korea, and this shameful sad sack that we've got in Washington, Trump, it is just totally terrifying. And which one of those 3 controls the world's largest nuclear arsenal?

It is terrifying that he is technically the Commander-in-Chief. While he himself is not a fundamentalist, he and his staff have brought so many in. They've littered the government. They're everywhere. They are omnipresent and it's wretchedly concerning. It is an absolute fact that you will see a marriage between our weapons of mass destruction and the extremely dangerous theology of fundamentalist, unbridled, Christianity, which is trying to end this world as fast as possible to get us to the End Times.

Where among other things, this fundamentalist or "Dominionist" version of Christianity promises its followers a 200-mile long river, 4.5 feet deep, filled with nothing but the human blood of those that they have crushed at the Battle of Armageddon. That is a pretty horrifying graphic there. That's what we have to fight. As Machiavelli said, "When you aim at the prince, you better kill the prince." Not half in, not three quarters in, this is a task that requires and demands being ALL in!

I think it was Frederick Douglass who said, "Power concedes nothing without a demand." So our job here at the Military Religious Freedom Foundation is to be the demanders of the commanders. You can go to <https://www.militaryreligiousfreedom.org/> and go from there.

Thank you for your time.

The Death of Margaret Mitchell

March 15, 2017

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

Margaret Mitchell **died**. I live in the province of British Columbia (BC) in Canada, which is a mild place. Often known for the young ‘hipster’ crowd, still not sure what the term means, though. Lots of high quality living and typically socially active, conscious, and progressive politics. I believe the newer made-up word, the neologism, is “woke.” BC is woke. Margaret Mitchell was vital to it. She was born in 1925, died, of course, 2017—March 8.

She was a Vancouver member of Parliament and a women’s rights advocate. She died at the age of 92, which is, even by Canadian standards, a long life. And a life of utility to self and others, obviously. She devoted herself to others. She fulfilled potential, which was inherent in her acts for equality. I assume she would identify with the principles of feminism, which amount to social and legal equality between the sexes.

She was a Member of Parliament for the New Democratic Party, or the NDP, for Vancouver East in the Lower Mainland of British Columbia, Canada (1979-1993). It’s an important job. It has responsibilities, and privileges, but things took off in 1982. That’s when she garnered the national eye some more. Why?

I’ll tell you why. She made a statement on the regular, deplorable beating of wives by husbands. Therein we find the issue around equality of the sexes, or more or less mainstream feminism. Many distinct women’s movements ongoing to this day. It was received with laughter. She noted it was 1 in 10 women. She was surprised by the reaction. But perhaps not.

What you and I can take for granted can be taken for profound knowledge, or so outside of the relevant frame of knowledge and experience of the other person as to be laughable, which is a reaction of dismissal. It is so absurd as to be funny, from that point of view. Mitchell won out. The House made an apology to her, and especially to the women of Canada as a whole. That’s 1982.

Vancouver-Kensington NDP MLA, Maple Elmore, **said**, “I think it was really a turning point, a watershed moment, certainly in Canadian history in terms of the issue of understanding and taking a stand against violence against women and really leading that campaign.” She didn’t stop there. She worked hard in her life and career to have abortion decriminalised and the provision of a childcare program at the national level.

And for a national change in one of the foundational documents of the country, she helped advocate for Section 28 of the **Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms**:

Rights guaranteed equally to both sexes

28. Notwithstanding anything in this Charter, the rights and freedoms referred to in it are guaranteed equally to male and female persons

An obvious one, it is aligned with her life's work. It was not driven by monetary reward, by the way. She voted against an increase in MP pensions. And she took that money and then reinvested in the community, in her community, in east side of Vancouver. It was entitled the Margaret Mitchell Fund for Women. There might be a little self-showiness through titling the fund after herself. But still, how can we ultimately tell? Is it really worth discussion? Maybe, a little.

But! The money has been reinvested for a good cause, regardless. The fund continues to work for social justice in addition to economic justice for women in the Vancouver area.

Her legacy awards: in 2000, she earned the Order of British Columbia; in 2016, she earned Vancouver's Freedom of the City.

There's a mythology of the cycle of birth, growth, maturation, degeneration, and death. You can see it plants. You observe it in animals. A natural development in and from life to death, or, more accurately, birth to death. That mythology ties to the renewal of culture, of society, as well. The 'Shoulder of Giants' statement often attributed to Newton when in consideration of Universal gravitation links to this.

We do. Sometimes, we even teeter on the tops of the heads one foot tippy-toed of past giants. Each generation, to sustain society, to maintain culture, has to take the torch and renew the culture or society. The matured take the torch of the dead and carry it forward. In turn, we die. Others take the fire. Then our children take that from us. Mitchell is gone now. But we have her civilising fire. Her work as a social activist civilised Canadian society. Now, it's our turn.

Education News in Brief March 14th 2017

March 15, 2017

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

Myanmar-UK cooperation on education

Myanmar Times reports that “research conducted for Universities UK by Oxford Economics in March 2017, international students studying in the UK generate more than £25 billion for the British economy and provide a significant boost to regional jobs and local businesses.”

The education sector will be travelling in March to Myanmar. The aim is to create a fruitful partnership with institutions and professionals between the two countries with the “#InspireMeFestival Myanmar.”

Project officer at the UK Department for International Trade, Nay Shine, said, “As Myanmar continues to show great promise and open itself up to the world, building capacity in the education sector has become more important than ever.”

Aims to increase productivity and efficiency for UK through technical education

According to **The Guardian**, there will be a new T-Level system for the ways in which technical education takes place in the UK. The courses are intended to be put on the same grounds as academic work.

Britain is behind the US and Germany. The plans will increase student’s training hours by 50% and decrease 13,000 qualifications to 15. I assume to simplify and expedite the system. According to the UK government, it will cost about £500m per year for the new program.

Philip Hammond, Chancellor of the Exchequer, said, “There is still a lingering doubt about the parity of esteem attaching to technical education.” There is good regard for academic education, but the document notes more needs to be done with technical education’s esteem.

Educational legacy and Indonesia

The Jakarta Post reports that “British ambassador to Indonesia, ASEAN” named Timor-Leste Moazzam Malik stated that “currently there are approximately 3,500 Indonesian students pursuing university degrees – from bachelor’s to doctoral – in the UK, making the country one of the most sought after higher education destinations among Indonesians.”

Indonesia’s Endowment Fund for Education (LPDP) sends students abroad. About 1/3 of the entire set of students sent abroad go to the UK. It is one of Indonesia’s most prestigious scholarship programs.

There is expected to be more students in the coming years. Technology appears to be the greatest attraction, the highest preference, of Indonesian students coming to the UK, which is “followed by natural sciences and social and political sciences.”

An Interview with Emmanuel Donate, JD – Director, Hispanic American Freethinkers

March 15, 2017

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

Emmanuel Donate is a member of the board of directors for the Hispanic American Freethinkers. Professionally he works as a mathematics, science, and martial arts teacher and as an immigration and family law attorney. He has a B.S. in mathematics from the University of Puerto Rico, Rio Piedras Campus and a J.D. from Mercer University, Walter F. George School of Law. He is currently a graduate student at the University of Georgia where he has completed an M.S. in Physics and is finishing his dissertation in Astrophysics with a research focus in radio astronomy.

You are the director of Hispanic American Freethinkers. What tasks and responsibilities come with this position?

I am one of seven directors of the Hispanic American Freethinkers. My position on the board is a bit unique. I was HAFree's attorney for four years prior to joining the board in 2016. My biggest role on the board has been to advise on legal issues. This ranges from controlling content that gets released to the public to writing, researching and editing documents that pertain to HAFree's non-profit status or our intellectual property.

What's your family and personal background in terms of freethinking? What was your experience of becoming, of living, as a freethinker? Your moment of awakening?

I became a freethinker at 16. I had been raised Catholic and was living a life of a lot of privilege. My family didn't have a lot of money but my father was in the military so we lived well, we were provided for and we travelled often. I had good grades and made enough friends to make school life mostly pleasant and enjoyable. When I was about to enter high school, my father was in the process of retiring from the military and so we moved back to Puerto Rico.

When I went to school in Puerto Rico, I faced a large culture shock that took me into a big depression. My solution was to pray more and get more involved with the church. The idea was that I was facing these difficulties because I had strayed the path and that if I were more dedicated God would help put things back in their place. Things only got worse as I got more into religion.

Eventually I realised the praying wasn't working. I didn't know who to talk to or what to read since everyone around me was a Christian. In an amazing stroke of luck, we got our first Internet connection at home around this time.

The Internet gave me way to do research that was covert. I could read about philosophy and any questions I wanted without getting in trouble with family. I found pantheism and at the time it made sense, so I stuck with it. As time passed I lost the label of 'pantheist' but continued to evolve my thinking patterns into what I am today.

Culture in Puerto Rico is very religious. People there are more willing to come out and claim atheism, secularism, or freethinking more freely now. However, it was mostly unheard of when I was a teenager in 1997. I didn't find friends who had the same ideas until I was in my second year of college.

In general, the process of becoming a freethinker was difficult for me because it included a culture shock, the loss of my religious community support system, and a lack of support from my family and friends. Once I found that group of friends in college, being a freethinker became much easier. I was able to develop my relationships and ideas within a supportive and inquisitive community. I've kept all of those friends and, now, thanks to HAFree, I've made even more friends across the globe who share the same ideas and want to contribute to a greater community.

What makes a good freethinker?

I hesitate to answer this question because it seems like it includes a moral/value judgement. I am not the right person to say what makes or doesn't make a good freethinker. I'm more confident in talking objectively about what makes a freethinker rather than a good freethinker.

The scientist in me says that a freethinker is a person who fits the definition of a freethinker.

Obvious right? If you form your opinions based on logical reasoning and evidence and you do not from your opinions on the basis of tradition, authority, or faith, then I would say calling yourself a freethinker would be accurate.

Subjectively, I'd say that whether someone is a good freethinker depends on whether that someone is a good person. Who are you in the world, what do you **do**? What is your way? I don't think there is a way to define that in words. If the people around you feel that you are positive force in the world and you happen to be a freethinker then I would feel that you are a good freethinker.

There was a time where I thought that freethinking could be associated with a code of values, but I don't believe that to be true any longer. I think I believed this because religiosity is always connected to a code of values. So it seemed natural that once you left your religiosity, whatever occupied that space would include a code of values. However freethinking as a lifestyle necessitates that you assume fewer things to be true or objectively clear-cut.

Freethinking does not occupy the same space as religion in the mind because it functions as a negation of knowledge. Religiosity imposes a foundation of information from which to draw conclusions about reality. As a freethinker, you question yourself and ideas far more often than when you are religious about any given fact or opinion. When you are less sure of your knowledge, it is harder to develop an objective code of values around that knowledge. Hence, there is no cut and dry way to establish goodness solely on the basis of words. Your goodness is a function of your self; only those that interact with you could ever tell you if your self is any good.

Where do you most differ from mainstream freethinking in its definition, aims, and activism, if at all?

I've been through a lot of changes in how I go about being an activist. I had a firebrand period where I argued against and criticised religion. This period coincided with the debates that made Christopher Hitchens and Sam Harris a force within the freethinking community. I admired them, and during that time I emulated their behaviour. Going through law school also increased my willingness to engage in debate.

The debate-prone version of myself continued until about 2012 when I went back to school to do a PhD. Since that time, I have focused more on community and bridge building. Where law taught me to fight science taught me to reconcile. I wanted to find more ways of making the freethinking community get closer together and of forming conversation and positive communication pathways between the religious community and the freethinkers. Lately, I've had more success with conversation than I had with debate.

The current socio-political climate suggests to me that we have to do better about coming together and building a governmental system that is inclusive and protects individual liberties more than we have to get together to highlight our metaphysical differences in the public square. This is in order to come together in order to highlight our metaphysical differences in the public square. There is always a place for intellectual debate, and I always enjoy watching the debates. I certainly do not believe that the activists who are engaging in the debates or the firebrand activism need to stop or be less forceful. However, I don't personally have that passion anymore.

I leave that to those who have the controversies as their personal mission and enjoy their work from the side-lines.

What are the main reasons, within your experience, people become freethinkers? For example, arguments from logic and philosophy, evidence from mainstream science, or experience within traditional religious structures.

What I see the most are two things: i) people open-minded enough to have rational epiphanies and ii) people who have gone through some kind of trauma or difficult situation in which religion is directly responsible.

Most of my friends and family whose religiosity has eroded as adults continue to hold on to the idea of a "greater power". The scientific and rational arguments are not lost on them when it comes to the fantastic parts of their core religions, but the god figure is still very present in their belief systems. On the other hand, the friends (I'm the only agnostic-atheist in my family) who lost their religiosity at a young age, say teenagers, were far more likely to burn the whole thing down and let go of the god figure.

The older a person is, the harder it is to get the to move on to the freethinking side of things and change their cognitive theory of the universe. If you base your understanding of reality on god for a long time, it will take a long time before you can pull that god pin out of your system without the whole thing crashing down around you. Although it does no physical harm to have

your cognitive reality fall apart, it can include some psychological damage depending on your level of belief and engagement. It takes a good bit of mental fortitude to crossover to freethinking and start your model of the universe from the beginning again, especially if you have passed your youthful rebellious phase.

What is the best reason you have ever come across for freethinking?

Science.

For me it's obvious that the success of science is the only reason any of us are here and particularly able to have this conversation. A freethinker accepts logic, reason and critical thinking and rejects tradition, authority, and faith as paths to knowledge. What this means is that when Kepler was trying to understand the orbits of the planets he put away any faith in an earth-centred universe. What we see is that in order for us to be successful as a species, it requires us to accept that we do not have real answers a priori; "real" meaning answers that accurately reflect our physical reality. Put very loosely, human ideas about how reality works are consistently wrong but we still convince ourselves we are consistently right.

Our tendency to think we are right and be wrong is very dangerous; it means we will continuously make mistakes. So how do we accept and take into account our error prone human nature when we are trying to decide how to live on the planet and amongst each other? Our philosophy and psychology have to take into account our natural state of being. The best way to do that is to think and act in such a way that our behaviour naturally uncovers our mistakes. We have to revisit and analyse our decisions, their consequences, and the implications of those consequences.

If we are to improve our state of living, as individuals and as a species, then we must be freethinkers. We must, as a species, adopt the understanding that we do not have all the answers and that everything must be questioned. It is the best way to safeguard against catastrophically wrong ideas that are the root of many of our traditional institutions and political discourse.

Two simple examples of this are the denial of climate change and the teaching of evolution in schools. These are ideas that are only accepted because of arguments founded in faith, tradition, and authority. A freethinking public would not likely be guilty of teaching creationism or denying climate change.

This is the greatest success of science and freethinking. The scientists made freethinking the foundation of their institution. With this foundation, science has been able to survive against traditional backlash for centuries. Not only has science successfully weathered human crises, but it has also been the driving mechanism for implementing the solutions to those crises as they have arisen. There is no better reason for free-thinking.

Is it more probable for freethinking to be accepted among the younger sub-population than the older sub-population?

Yes, but I think this is more a function of humanity than it is a function of freethinking as a concept. Young people are more open about things because in general they have learned less

about life than older people. Even in religious or non-freethinking societies the young tend to be more revolutionary and looking for change, positive or negative.

Older people had to fight different fights and so they chose to ignore the fights they could not win or fights that weren't as important to win. Younger folks walk in with the freedoms of those battles ready to take on new battles. The new atheist or freethinking revolution would not have happened the way it did a few years ago had it not been for the social civil movements other marginalised populations mobilised for in the past.

What are the popular community activities provided by Hispanic American Freethinkers?

HAFree offers monthly meetups encouraging its members to get together for social and educational purposes. Since its foundation in 2010, it has an annual picnic, sometimes inviting other secular groups such as Ex-Muslims of North America. Many of its members participate in “tabling” at conferences, festivals, and similar in order to inform the public about critical thinking, science, and scepticism of everything, especially the so-called “supernatural” claims. HAFree works with other organizations on everything from separation of religion and government issues, to educating people on death with dignity issues. HAFree also partners up with other organisations such as Humanistas Seculares de Puerto Rico and American Atheists to put together conferences that are beneficial to the communities we are trying to serve.

What are some of the demographics of Hispanic American Freethinkers? Who is most likely to join Hispanic American Freethinkers? (Age, sex, sexual orientation, and so on.)

Hispanics (a minority ethnic group in the U.S.) are made up of people of all races. Some are born here and some were born abroad. Some speak Spanish, some speak English only, and most are bilingual to one degree or another. Family backgrounds come from every country in the Americas and, even if not self-identified as Hispanic or Latino, they are all welcomed as freethinkers. Most members and supporters tend to be between age 16 and 60 with the bell curve leaning towards the late 20's and early 30's. HAFree has transgendered, gay, straight, male, and female, but we don't keep much records on such demographics.

What have been the largest activist and educational initiatives provided by Hispanic American Freethinkers? Out of these, what have been honest failures and successes?

In the past 5 or so years, HAFree has provided speakers for a couple of dozen conferences, exposing the organisation and its members to the greater growing secular community in the U.S. These presentations throughout the country have helped inform mainstream Americans about the plight of Hispanics, including the specific targeting done by religious groups including Muslims, Jehovah Witnesses, Pentecostals, and Mormons just to name a few. HAFree gives seminars in high schools and colleges on critical thinking, careers in STEM, technology futurism, etc. and its members are often asked to participate in panels about minorities in secularism.

HAFree produces a podcast in Spanish whereby topics of science and controversial issues such as abortion are discussed as well as some debates with Christian pastors in the form of

conversations about religion claims and counterclaims. Once or twice a month, HAFree members host the television show “Road to Reason – A Skeptic’s Guide to the 21st Century” in which religion, pseudoscience, superstitions, and other claims are carefully examined through the lens of science. HAFree produces a lot of online debates, brochures, t-shirts, bible stickers, buttons, and similar to help people understand better the flawed thinking of faith-based claims. In general, everything has been very successful.

On the weakness side, being an all volunteered organisation and one that is in general more mobile than most other communities (yes, Hispanics tend to move a lot), it is challenging to have continuity in some of the projects. This will sometimes lead to pauses in activities that were going well (i.e. you will notice some difference in times when publishing the HAFree podcast).

Although the organisation is 100% volunteer, funding is extremely challenging because our target communities are already far less affluent than mainstream Americans and volunteers are already tasked in doing what they are most passionate about – educating people about freethought within the Hispanic/Latino cultural environments of our Nation. Currently, HAFree has been working in creating a documentary film about Latinos in the U.S., their beliefs, and challenges as both religious and freethinkers.

Who/what are the main threats towards freethinking as a movement?

The erosion of church and state separation is the biggest problem as far as I can see. Some parts of government and religion have never been separate, despite what the constitution says. If we can continue to win those battles and not lose ground on the battles we have already won, then I think the movement will continue to flourish and improve humanity. Otherwise, things will go back towards theocracy and the freethinking movement will have to start from the beginning again.

How can people become involved with the Hispanic American Freethinkers? There’s the meetup group, and Twitter and Facebook.

Any of those are great. The directors are all available on those platforms and any of us would enjoy talking with folks that are interested in talking to us.

Any closing thoughts or feelings based on the discussion today?

No, thank you for interviewing me. Please let me know if you have any follow-up questions you would like me to address.

Thank you for your time, Emmanuel.

Sophie Gregoire Trudeau Teams Up With Global Women's Development

March 16, 2017

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

Sophie Grégoire Trudeau, who is the wife of Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau, is an advocate for both gender equality and women's empowerment. Jeff Lagerquist, reporting from CTVNews, described how Trudeau will be joining forces with "Women Deliver, Deliver for Good campaign" (Deliver for Good).

Mrs. Trudeau is an advocate for the global education of girls. Through this campaign, there will be an emphasis on climate change, education, human rights, and sexual health. That is, the pressing international concerns at the moment.

The campaign, heralded by many as much needed, is essentially a development campaign for women. It's multidimensional, comprehensive and international. During the United Nations' 61st Commission on the Status of Women, Trudeau was listed as 1 out of 5 of the main "influencers" for the initiative.

Others included "Princess Mary of Denmark; José Alberto "Pepe" Mujica Cordano, the former President of Uruguay, Dr. Alaa Murabit, the UN high-level commissioner on health employment and economic growth, and Phumzile Mlambo-Ngcuka, the UN Under-Secretary-General and Executive Director of UN Women."

Each appointed influencer will have specified roles with associated responsibilities. Trudeau will look at the ways in which women can increase development and progress for societies. That means globally, too. She will be the fulcrum of the 5 on that discussion.

The means will be speaking engagements and other activities via Trudeau. No extra travel is needed; she will engage in this role while in her regular speaking engagements.

She, in a media release, stated, "Our societies have taken profound steps towards a more gender equal world, but at current rates, gender equality might not be achieved in our lifetimes... We must all work as one, including having men being part of the solution."

PM Justin Trudeau, Sophie Grégoire Trudeau's husband and prime minister of Canada, sent a group to New York, including "federal and provincial cabinet ministers, parliamentarians and non-governmental organisations.

At the meeting in New York with the UN Commission, the group presented the Canadian a 650 million CAD 3-year commitment for reproductive and sexual health initiatives around the world UN Under-Secretary-General and Executive Director of UN Women, Phumzile Mlambo-Ngcuka, will assist Grégoire Trudeau in the role for the work for Deliver for Good. The UN Under-Secretary General noted the celebration in the shift within Canada – a celebratory remark reflecting a reality within the UN over Canada's recent work and affirmations.

Those statements from PM Trudeau were highlighted as rare, and obviously welcome, by Mlambo-Ngcuka. Leaders of nations do not speak like this, according to Mlambo-Ngcuka. There is a growing concern over the conservatism that can, and is, dampening the socially—internationally speaking—progressive steps made for the advancement of women and girls regarding their rights, and so health and wellbeing.

“By denying women and girls their fundamental rights, we are preventing societies from reaching their full potential,” Grégoire Trudeau said.

Politics News in Brief March 16th 2017

March 16, 2017

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

Big data transforms politics

According to Vox, through an analysis and summary of a column by NBC's Chuck Todd and Carrie Dann, it was found that big data plays a massive force for the transformation of politics in the United States, and likely elsewhere.

"Politics "broke" because the system is paralysed by polarisation, and it's paralysed by polarisation because technology and demographic data have made it easier (and less risky) for campaigns to target their base instead of appealing to a broad swath of voters."

The information about and on voters provided by the digital revolution has given political folks the ability to have precise information about their constituencies, about the general public. With big data, huge computation, and largesse in finance and information, politics has been changed. Voters can be mobilised like never before.

How BJP secured pole position: To remain central pillar of Indian politics, it must ensure opponents don't gang up

The Times of India reports that the BJP and Prime Minister Narendra Modi, based on the electoral results from throughout 5 states, "have secured pole position in Indian politics." It is an echo of the huge win from 2014 before.

Between 1999 and 2004, the Times of India noted that the leadership of PM Vajpayee felt as if a post-Congress era. There was a long 25-year period of coalition governments, but "very few thought a Congress revival likely."

For 10 years, Congress revived and ran the country. According to the article author, Congress seems unable to accomplish the task, to do it again – or revive and run India for 10 years. That is, it is "apolitical, out of touch and wrong instincts at its highest levels."

UK fate sealed

The Guardian reports that, "Nicola Sturgeon has accused Theresa May of sealing the fate of the United Kingdom after the prime minister rejected her demand for a second Scottish independence referendum before the Brexit talks conclude."

It was noted by the first minister that the stance taken by May is both unacceptable and outrageous. This was made after the insistence on the immediate present being the time for the referendum by the prime minister.

Sturgeon described directly that this amounts to an argument for independence because "Westminster thinks it has got the right to block the democratically elected mandate of the Scottish government and the majority in the Scottish parliament. History may look back on today and see it as the day the fate of the union was sealed."

An Interview with Rob Boston – Communications Director, Americans United

March 17, 2017

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

How did you become involved in the separation of church and state, personally?

I would say there are two reasons why I got so interested in separation of church and state. One is that as a child, I attend a Catholic school for eight years. We were required to pray three times a day. This was a private school, so they had the right to do that, but I found it off-putting. The prayers took on the air of a by-rote ritual, the sort of thing you did just to get through it. These mandated prayers certainly didn't feel very spiritual. In ninth grade, I switched to a public school. Of course, there were no mandated prayers there, and I much preferred that situation. I became a very big opponent of coercive, mandated forms of religion and concluded that faith has to be voluntary, or it doesn't mean anything. This led me to support the separation of church and state.

The second reason is my reading of history. I've always enjoyed the study of history, and my reading in this area has made it abundantly clear to me that combinations of religion and government simply do not work. They are bad for both church and state. You end up with one of two things: a nightmarish theocracy, such as we saw with Christianity in the Middle Ages and still see today in some hard-line Muslim nations, or a devitalised state church, which we see in some European countries.

You are the director of communications of Americans United for Separation of Church and State. What tasks and responsibilities come with being the director of communications?

Americans United publishes a monthly magazine of news and analysis of church-state issues called *Church & State*, which I edit. I write for that magazine and other publications as well. I'm also responsible for AU's outreach to the media. AU's Executive Director, Barry W. Lynn, is often quoted in the media and has done a lot of cable news programs, which we coordinate. We try to get the word out to the average American through the media – both traditional and new media – as much as possible. Our website, www.au.org, "Wall of Separation" blog and various social media platforms such as **Facebook**, **Twitter** and **Instagram** are vitally important outreach tools. We try to reach people in many different ways. Some people really enjoy social media, so we are active there. But I also believe that traditional forms of communication are still important, so I give about eight to ten public speeches per year.

In general, what are the perennial threats to church and state separation in the United States? There are too many to cover in the interview here, but there are more resources on the website.

There are certain issues that just keep popping up. The role of religion in public education is huge; that is a perennial issue in this country, and it includes things like prayer in schools,

teaching about religion objectively, creationism, etc. The question of taxpayer support for religion is also big. Here we deal with things like school vouchers and “faith-based” initiatives (AU’s view, of course, is that all religious enterprises should be funded with private dollars, never tax money). A third issue deals with religion’s role in the public square. By this I mean the battles over Ten Commandments displays at courthouses and disputes over nativity scenes on government property in December. AU has been involved in many of those cases, arguing that sectarian symbols are fine for houses of worship, but they don’t belong on government property since the state has an obligation to represent us all.

I would single out two more issues: One is the proper role of religion in politics. Religious groups have the right to speak out on issues, but under U.S. law they are prohibited from intervening in elections by endorsing or opposing candidates. It has been a challenge to get some houses of worship to respect that law. The final issue is the meaning of religious freedom. At Americans United, we believe religious freedom gives you the right to worship, or not, as you see fit. But it gives you no right to harm others or take away their rights. Lately, we’ve been hearing arguments that owners of businesses or even government employees, such as county clerks, should not have to serve certain people (mainly members of the LGBTQ community) if those people somehow “offend” the religious beliefs of the business owner or the government employee. AU believes this is a perversion of the concept of religious freedom, and we have an entire project, **Protect Thy Neighbor**, that works to counter it.

How does Americans United for Separation of Church and State work to keep these boundaries fixed rather than fluid?

We do this in several ways. Members of our Legal Department work in and out of court to protect separation of church and state. Over the years, we’ve won several notable courtroom victories. Our Legislative Department works to stop dangerous bills in Congress and in state legislatures. It is always better to block a bad bill if you can rather than have to fight it in court. AU’s Field Department organizes people locally and gives them the tools they need to stand up for separation in their towns and states. This is important because lawmakers would rather hear from constituents than a group based in Washington, D.C. We also educate people. We give them information about what church-state separation means and why it is important. This is crucial because Religious Right groups have launched an aggressive campaign to turn the American people away from church-state separation. We must counter that.

What are some of the more egregious cases of violation of church and state separation in American history?

Many public schools sponsored daily prayer and Bible reading until the Supreme Court put a stop to it in 1962 and ’63. Non-Christian students and even some who were Christian but disagreed with the content of the prayers were forced to take part. This was a grotesque violation of the fundamental right of conscience. In a related issue, we had to struggle in this country to win the right to teach evolution in public schools. Some states had laws banning it, and we fought to overturn those. Even today, bills that would promote the teaching of creationism or water-down instruction about evolution surface in state legislatures every year.

There are other examples: Powerful religious groups for many years made the sale of birth control illegal (even for married couples), and religiously based censorship of books, magazines, movies and art exhibits was once common. And of course we know how right-wing religious groups suppressed the rights of the LGBTQ community. We had to fight in the courts and through the culture to change these things, and today there are still forces working to drag us back to the 1950s.

Who are the unexpected allies in the maintenance of secular values in American culture?

The support of the religious community has been absolutely essential. Most U.S. religious leaders understand the need for secular government; they appreciate it, and they help us protect it. Americans United was founded in 1947 largely by religious leaders, so we know how important their voice is. Today, religious and non-religious people work together through Americans United to ensure that freedom for all remains the law of the land. That coalition must be kept intact to keep the church-state wall high and firm.

Is there ever a valid, even sound, justification for temporary freezing of the standard separation of church and state?

I can't think of any. In fact, when this happens, it usually results in something negative. For example, political leaders may invoke "God and country" rhetoric to pursue certain policy goals that may not be in the best interests of the people. Generally speaking, when I hear political leaders spouting off constantly about religion, I get suspicious. What are they trying to get us to do? I speak here not of sincerely devout leaders but of those cynical people who seek to use appeals to faith as a tool to control others. Remember, sincerely religious people don't have to wear their faith on their sleeves or wave it around like a flag in a parade – only hypocrites do that.

With the current Trump Administration, does Americans United for Separation of Church and State see new threats to the separation of church and state?

To be blunt, the Trump administration has been a disaster for the separation of church and state. During the campaign, Trump courted right-wing evangelicals, and they turned out for him in record numbers. Now he's paying them back. Trump has vowed to repeal the federal law that bars non-profit groups, including houses of worship, from intervening in elections by endorsing or opposing candidates for public office. He wants to spend \$20 billion in taxpayer dollars on a reckless school voucher plan. He believes fundamentalist Christian business owners should have the right to deny services to members of the LGBTQ community. He seems to have a limited understanding of science. No doubt, we're going to have our hands full for the next four years.

What are the more frequent, daily/weekly/monthly issues dealt with by Americans United for Separation of Church and State?

I've mentioned religion in public schools a few times already. That issue really is a constant. Our attorneys strive to resolve matters outside of court, and they receive a steady stream of complaints about violations in this area. It has been more than 50 years since the Supreme Court

handed down the school prayer rulings, yet we continue to see these problems. I think most people who work in public education understand that pushing religion isn't their job, but it only takes a few bad actors to create problems.

What have been the largest activist and educational initiatives provided by Americans United for Separation of Church and State? Out of these, what have been honest failures and successes?

I think we've done a great job educating people about the historical and legal foundations of church-state separation in America. Some people may not like what our history says, but the information is out there for anyone who wants to objectively examine it. We've effectively countered and debunked Religious Right lies about church-state separation.

We've also done a very good job, both in and out of court, of defending the religious neutrality of the public education system. I'm very proud of the role AU played in a 2005 lawsuit that removed intelligent design creationism from public schools in Dover, Pa. That decision served as a warning to other schools and has helped put the brakes on similar proposals to teach the Bible as science in our public schools. Our efforts to educate people about the law prohibiting houses of worship from endorsing or opposing candidates have been in-depth and persuasive. Polls show that a large majority of Americans agree with us on that issue. We've also done important work highlighting the dangers of "faith-based" initiatives and government funding for religion generally. I'm also proud of our work defending the rights of the LGBTQ and non-theistic communities, which has really escalated in recent years.

One area where we've lost ground is tax funding for sectarian schools, specifically through voucher plans. We put up a good fight, but the Supreme Court upheld Ohio's voucher plan in 2002. Since then, we've not been able to fight voucher programs in federal courts. We've had some success fending them off in state courts, but the loss at the federal level was a blow. I should note that we lost ground over that issue mainly due to politics. During the terms of Ronald Reagan and the first George Bush, some very conservative judges were put on the Supreme Court. They simply did not support church-state separation. You see the result. I always remind people that there is a strong connection between the candidates they support for president and Senate and the type of justices we end up with on the Supreme Court.

How can people get involved with Americans United for Separation of Church and State, even donate to it?

The best thing to do is go to our website, www.au.org. There, people can learn about the work we do, join and donate. At the site, you can also find out if there is a local AU chapter in your area. If local activism is your thing, you'll want to get plugged into a chapter. And remember, if you join Americans United, you'll start receiving *Church & State* magazine. Our members find that to be an interesting and informative resource.

Thank you for your time, Rob.

My pleasure.

US Regressing on Human Rights – CFI

March 18, 2017

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

A United States (US) organisation, based and mainly operating in—though the United Kingdom does have one too run by **Dr. Stephen Law** entitled **CFI-UK**—has reported on the recent decline in the human rights status of the US. The organisation is Center for Inquiry (CFI).

CFI is, more or less, a mix of different views, organisations, and themes such as the Committee for Skeptical Inquiry, and the Council for Secular Humanism, and the Richard Dawkins Foundation for Reason & Science.

One of their organisational representatives, Michael de Dora, who is the central representation to the United Nations (UN) of CFI and president of the United Nations NGO Committee on Freedom of Religion or Belief, **described** the current situation for human rights in the US to the UN.

As CFI is devoted to the advancement of “reason, science, and secular humanism,” the work at the UN is important for the US and its constituency within it.

The work is important for the scientific and technological flagship status that America earned through smart immigration policy, post-secondary and professional training, and the prioritisation of big projects and initiatives to create a culture steeped in science.

At the UN Human Rights Council within Geneva, de Dora noted the declining human rights defender status of the US because of its rather regressive policies surrounding human rights for its citizens, and for its influence on human rights abroad.

In **the speech**, de Dora made mention of the Trump Administration’s “appeals to xenophobia, its hostility to a free press, and the rescinding of protections for transgender individuals.” CFI is devoted to human rights and dignity for everyone “at home and abroad.”

“We have been disturbed by the recent rise in baseless, xenophobic rhetoric and actions by political leaders, and heightened social hostilities, in many states...” he said, “...there has also been a wave of proposals to criminalise protests, and an increase in threats and attacks — some deadly — on religious minorities.”

He urged the government to serve as a force for good, to choose to do so too. With special consultative status to the UN, de Dora is able to advocate for humanist values in addition to freedom of expression around the world.

This includes one prominent case, who you may have heard about, in the dissident Raif Badawi, who is a Saudi and is currently imprisoned and has been for some time. He is a focal point in a larger fight to protect the freedom of thought and speech of bloggers – for example, those Bangladeshi bloggers who have been murdered by Islamists.

In the full statement by de Dora, he noted that worldwide human rights crises require immediate solutions. However, the expediting of these actions can be dampened because of the regressive acts and decisions of powerful international state actors.

“We also urge states to engage with the U.S. to ensure the protection of human rights there, and around the world,” de Dora **said**.

UN Secretary General Speaks Out on Decline in Women's Empowerment – Men and Women Must Unite

March 19, 2017

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

United Nations (UN) secretary-general, António Guterres, made an open statement about the **decline** of global women's rights. There was a 2-week conference on the fight for gender equality at the UN headquarters in New York City, New York.

In reaction to the recent “global gag rule” from the Trump Administration of the US, women's rights and empowerment became an important international issue. The global gag rule cut US funding to groups that offered abortion services.

Around the same time, Putin's Russia, known for its flouting of women's rights, removed the punishment for domestic violence. These ‘cast a long shadow on the annual gathering of the Commission on the Status of Women’. Guterres considered this a generalised attack on the rights of women—their equality and empowerment.

“Globally, women are suffering new assaults on their safety and dignity,” **Guterres said**, “Some governments are enacting laws that curtail women's freedoms. Others are rolling back legal protections against domestic violence.”

Guterres reaffirmed the aphorism that women's rights remain human rights. In the important speech, he made note of the ongoing difficulties for women around the world, but without specific mention of a particular place.

Some have speculated that the direction of the commentary was towards the Islamic State, **according to Conservative Review**. Nicole Russell, in the Conservative Review article, said, “Guterres couldn't be more right in saying women around the world face incredible discrimination, violence, and other atrocities just for their gender.”

While Trump himself, and the administration by decision and political maneuvers—and economic ones too, have openly made their anti-abortion views known, the curtailment of the funding for abortion and reproductive health services will likely have more women, and so girls and children in general, suffering because of the known benefits for women and children that have access to these vital services.

There are nuances to the discrimination. For example, in the other prominent nation case of Russian, the Russian President Vladimir Putin, in signing the Bill, reduces the penalties for the jail term, “if the assault is a first offence and does not cause serious injury,” **Daily Nation reports**.

Phumzile Mlambo-Ngcuka, the UN Women executive director, said the need to come together around the sexual and reproductive health rights of women was more important than ever. If protections are waning, then they need to be more protected.

By 2030, the UN made the ambitious goal of have gender parity or equality.

Will this happen? I do not know. Is it reasonable? Yes, and no. Just from a mildly informed level, not an internal-to-UN perspective, yes, for the most part, it seems as if doable.

At another level, no, because too many nations violate them, some states with power to change the international situation for women act irresponsibly based on ignorant, non-scientific positions. I don't despair here, but there will be hardships.

And make no mistake, many women who would otherwise not die in childbirth or in getting an unsafe abortion, where previously a safe one was available, will either be seriously injured or even die based on the "global gag rule." It is an ominous rule title to me.

But these are the main, current concerns for women – the domestic abuse Bill and the global gag rule. The ILO, the International Labour Organisation, **said**, at the current pace, it will take about 70 years to close the gender wage gap.

So there's the perennial issues of work – "perennial" relative to the Millennial generation – and economic empowerment. Mlambo-Ngcuka, relatively accurately with a hint of hyperbole, describes this as "daylight robbery," or a loss of security and income into the future. Guterres continued that men need to become involved in women's advocacy, empowerment, and rights. I agree with him.

As a man, and (obviously) so not a woman, and taking part in advanced industrial society and its fruits, I am given a life, likely in the top 1/10th of 1% in the world. Some questions arise. Do privileges emerge? I think so. Do responsibilities arise? Possibly. That raises more questions. Do responsibilities, or obligations, that are necessarily attached to it come about in a free society? Yes, and no; yes, the responsibilities or obligation necessarily attach to them; no, individual citizens should not, or can not, be coerced or forced into enacting them in a free society, because it's a free society. That means the freedom to do wrong by doing nothing; that also means the freedom to do right by doing something, and even sometimes nothing.

If someone lives a good life – with good health and well being, then responsibilities or obligations exist with it, to some degree, to one's fellow human beings within reason, one is surely responsible to one's fellow human beings? Put another way, if a free society provides for an individual—and if an individual in a free society should not or can not be coerced, or forced, to think or act in specific ways, then the living of a good life – with good health and well-being, it implies responsibilities or obligations, to some degree, to one's fellow human beings within reason without coercion or force to think or act in specific ways. So the obligations are there, but the freedom to act rightly or wrongly is there too. These are perilous times for women's advocacy, empowerment, and rights. And men have a role, as per Guterres; that is, necessary obligations, but still have the freedom to choose wrong over right, as some leaders and administrations have apparently done.

Religion News in Brief March 19th 2017

March 19, 2017

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

Religion and work a 'hot topic'

According to the Society for Human Resource Management, the relationship between religion and work continues to be a complex one. It's a 'hot topic' – so to speak – now. There are notes to the Jewish community centres being vandalised.

Such vandal is worryingly accompanied by bomb threats. This is in a time of restricted immigration by President Trump as well. It does not go unnoticed by attorneys and others.

Jonathan A. Segal, an attorney with Duane Morris in Philadelphia and New York City, said, "What happens out there [in public] ... can affect our workplaces...This is a hot topic and getting hotter every day."

LGBT talk about religion

The Maroon states that, "Sex, politics and religion are three topics people are never supposed to discuss in polite company, but for some members of the Loyola community, they're a major part of life." Does this need to be the case?

A biology sophomore in the LGBT community within Loyola University, Kayla Noto, said, "When I was younger, trying to fit into the Catholic community as well as come into my own as a member of the LGBT community was very difficult and ultimately became impossible."

She described being raised in the Catholic environment and a traditional home as a result. There appeared to be "tension" with the sexual orientation as a member of the LGBT community and the particular brand of religious upbringing.

Jehovah's Witnesses protesting Russian authorities

Newsweek reports that the Jehovah's Witnesses in Russia are protesting being labelled an *extremist religion*, by the Russian justice ministry, which, apparently, handles these affairs on behalf of the Russian people.

The Jehovah's Witnesses are protesting the Russian authorities because of the recent move. But from the view of the Russian authorities, the Jehovah's Witnesses are viewed "with suspicion."

"In a statement, the Jehovah's Witnesses press office wrote that the Russian Supreme Court had revealed a suit had been filed on behalf of Moscow's justice ministry seeking the 'liquidation and prohibition' of the faith and its activities."

A Call For the Reclamation of Music

March 19, 2017

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

Steve Martin produced one of the first hymns for the atheist crowd in, well, probably ever, which he termed the “the entire atheist hymnal”. And its actually very good, not only because he’s a talented musician and an extremely gifted comedian—among the best ever by a reasonable IMDb peer review measurement -, but because a) there’s nothing to compare it to so the hymn remains both the best in music and the worst of its kind by definition internally and b) I have sung in a university choir and find the song ‘pleasing to the ear’.

Martin sings the hymn with a quartet of male singers in the performance, which has, likely, become the first staple of the atheist hymnal genre—hopefully more to come—and goes against the expected stereotype from two angles. Angle one, those looking at the rather thin, tawdry, and rather small set of texts—simply Hume and Voltaire for starters—devoted to atheism as compared to those—such as Augustine, Anselm, and Aquinas—oozing with praise to the Heavens, and God the Almighty Father, and with tacit, nay explicit, statement of how “so absolutely huge” or simply big is the Theity reflect the musical world. Religion, or worship and communal rituals, dominates the historical, and so the present, landscape.

Take, for example, *Herz Und Mund Und Tat Und Leben*, or “Heart and Mouth and Deed and Life,” a beautiful piece of work by Johann Sebastian Bach and one of the more memorable pieces of music in the older Western canon, which brings mist to my eyes, sometimes. Or one closer to home, by Bach once more, played with a dead, reasonably famous, Canadian pianist named Glenn Gould and accompanied by another artist, a singer, named Russell Oberlin, it was entitled Bach Cantata 54. It is another moving piece with a sentiment for the transcendent; something outside and other, even infinitely mysterious—lovely piece. So angle one is the communal and social, and well-established, music is seen as religious. Many people coming to think of the ways in which the religious music is in congregations as, in some way, akin to these pieces of music.

Angle two, the music typically associated with irreligious individuals does not tend to associate with the communal or the social, but, rather, with the a-social, antisocial, or the deviant. There seems to me a negative valuation of some music, which then becomes associated with irreligiosity, even Satanism, including the rock n’ roll and head bargin’ band movements. Those two angles, of many, seem to influence the perception, and so the motivation, for the development of an irreligious genre of music, even hymns—until now.

Feminism and “Constructive Impatience”: The Mood for Change, for a Change

March 20, 2017

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

International Women’s Day is done and gone for the year. But Women’s History Month marches forward into its twilight days until the 2018 version comes around, one of further change, but the issues, concerns, and obligations arise year-round. Also, here’s a bad segue:

‘**What a Wonderful World**’ was a great song by Louis Armstrong – 26,000,000+ views, wow. Anyway, this song – lyrics and tune – were running through my mind when I came across a **phrase** recently by the executive director of United Nations Women (UN Women). I thought, “What a wonderful saying.”

Phumzile Mlambo-Ngcuka is the UN Women under-secretary-general and the executive director of UN Women. She made a statement at the 61st Commission on the Status of Women (CSW61). I loved it. Mlambo-Ngcuka called this “constructive impatience.” I’ll explain in a bit. But I loved it because I hadn’t thought about that before. Maybe not “thought about that before,” but ‘thought about *in that way* before.’

It was about a week ago on March 13. Mlambo-Ngcuka spoke in front of group of distinguished internationals. She noted that the Commission included a series of reviews on the progress made for women and girls.

These are ‘barometers’ “of the change – of the progress – we are making on achieving a world that is free of gender discrimination and inequality,” she said, “...a world that leaves no-one behind. It will help us measure achievement of the implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.”

2030, as far as I know it, is the date set for the 50-50 world agenda set by the United Nations (UN). It seems ambitious, and doable, but, gosh, that’s a lot of work. Just take the **World Economic Forum** (WEF), with its ***Gender Gap Report***, these are annual reports on the equality of women.

I suggest even a skim of them. It is rather remarkable. It’s not a total equality metric, though. Why’s that? Because if women surpass men by more than 50% in a given domain, this is taken as equality, even if the domain is dominated by women at 95%, say.

But given the massively tipped scales against women on numerous metrics, then the analysis from the WEF in the Gender Gap Reports can provide comprehensive, relatively fair, representation of the situation for women, and by implication men.

And by the WEF estimation, the gender gap will not close until 2186. Not much for to do then, so two options: pick up the pace, or make this a legacy project (or both). I like the third tacit option. We need to hand the torch at some point, but can do much, much better than now.

According to the Secretary-General report on the CSW61 session, the “priority theme” was “Women’s Economic Empowerment in the Changing World of Work”. That means economies inclusive of women in ways that can break the cycles of poverty. Women appear to be a linchpin in the inclusive, and I would add sustainable, economies.

In the statement, she continued, “Currently, in the gender equality agenda, we see progress in some areas, but we also see an erosion of gains. The much-needed positive developments are not happening fast enough. We also need to work together to make sure we reach a tipping point in the numbers of lives changed.” How many, and how quickly? That’s her emphasis.

I am paying attention, and in a Canadian context – work with what you know, and try to set an example here-ish and now-ish to give legitimate grounds for changing the world the better outside of my maple syrup wonderland.

Mlambo-Ngcuka talked about the Sustainable Development Goals for a wider vision and renewal of that image for those, especially at the bottom of the global strata. And as you know from a second’s reflection are mostly women and girls.

Young women affected by violence around gender, even sexual harassment in the workplace. And with the recent “Global Gag Rule,” we can be sure the restriction of what **Human Rights Watch** calls “first and foremost a human right.” So there are examples of the restricted equitable access, which isn’t equitable at all, to abortion and reproductive health services.

“Intersection” is an overused term, almost stripped of meaning and left bereft of substance. But it seems popular, so why change? I’ll use it for sake of ease. The intersection of the sexual harassment, workplace discrimination, varying degrees of inequality seen in the provision of abortion and reproductive health services, and the extrapolation of 2186 as the year for equality by the WEF Gender Gap Report lead to the consistent, if not conclusions then, themes.

She spoke to the additional, specified concerns of other minorities within minorities based on “sexual orientation, disability, older age, race, or being part of an indigenous community.”

These various intersections, even intersections of these intersections – see, fancy and academic – as statistical tendencies might be grounds for more often real rather than perceived mild to major discrimination in these arenas of professional and public life.

Now, what was the phrase in context? **Here**:

We need swift and decisive action that can be brought about by the world of work so that we do not leave women even further behind.

Excellencies, let us agree to constructive impatience.

The Sustainable Development Goals give us a framework to work for far-reaching changes. In this session of the Commission we will be able to bring renewed focus to the

needs of those who are currently being left behind and those who are currently furthest behind. [Emphasis added.]

The Commission was organised around the needs of women. CSW61 was a high-level international event through the UN with specific emphasis on UN Women. Mlambo-Ngcuka said, “Constructive impatience,” because of the continual denial of human rights to women.

Of course, these rights are newer than, say, the divine right of kings. But how long is reasonable to wait? Millions of women’s lives are adversely affected, so girls and children and families, each day. Change needs to happen. And outside moral, and health and wellbeing, arguments, we can reflect on the economic benefits, which Mlambo-Ngcuka covered in her statement.

Much of the information I’ve learned, or reviewed, in the process of researching and writing this article come from the comprehensive statements by her.

“Investment into the care economy of 2 per cent of GDP in just seven countries could create over 21 million jobs. That would provide child care, elderly care and many other needed services.” Mlambo-Ngcuka said.

Women are left behind economically. When women are deprived of the equal access to the jobs market, or the training for the jobs market, and I mean this emphatically, societies lose. Maybe, that’s another tacit takeaway, or even explicit, from the extensive statement by Mlambo-Ngcuka.

A modern problem without a single solution, which needs a multipronged approach. The relatively developed and the undeveloped, and outright failed, states in the early to middle 21st century might be the ones, most else considered, that provide the implementation of women’s rights through advocacy followed by empowerment. It feels good.

It sounds easy, but, quite frankly, it will very much be a difficult road ahead of us. How do we move ahead and change the situation? How do we forge a new path into a world worth preserving? Identifying the problems – somewhat done, and staking out evolving ideals seems reasonable – more or less accomplished. Solutions, anyone?

I see predictive statements tied to a bunch of “ought to” or “should.” ‘Such, and such, a series of measurements in national performances correlate positively with the health of a nation and the empowerment of women’ – but then I think about it. What does this actually mean? And I kind of know.

These measurements are the basis for confidence in furtherance of women’s rights *through these means without specification on the exact means in each case – cultures differ, histories differ, economies differ, and educational and literacy levels differ.*

So within the statements by Mlambo-Ngcuka, I feel as though this means the specific solutions within ‘such, and such’ a set of boundaries will improve the economic performance of nations, which happen to, at the same time, improve the implementation of women’s rights. It’s moral if you want moral reasons. It’s economic if you want economic reasons.

But the trend lines are clear.

“More than half of all women workers around the world—and up to 90 per cent in some countries—are informally employed. We cannot ignore them. This sector is just too big to fail.” Mlambo-Ngcuka said, “...Lessons from countries already making change are important to share.

For this Commission, 35 countries have provided input on the review theme of how lessons from the Millennium Development Goals are being reflected in national processes and policies.”

That’s an incredible wealth of information and is sincere reason for hope for finding specific general solutions to pervasive problems surrounding women’s rights within the international community.

“At the same time, over the last two years, a resounding global gender equality compact has been accumulated, through the Beijing+20 Review, Agenda 2030 itself, the Paris Agreement on Climate Change, the New Urban Agenda and the New York Declaration on Migrants and Refugees.”

It’s not only an outstanding reason for hope; it’s an outstanding achievement in motion towards equality by the stated 2030 goal, if not the comprehensive by 2186. And the right attitude can always be good start. So how? Well: “constructive impatience.”

Education News in Brief March 21st 2017

March 21, 2017

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

Chinese textbooks translated for UK

According to The Guardian, there has been a “historic” agreement, or “deal,” between HarperCollins and one Shanghai publishing house for the translation of books to be used in schools in the United Kingdom.

Shanghai and Beijing are two of the wealthiest cities in China in addition to producing some of the best math students in the world, which contrasts with British students, in general, who rank far behind their Asian cohort.

The agreement was signed with the education division of HarperCollins. The deal is for a series of maths textbooks. Managing director of Collins Learning, Colin Hughes, was quoted as saying, “To my knowledge this has never happened in history before – that textbooks created for students in China will be translated exactly as they have been developed, and sold for use in British schools.”

UK Education Expo for Omanis

Muscat Daily reports that “Ahlam Higher Education’s latest edition of the UK Education Expo officially began at the Grand Millenium Hotel on Monday. The two-day expo was inaugurated by H E Sayyid Salim bin Musallam al Busaidi, Undersecretary for Administrative Affairs in the Ministry of Civil Service in the presence of Russ Dixon, Deputy Ambassador, British Embassy, Muscat.”

H E Sayyid Busaidi made a particular note to the importance of higher education for Omani students because of the growth and diversification of the Omani economy will require students and parents “informed about a wide variety of programmes available.

The managing director and student adviser of Al Ahlam Higher Education Services, Kate Clarke, described the importance of education for “consistent, inclusive and equitable economic growth.” That is, the growth that typifies the standard sustainable development of a nation.

Sandbach education protests

BBC News states that 100s “of parents have taken part in a protest march against what they claim are “unfair” school funding plans.” There is a new national formula. The formula is an attempt to address the “inconsistent” funding.

There was a protest or march at Sandbach School over this funding issue. Laura Smith, the organiser, described the march as an opportunity for the parents of Cheshire to express the anger for their children being left worse off.

For Cheshire east, the national funding formula would reduce the amount of the funding per student by “£4,200, which is among the lowest in the country.” That contrasts with the Westminster schools that will receive about £6,000 per student.

Earth's Origin: New Discovery Suggests Age of Earth is 4.3 Billion Years

March 21, 2017

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

Scientists believe they have discovered a piece of that very early crust on the Earth's surface, dating back some 4.3 billion years. Image: New Zealand Herald.

The New Zealand Herald reported on the age of the Earth, and a recent scientific discovery going back a few billion years. With the Earth aged at around 4.54 billion years ago for its origin, this means the finding was very close, geologically speaking, to the origins of the Earth.

When the Solar System was beginning to form, the Earth was definitely not the more human-friendly, comparatively speaking, place that it is experienced today, especially if you can take advantage of the fruits of modern science and technology.

The discovery has placed the age of the Earth at around 4.3 billion-years-old. That's super old. The discovery is a piece of the early Earth's crust. **Some** have reported this at 4.2 billion-years-old – a hundred million years as a margin of difference is fantastical. Modern anatomical humans have, probably, been around between only 200,000 to 100,000 years.

There's something called the Canadian Shield. Its contents are estimated, the continental crust, to be about 2.7 billion years old. That this is true, many deem remarkable.

There is supposed to be an elusive, probably extrapolated from expert analysis, set of contents in the Canadian Shield that run to the earliest formations of the Earth. A lot of stuff, various rock materials and crust contents, are difficult to date and provide an accurate dissecting for the geological historical record because of things like continental drift.

Continents, move, and churn, and shift, and crash and crush up against one another – and they undergo subduction. Continents slide one underneath another and on top of each other. The stuffing down back into the Earth is where the materials get recycled. So new stuff is made from the recycled parts.

So what then? It essentially would restart the clock, I guess, for any reasonable dating of the materials.

There should not be that many original, unrecycled pieces, understandably. In the “eastern shore of the Hudson Bay in Northwestern Quebec, in Canada,” some professional geologists found this “sliver.”

This sliver is a piece of earliest Earth rock. Jonathan O'Neil, an assistant professor of geology at the University of Ottawa, and others published the findings in the prestigious and well-regarded journal, *Science*.

“I think that it’s a piece of the original crust. It was cooked, but I think it’s still very close to what it used to be,” **O’Neil said**. And it’s a substantial uptick in the reports of the recorded dates in prior pieces of rock. The earliest have been only 2.7 billion-years-old. Not much, comparatively.

As the old core of North America, the continent, the rock was discovered in a huge patch of granite. The sliver is apparently basalt, or volcanic rock. It can be found, at some point or other, beneath the oceans.

Using new dating methods, the date of the rock, likely, came as a surprise. It is expected to provide insight to the early Earth’s geodynamics. O’Neil said, “If we understand early processes that shape our planet, we can maybe understand other planets: Why are they different? Or are they similar and where in their life they drift apart in terms of geology?”

An Interview with James Avery Fuchs – Program Director at Humanist Society of Greater Phoenix

March 21, 2017

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

James, you are the program director for the Humanist Society of Greater Phoenix (HSGP). When was the moment of ethical, political awakening for becoming a Humanist?

I've always believed in the importance of doing the right thing, even if it's not the easiest thing, and I've been an atheist since about the beginning of my teenage years. However, I didn't have community as an atheist, and struggled with maintaining a sense of greater purpose and dealing with the eventuality of death, so during a few rough patches in my childhood and young adulthood, I delved back into religion as an escape from the realities of life. Those explorations lasted a year at most, though, as the more familiar I became with various religious texts, the less comfortable I was with accepting the tenets, especially since any faith in a god or gods I had was tenuous at best.

It wasn't until the last few years that I learned of humanism, and the Humanist Society of Greater Phoenix, but as I delved further into both the organisation and the tenets of the American Humanist Association (AHA) and the International Humanist and Ethical Union (IHEU) (HSGP is an official chapter of these organisations, among others), I felt like I had finally found a community and philosophy that spoke to me.

What is humanism to you? How does this inform professional work?

To me, humanism in its most simple form is defined as "Atheists and agnostics dedicated to doing good." Humanism is a secular application of the drive to make a positive difference in people's lives and the world as a whole, and that drive and passion for positive change and action is at the heart of nearly all my choices, professional and otherwise.

As a trans educator, I am seeking to create a better, safer world for others. When I give workshops and speeches on consent, boundaries, and toxic relationships, I have the same goal.

With my podcast, "A Queer Was Here," I seek that same positive future through providing approachable education on various LGBT+ topics. As a spoken word poet and author, my drive for positive change is the same. As Program Director of HSGP, I also seek to improve the world. And as a human being, I seek to be as ethical and moral as I can be, guided by my sense of right and wrong and my openness to changing my perception of situations and topics with the introduction of new knowledge or perspectives.

I try to live my life as a whole with the same singular goal and purpose that humanism highlights in its tenets.

What tasks and responsibilities come with being the program director for the HSGP?

My main responsibility is booking and introducing the Sunday speakers we have twice a month (except for December, which only has one), but I also vote on board decisions and try to help out wherever I can with other events and tasks.

As well, you are in a unique position as not only an author, but a public speaker and spoken word poet. Some of the topics relate to being trans. How do you engage audiences, whether through books, speaking in public, or poetry, on trans topics?

Most of the speeches I give on trans topics are educational ones, and many of them are directed at non-trans audiences. As the public has become more aware of trans folks, they've been looking for sources willing to educate, so speeches that I book on trans topics generally have fairly large audiences. I've found being approachable and calm makes people a lot more willing to listen and change their minds on trans topics, though I of course understand that education is not the responsibility of trans individuals. However, it's something I enjoy being able to offer.

When it comes to poetry, I find that it helps to emphasise the emotions various situations evoke rather than the situations themselves, like I do in the poem "The Sound of Home," in which I write about how it felt to discover the word "transgender," or address broader situations using trans topics as examples, as I do in my poem "Stage Fright," in which I talk about coming out on stage and learning to associate fear with success.

Also, what are common misconceptions, or common questions from audiences about being trans?

A lot of people unfamiliar with trans identities will conflate them with sexual orientation, thinking an individual assigned female at birth who is interested in men, for instance, will then become interested in women instead after transitioning, which is not usually the case.

Also, many people don't understand what transitioning means. It's not just some one arbitrary surgery. Trans individuals undergo a variety of surgical and hormonal and legal changes in their transition, and some only choose to take hormones, or have one of the many possible surgeries, or do none of the above, with reasons as varied as the individuals themselves. These procedures are often life-saving when individuals do elect to have them, however. The trans population has a suicide attempt rate of nearly nine times that of the general populace.

People also often confuse gender expression with gender identity, when in many cases, they do not interrelate at all. Gender identity is a person's internal sense of where they fall in or out of the gender spectrum. Gender expression refers to how your outward behaviours and appearance fit within societal gender norms, whether they match with your gender or sex or not. Just like there are cis women who are mechanics (a mostly male-dominated career in the US) or who prefer pants over skirts, or cis men who are stay-at-home dads (a mostly female-dominated position in the US) or wear make-up, there are also trans women and trans men who fit these categories, and those things do not invalidate their identities.

You write, a lot (available on Lulu and Amazon). You've written about seven books since January, 2014. Aside from life as a trans individual and humanism, what are other common themes of the texts?

Some common themes include love and heartbreak, mental health, politics, science as metaphor, and introspection, as well as grief and friendship.

Also, how do you keep up the writing pace?

Dedication, a prompts list I constantly add to, and a consistently engaged mind. I also just really love writing, and no longer allow the abstract concept of "writer's block" to stop my attempts to piece words together effectively.

As well, with the spoken word poetry and writing to have various platforms to express yourself, and the HSGP community of humanists, whether religious or irreligious, what is the importance of community in pursuit of artistic interests?

I think community is always incredibly important. I went through a lot of trauma as a young adult, and one of the biggest things that allowed me to heal and grow and speak was the friendships I developed among the music crowd. Having that sense of community and support, and the push to keep improving, had a tremendous effect on my future.

Does it necessarily have to be an artistic community, or simply an appreciative audience that can include artists?

Some of the people who most affected my drive to keep growing as a poet were not artists of any kind themselves. They were the people who came up to me after a performance and told me how my words had affected them, and urged me to continue. They were the people who bought my books because they wanted to show their support. They were the people who asked if they could share one of my poems in their class or support group, because I said something they hadn't been able to find the words to. They were the ones who walked up to me after a series of hard-hitting poems and wordlessly offered a hug. When listeners, or viewers, of an art form express the ways the artist's work affects them, they provide something precious.

Thank you for your time, James

Atheistic Humanism and Media Stereotypes.

March 21, 2017

Phoebe Davies-Owen and Scott Douglas Jacobsen

Humanism encompasses a range of beliefs including the theistic, such as Humanistic Judaism or Unitarian Universalism, and the non-theistic, such as atheism, agnosticism, even deism or apatheism. More than a specific set of precepts, humanism is a lifestyle incorporating a worldview. It is an ethical and philosophical stance for guidance in one's life, relations with others, and perception and conception of the nature of the world.

Unfortunately, this seems less understood by the wider public, but it is not their fault, necessarily. There are simply fewer Humanists, so fewer spokespeople and representatives; and less impetus socially and culturally, even politically, to openly advocate and promote it in the public arena to a wide audience.

Indeed, the mass media, news, and the public relations industry have enormous sway over the general public's mind and perception of social issues and others' views on the world. This extends, unfortunately, to the point of stereotyping others, e.g. atheistic humanists. Strict nonbelievers in God, gods, or the supernatural are given a negative portrayal in the popular media.

Sometimes, non-believers can have virtues such as intelligence. At other times, they can be demonised, quite literally. More often than not, the Humanist sub-population who are atheists are not represented in the media at all. So even if, or (rarely) when, an Atheist is represented in the media, they might have a virtue, but come with numerous obvious vices.

What kinds of tired tropes are there? Common, tiresome tropes assigned to atheist characters are anti-sociality, cynicism, depression, drug addiction, and narcissism. These can be seen in some characters that you may be familiar with: Brian Griffin from 'Family Guy,' Sheldon Cooper from 'The Big Bang Theory' and Dr. Gregory House in 'House.'

Brian Griffin is demonised by society for being an atheist, and is critical of religion without much thought or care for the beliefs of those he lives with. Sheldon Cooper, while possessing genius intelligence, is reliant on the faith in science and has complete disregard towards religion, stemming from his growing up in a deeply religious environment. Cooper is surrounded by friends who do believe he is often insulting and self-righteous. Also, he is initially antisocial and doesn't conform to social norms. Dr. Gregory House is, again, written and presented as a deeply intelligent but egotistical misanthrope unable and unwilling to effectively engage with the world socially, or emotionally.

House, Sheldon—but not Brian Griffin—are the leading characters of their shows, and as a result they carry it through season after season. The problem when these lead characters portrayed as Atheists/Humanists are narcissists, cynics, anti-socials is that they create stereotypes. The problem with stereotypes is that they create an image of a certain person—Atheists are conceited, highly intelligent and unfriendly—and soon we begin to view all Atheists/Has the same. This, of course, isn't true!

There may be people who fit that description outside of the TV screen, but otherwise Atheists and Humanists are a diverse group of people, encompassing people from different countries and backgrounds. While the characters we see on the TV representing the Atheist/Humanist community are interesting and amusing to watch, they don't represent the wider community and as a result Atheists/Humanists are very dramatic caricatures.

Most of us who are Atheists/Humanists don't even think about it; we just go about our lives without the belief in a supernatural creator and don't tend to make a fuss about it. We should be fighting for real representation of the community, normal everyday working families who raise their children as sceptics and who are well behaved and charitable just because you can be, without any other motivation.

Women's Empowerment in Qatar

March 23, 2017

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

Often—well, at least sometimes- I reflect on reasons why powerful international state actors, multinational corporations, major global religious denominations, and other super powerful sectors strive for women's empowerment.

Is it moral, ethical, or some efficiency deal? I don't know. But women's empowerment, according to the people that spend a lot of time on this stuff – the experts, is crucial. It's core to the development of developing societies, and to the maintenance of developed ones.

Qatar recently made an important statement about the need to provide “empowerment of women in all fields and backing all regional and international efforts in that regard.”

The Commission on the Status of Women, the 61st session, (CSW61) was a recent important event. At the CSW61, Najat Daham Al Abdullah, the director of family affairs at the Ministry of Administrative Development, Labour, and Social Affairs, was the reader for the statement on behalf of the Qatari government.

The statement at CSW61 was in the context of the vision in the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) of the United Nations at 2030. The empowerment of women is seen as an important thing. Aspects of the SDGs make specific stipulations about gender equality. Others make them more indirectly.

The 5th and the 8th goals were the emphasised goals by Al Abdullah at CSW61. Gender equality and inclusive growth were the points of emphasis. There was mention about the **Human Development Index** (HDI) as an important metric.

It is a measurement to show development of the country relative to others, and, in fact, the nation of Qatar is doing really well in **it**. It is “to emphasise that people and their capabilities should be the ultimate criteria for assessing the development of a country, not economic growth alone.” Qatar, by the HDI, describes the situation for the country as among the top 20% of the world:

Qatar's HDI value for 2015 is 0.856— which put the country in the very high human development category— positioning it at 33 out of 188 countries and territories. The rank is shared with Cyprus and Malta

That's excellent, and a healthy sign of development on economic and other factors provided by the HDI. Al Abdullah noted that the growth is intended to be equitable between sexes. Akin to other statements about international equality by 2030, Qatar has one.

It is the **Qatar National Vision 2030**: developmental vision for social, economic, human, and environmental areas of Qatari society. The website states:

During the reign of His Highness Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa Al Thani, the Father Emir, May God Protect Him, Qatar National Vision 2030 has been launched to serve as a clear road map for Qatar's future. It aims to propel Qatar forward by balancing the accomplishments that achieve economic growth with the human and natural resources. This vision constitutes a beacon that guides economic, social, human and environmental development of the country in the coming decades, so that it is inclusive and helpful for the citizens and residents of Qatar in various aspects of their lives.

The emphasis is the empowerment of women as well as the protection of women socially. This is all fabulous for the equality of women and men. Al Abdullah, on behalf of Qatar, re-affirmed the in the UN's Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women.

“Qatari women worked as ministers, ambassadors, and directors of public and private institutions. Qatari women also became the region's first judges and prosecutors, **Al Abdullah added.**”

Other stipulations, affirmations, or open statements of obligations and positive rhetoric, from the Qatari statement described the ensuring of women's right to lead balanced family and work lives and to take on earned work as they see fit – whether “diplomacy, medicine, academia and police.”

There was also discussion on issues outside of Qatar. To give assistance to the areas of the world where there are high levels of poverty and violence amongst women was considered. There was emphasis on the difficulties for Palestinian women in the occupied territories, especially in the Gaza Strip.

Where the statement “called on intensifying efforts in order to improve the situation of women in Palestine and support all her human rights, starting with the right to establish and independent Palestine states in line with international resolutions.”

Politics News in Brief March 24th 2017

March 24, 2017

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

Chinese textbooks translated for UK

According to **BBC News**, First Minister Nicola Sturgeon is seeing an increased solidarity in Scotland for the people in the UK after the terror attack on Wednesday. It has been reported that 5 people died.

The 5 died when a car was driven at pedestrians in the UK parliament. The driver leapt from the car, but was stabbed by a police officer. There was an independence referendum at the time of the attack.

The Scottish parliament “suspended” the debate. Sturgeon said, “My thoughts, as I’m sure the thoughts of everybody in Scotland tonight, are with people caught up in this dreadful event...My condolences in particular go to those who’ve lost loved ones.”

Northern Ireland stability responsibility of the UK

The Belfast Telegraph states that Prime Minister Theresa May “ruled out” direct rule of Northern Ireland – according to Enda Kenny. Downing Street ‘insists’ that the political instability of Northern Ireland remains as the responsibility of the UK Government.

Taoiseach Enda Kenny and May mutually agreed that there would not be a need to return to direct rule of Northern Ireland with “this month’s snap assembly election.” One UK spokesperson responded to Kenny.

“Political stability in Northern Ireland is the responsibility of the UK Government...We remain firmly focused on securing the resumption of devolved government and the formation of an Executive within the statutory time-frame of 27 March,” the spokesperson said.

Fathers feel afraid to ask for flexible working hours

BBC News states that “Dads who want to be more involved in the care of their children fear that asking for more flexible hours might damage their careers, the chairwoman of a new probe into the issue says.”

The Conservative MP Maria Miller stated that many employers can question the commitment of the employees when they make these requests. “44% of dads have lied about family-related responsibilities” in reports.

Working dads juggle their responsibilities. “The inquiry comes in the wake of the **2017 Modern Families Index**, authored by employment campaign group Working Families, which suggested that while family was the highest priority for fathers, half of those interviewed felt their work-life balance was increasingly a source of stress.”

Huge Neuron Hints at Consciousness

March 25, 2017

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

There was a recent **ScienceAlert** article reported on a huge neuron, which wraps itself around the circumference of the brain. It's been likened to a big winding tape worm.

It is the "first time" that researchers found a neuron wrapping around the whole circumference of a mouse brain. Usually, our images of a brain come from TV shows, Netflix, movies. And they're shown as a big piece of cauliflower, with some distinct structures, but nothing innervating the entirety of the structure, the brain.

It was reported that this was "so densely connected across both hemispheres, it could finally explain the origins of consciousness." Basically, the assertion here is the feeling that makes you feel like you to you is consciousness.

That consciousness is this feeling of unified experience of the world, able to attend to bits and pieces of.

A digital reconstruction of a neuron that encircles the mouse brain. information, and do something with that attention at any one given time. So what would solve the problem?

Apparently, the idea of a singular structure other than the brain itself that wraps around the brain...itself. That being an individual neuron, which, for a rat, is very large. It connects between two hemispheres.

There is another structure, which is like the telephone lines between the hemispheres, called the corpus callosum. This important structure does not get into the depths of either hemisphere as much as the big neuron.

The neuron was detected as "emanating from one of the **best-connected regions** in the brain," BBC News reports. This may imply coordination of information transfer from disparate areas of the brain, for conscious thought.

That conscious thought coming into experience as the consciously deliberated information. So it's like asking, "Of this arena of passively processed information and experienced on the periphery of my awareness, what is taking up my conscious thought?"

And then thinking some more, asking, "What structures in the brain correspond to the conscious thought?" These are called, usually and academically non-descriptively, "Neural Correlates of Consciousness."

This recent finding is part of a grand, and so far, challenging, series of attempts to map consciousness to the brain. Attempts made but with no definitive conclusion. And it's not the only one.

There's 3. This isn't in a human brain, or a primate brain, which seems like a weakness. It's in a mammal brain, though, which is closer, evolutionary and historically speaking.

These brain parts may have been “undetected in our own brains for centuries.” So how close to solving consciousness? According to the reports, it depends on the definition of consciousness. It depends on the criteria for scientific processes. It depends on the empirical data sets taken into account.

It depends on the level of taking into account of the well-accepted, well-attested-to, broadly empirically supported standard theories. New theories, frameworks to explain sets of facts—fact 1, fact 2, fact 3, fit into such a hypothesis and the predictions from this are born out.

“At a recent meeting of the Brain Research through Advancing Innovative Neurotechnologies initiative in Maryland, a team from the Allen Institute for Brain Science described how all three neurons stretch across both hemispheres of the brain, but the largest one wraps around the organ's circumference like a “crown of thorns’.”

Christof Koch, a respected and renowned researcher, and the president and chief science officer at the Allen Institute for Brain Science, told *Nature's* Sara Reardon that this is a first. Indeed, the extent of the neuron is vast relative to the brain. And to boot, all 3 Super Size Me neurons come from that same area, “emanate” from that same locale.

It's apparently called the *claustrum* and appears to be, based on modern evidence, the single greatest interconnected brain portion.

Plus, its connections, the claustrum's emanations, link to “higher cognitive functions such as language, long-term planning, and advanced sensory tasks such as seeing and hearing.” So brain structures devoted to this.

In 2014, Koch wrote for *Scientific American*, “Advanced brain-imaging techniques that look at the white matter fibres coursing to and from the claustrum reveal that it is a neural Grand Central Station...[almost] every region of the cortex sends fibres to the claustrum.”

Like an “orchestra” conductor, the claustrum (plus these emanations) conducts consciousness. So that mass of passive information processing permits the possibility for the selection for conscious thought, and the orchestra follows the conductor.

It's one of the most important connections, one documented by many case studies, individual medical profiles over time, diagnoses, and reportage. One such case includes:

A 54-year-old woman checked into the George Washington University Medical Faculty Associates in Washington, DC, for epilepsy treatment.

This involved gently probing various regions of her brain with electrodes to narrow down the potential source of her epileptic seizures, but when the team started stimulating the

woman's claustrum, they found they could effectively 'switch' her consciousness off and on again.

This on-off switch for consciousness, for awareness, the feeling of you being you, and observing you feeling you be you, appears to be a significant discovery for neuroscience. With electrical impulses, the woman would stare blankly into 'space' – not sure if they were outside, but presumably the room where the procedure was taking place.

She suddenly zapped back into consciousness – no memory. Two days of experiments reconfirmed the proceedings. So scientists believed this case was not anomalous.

And this has been documented in other cases of sub-populations that are unappreciated or almost completely neglected. It was 171 individuals in the experiment in total, including war veterans. Those 171 combat veterans had correlates, neural correlates of consciousness in a way, of the "duration, but not frequency, of loss of consciousness."

This is not proof, but continual hints or suggestions as to the central correlate of consciousness, the claustrum, which includes these 3 huge emanations or neurons innervating other areas of the brain.

Does this prove the Koch theory of consciousness? According to the evidence, not necessarily. Rather, what it does appear to give is context and more evidence. Therefore, neuroscience appears to be 3 Super Size Me neurons closer to proving the Koch theory of consciousness.

(Video) NASA Satellite Catches Star's Death by Black Hole

March 26, 2017

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

Elizabeth Howell, in *Scientific American*, described how a NASA satellite captured the last moments of life for a black hole. The star's last bit of life was not a supernovae or novae. The star was engulfed by the black hole. And it was all charted by the NASA satellite.

The black hole is a 3-million-solar-mass black hole. Really unprecedented according to the standard metric of mass in astronomy – the study of the celestial stuff like its objects and processes.

It is used to measure the mass – not weight – of stars and nebulae and galaxies, and clusters and groups of galaxies and so on. Therefore, as NASA scientists were quick to point out, it's an enormous mass completely out of regular experience of physics for us.

And this black hole weighed 3 million of these units. There were “cosmic fireworks” that revealed a lot about the black hole and the star's descent into death and darkness. Fireworks mean observables, which means evidence.

That evidence can be dissected and provide insight into stellar and black hole dynamics, at least in terms of the pull and absorption of the star into the black hole. It was about 290 million years ago.

The original observation was back in 2014, and various wavelengths of light were emitted, which is just energy – visible energy was emitted detectable by our technology: “optical, ultraviolet and X-ray light.”

“Fresh observations of this radiation by NASA's Swift telescope have yielded more details about where these different wavelengths were generated in the event, which is called ASASSN-14li, a new study reports.”

Dheeraj Pasham, the lead author – the person who is the principle writer and researcher behind the article – and an astrophysicist at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology , said, “We discovered brightness changes in X-rays that occurred about a month after similar changes were observed in visible and UV light.”

The hypothesis of Pasham and others – or et al – is that the emissions, the ultraviolet and optical electromagnetic or light emissions, were far from the black hole. Matter was orbiting – in elliptical, not ovular or circular.

Imagine an egg, turn the egg right-side up so it looks like a balance with the fat end on the bottom and the thin end on the top. Now cut the top half of the egg off, make a copy of that top half, flip it 180 degrees around, then stick it to the bottom of the original top.

That's basically an elliptical orbit – like an egg.

Planetary orbits are like that. So it means, for instance, that the distance from the Sun changes upon where the orbit of the Earth is.

So imagine stuff crashing around the outskirts of the orbit of the black hole and emit electromagnetic energy – optical and UV. The star that was to die, actually, had the same mass as our Sun, our star.

So the image can be a bit more graspable. The forces from the black hole overwhelmed those of the star – 3 million or so more. The star began to be ripped apart and was funnelled into the black hole.

It began to form a stream of stellar, or star, matter that began to be pulled into the black hole, which is a 3-dimensional hole.

“Next, the debris from this star formed a spinning accretion disk, with the matter compressing and heating before falling into the **black hole**,” **Howell said**. So why was some of this matter on the outskirts hurtling around at incredible speeds so that when they impacted one another they emitted optical and ultraviolet rays, electromagnetic rays?

Bradley, Cenko, from NASA's Goddard Space Flight Center, said, “Returning clumps of debris strike the incoming stream, which **results** in shock waves that emit visible and ultraviolet light...As these clumps fall down to the black hole, they also modulate the X-ray emission there.”

My Recent Correspondence with ‘Ayaz Nizami’ – #FreeAyazNizami

March 27, 2017

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

In early March, I sent an email to a Pakistani blogger, ex-Muslim, and atheist, and vice president of the Atheist & Agnostic Alliance Pakistan. One week ago, he replied to me. The original email was for an interview for this Progressive online news platform, Conatus News.

The Pakistani blogger is *Ayaz Nizami* (an alias name). I sent a questionnaire five days ago. I did not receive a response. Usually, people have lives, roles and responsibilities, needs for random vacations, and time with family and friends, and for recreation. More on this in a bit, but...

Who is Ayaz, though? He is a religious scholar and ex-Muslim. He pursued religious training after standard, mainstream education. He was admitted to an Islamic studies school. He began to doubt the authenticity of the claims of his faith at the time.

I suspect that not being an easy thing to undergo or endure, especially being part of an orthodox religious family. Even with the doubts, he accomplished accreditation in the Islamic studies. He was not only a religious scholar in general, but an Islamic scholar in particular.

As described by the **Atheist & Agnostic Alliance Pakistan**, Mr. Nizami has expertise, based on the Islamic training, in “Tafseer, Principles of Tafseer, Hadith, Principles of Hdith, Fiqh.

Principles of fiqh, Arabic language (grammar, vocabulary, and literature), philosophy & logic.”

It is the breadth of a philosophical and theological education with an emphasis on Islamic theology. He claims that the study of Islam, at near the highest level one can safely assume, in addition to the other Abrahamic faiths, led to an interesting conclusion.

That they are not divine, “a mere creation of the human brain and are a bi-product of culture and civilisations in the world especially the Middle East,” Mr. Nizami said.

Upon this realisation, he set out to “educate and enlighten his fellow countrymen and share his findings with them” with a mission to further truth and knowledge without reward. 2012 was an important year for him. He assisted in founding the Atheist & Agnostic Alliance Pakistan.

...So I thought little of the delay. Earlier yesterday morning, in Pacific Standard Time, I saw an update via social media about an Ayaz Nizami, a blogger, or writer, jailed for blasphemy and placed into custody in an anti-terrorism cell. What is the criminal charge? Did Mr. Nizami murder someone? Did Mr. Nizami rape someone?

It seemed suspicious. The common knowledge in the educated secular community is bloggers with critiques of religion or religious patriarchs, or practices, can be killed, given lashings, or stigmatised and ostracised in their communities.

So the answer to the latter two questions: no, and no. Answer to the former query: as far as I can tell, he existed as a non-believer, especially an ex-Muslim, with self-confidence rather than acculturated diffidence and spoke out on religion and Islam, and with highly educated, scholarly authority in the relevant subject matter. It was taken as terrorism and blasphemy.

Whether or not the statements are true or not, and whether or not you're religious or not – and especially if you're religious take the parable of the hypocrite and the Golden Rule into account, ask, “Should someone be imprisoned on blasphemy or terrorism charges – even threatened with a hashtag hanging campaign (#HangAyazNizami) based on belief, in particular non-belief, in the public arena?”

At root, some subset of Pakistani Muslims are offended, and some non-Muslims. But does this justify the sentiments and the very real consequences on the life of Mr. Nizami? No, and take the footnote about the hypocrite and the Golden Rule into account, I get it.

But if in his situation, if something you did was that offensive, would others be justified in imprisoning or threatening to hang you? I feel offence at the offence around Mr. Nizami. Does this justify blasphemy charges and imprisonment, and public threats of hanging? No, and I would not condone it, as I do not condone the same for the offence – which from that perspective, I can feel sympathy for – felt by some Pakistani Muslims, and others.

All I can say further is what has been expressed before: **#FreeAyazNizami** – and let us finish that darn interview.

Over 2 Million People Every Year Die Due to Working Conditions

March 27, 2017

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

Death by work: daily, weekly, monthly, yearly, even hourly. Globally, over 2 million people, roughly speaking, die every year due to their working conditions and their environment. The ILO, the International Labour Organization, says more than that. 2.3 million workers die due to “occupational accidents or work-related diseases.”

Actually, it is about 4 per minute if you count the number of seconds in a year and then do the math with that 2 million per year dead. A 5-minute article read comes out to about 20 deaths by work. But then again, over 150,000 people die every day.

So only about 5,500 out of the total 150,000 dead witnessed each day, or about 2.3 million out of the 131 million dead per annum. Only 167,000 people die each year due to conflict. As the World Economic Forum (WEF) reports, “167,000 people died in armed conflicts in 2015, according to the latest edition of the IISS Armed Conflict Survey.”

To top out the staggering number of deaths, there inefficiencies with not only having fewer workers, but workers need to take leaves of absence based on work. There are ~313 million accidents each year on the job that result in those absences.

Why does this matter? Two reasons.

One, it is costing human lives. I suspect most of the most dangerous jobs are taken by men, and so the costs in the injuries and livelihood, and lives – outright, will be young men and men.

Two, it is costing countries and the global economy. WEF said, “The ILO estimates that the annual cost to the global economy from accidents and work-related diseases alone is a staggering \$3 trillion.”

So it matters on the two main points of contact for people – morals and money, or ethics and economics. Not only this, a few billion workers in the world – 3.2 – are “increasingly unwell” and facing “economic insecurity.”

¾ are in the vulnerable sector, the precariat, which means part-time, temporary, and unpaid work. These are the lowest half of the world’s workforce, for the most part. What’s more, our ageing world population is making some things untenable such as ½ of the working population being fat or “obese.”

Productivity relates to wellbeing and the health of the workforce, but the health and wellbeing of the workforce relate to the eventual medical costs – especially for the old. An old, less healthy, less well-off workforce loses net productivity.

Who pays? At the end analysis, everyone.

Klaus Schwab, a respected and prominent contributor, and founder and executive chairman of the WEF, presented the **Workplace Alliance Report**. In the introduction or the presentation of the report, he made some key notes.

First, employers have a responsibility for the wellbeing of their employees without which the country can lose “competitiveness, productivity and well-being.” Second, ½ or more of the working population, so the labour force, spend their time at work – most of their time.

Third, there is the need – and this is an indication of the reason for the respect, it can be assume – for the incentivising of workers to engage in healthier lifestyles and for the employers to provide healthier families and communities.

Fourth, employees have a duty to self-respect through healthy lifestyles. But also, employers have the responsibility to provide healthier working conditions too.

The majority of the cases here are based on the construction industry, where 1/6 fatal workplace accidents take place in the construction sector. I worked in the construction sector for years, from adolescence onwards, and sucked at it. But there you go.

In the case of men, many incidence occur because of the “intrinsically hazardous nature of this work, the challenging locations of construction sites, changing work environments and high rates of staff turnover. There are also health problems associated with building activities, such as musculoskeletal disorders and exposure to hazardous substances, such as asbestos.”

Construction remains dangerous for the aforementioned reasons. But there have been significant improvements in safety.

And it doesn’t come without a cost. Contractors and owners “commit the time, budget and management to focus on the well-being of the construction workforce.”

There standards of safety performance. There is the need to implement programmes to prove sufficient efficacy. The goals spoken of now are “zero incidents.”

There were 6 areas listed by the **WEF** for the arenas of worker health, safety, and wellness:

1. *Creating an organisational leadership structure that fosters a culture passionate about health, safety and wellness*
2. *Establishing governance, engagement and dialogue for health, safety and wellness awareness*
3. *Well-being through social stability and security*
4. *Well-being through advanced technology*
5. *Well-being through professional development*
6. *Specific actions for ensuring mental and emotional well-being*

Canada Will Legalise Marijuana by Canada Day 2018

March 28, 2017

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

According to the reportage coming out of the national Canadian news source, **Toronto Star**, the Canadian federal government intends to legalise marijuana, or cannabis, on Canada Day in 2018. The Liberal Federal Government of Canada is intending this as a fulfilment of a promise.

Currently, the Liberal Prime Minister of Canada is Justin Trudeau, who is the son of the deceased Pierre Trudeau. The legalisation will occur on July 1, 2018. The Canadian Broadcasting Company, or the CBC, presented the report on the “flagship TV show, *The National*.”

In Canada, April 20th or ‘4/20,’ is a symbolic date around marijuana, mostly for cannabis users. Cannabis tends to be a favourable term used by the community of users. Marijuana tends to be an unfavourable term used to describe the substance from outside the community.

And this has been, as **The Globe and Mail** states, part of a rush pre-April 20th to draft a bill. One “senior official” is claimed to have said that the preparation for the legislation exposes division “on key issues between the Health, Justice and Public Safety departments, requiring federal lawyers to work overtime to find the appropriate legal language to express the government’s final intentions.”

Ottawa, Canada “will secure the country’s marijuana supply and license producers. The national age limit to purchase the drug will be set at 18, but provinces will be able to set it higher. Provinces will also control price, along with how marijuana is bought and sold.”

As the preliminary work for this date setting, there was deliberation through the creation of a **federal task force**. In December, 2016, there was the creation of the report for consideration. It had 80 recommendations.

The former Toronto police chief, and Liberal MP, Bill Blair, was the briefer for the Liberal caucus. However, until the point of legalisation on Canada Day, 2018, marijuana continues to be illegal, as the **Toronto Star** reports.

CBC News in its politics section reported that the limit for plants per household will be 4 plants. The Canada Day 2018 promise will be the fulfilment of a campaign promise from PM Trudeau.

But, there have been raids on marijuana dispensaries in cities across the country as the substance remains illegal, **CBC reports**, and this includes marijuana advocates Jodie and Marc Emery.

British Columbia MP, Peter Julian, has been skeptical about the claim, in a debate, saying, “I do not believe Justin Trudeau is going to bring in the legalisation of marijuana and as proof that ... we are still seeing, particularly young, Canadians being criminalised by simple possession of marijuana.”

PM Trudeau has noted, succinctly, that the laws have not changed and legalisation has not taken place. “Yes, we got a clear mandate to do that. We’ve said we will,” Trudeau said. “We’ve said we’re going to do it to protect our kids and to keep the money out of the pockets of criminals.”

Religion News in Brief March 28th 2017

March 28, 2017

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

The Most and Least Religious Least Afraid of Death

According to the Daily Mail, the most extreme in religiosity and ‘irreligiosity’ are the least scared of death. That is, researchers found evidence that showed that the most religious and atheists are the least scared of death.

Those that believe in the social and emotional benefits of religion are “most afraid.” Those that have a motivation based on true belief are the least afraid of dying. As well, many atheists are not scared of it, and they do not seek out a religion.

So, the atheists and the most religious take the most comfort in death, but for, obviously, different reasons.

Sikh Charity Caught in Fraud

According to the Hindustan Times, the British regulator charities conducted an investigation into the one Sikh group claiming to want to advance Sikhism. Apparently, the group turned out to be a “conduit for immigration fraud to bring Indian nationals to the country.”

It was called the Khalsa Missionary Society on the Charity Commission, but has been permanently barred from the Charity Commission now. Khalsa Missionary Society was listed as Trustee A in the report from the investigation.

The Khalsa Missionary Society stated its objective as: “To advance the Sikh religion in the UK for the benefit of the public through holding prayer meetings, lectures, public celebration of religious festivals, producing and/or distributing literature on Sikhism.”

Religious Countries Less Educated

The Independent reports that, “Students in religious countries are likely to perform worse in science and maths than their more agnostic or atheist counterparts, new research has found.” The more religious the country, the lower the educational score.

Professor Gijsbert Stoet, the co-author of the research study, said, “Countries that are more religious score lower in educational performance...governments that might be able to raise educational standards and so standards of living by keeping religion out of schools and out of educational policy-making.”

It was a collective effort of academics at Leeds Beckett University and the psychology professor is based there. The University of Missouri was part of it. There was a strong negative correlation between overall educational performance and time spent on religious education in second schools.

Musings on Belief, Ezra Pound style

March 28, 2017

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

[Previously published in Humanist Voices]

This morning, I reflected on belief in Canada over coffee. In particular, belief in the ‘other worldly’. Where, in John von Neumann’s (**Poundstone, 2015**) terms, propositions, as these describe the world, about material things or abstract objects, come in three states—yes, no, or maybe—based on the question, for instance, “Does X exist?” Yes, X exists; no, X does not exist; or, maybe, X might exist. Where the other worldly exists, does not exist, or might exist, most seem contained in the lattermost categorization.

So, “Does Apollo (or Cthulhu, or Ahura Mazda) exist?” The technical categorization remains: possible, or “maybe.” For all intents and purposes, most humanists will choose, “No.” The former as a technical, logical selection; the latter as a functional, utilitarian selection. Both work in context. In surveys of belief, Canadians, a little under half at 47%, believe in ghosts (**Ipsos Reid, 2006**).

If reduced to 30,000,000 for the total Canadian population, that means ~15,000,000 Canadians believe in ghosts, in the other worldly, in the supernatural. Many small towns will host ghost, haunted house, and cemetery tours with scant, or no, evidence for the claims. At the same time, the revenue from these tourist activities might prevent, whether passive or active, appropriate investigation into the evidentiary basis of the claims to the ghosts, the hauntings of the house, or the spirit-wanderings of the cemeteries. Some might think, “Why ruin business?” Indeed.

If the percentage of the Canadian population from the survey, and other surveys and other beliefs parallel this finding about ghosts, then many Canadians, in spite of functional living in numerous areas of life—work, school, paying taxes, raising kids, being neighbourly, and so on, live in a world of other worldliness, of the supernatural, of the magical-mystical. Many Canadians aren’t living in the natural world, in their minds’ eyes. They live in a world of magic.

Maybe, it feels cozier.

But what about the serious implications for the reality of death? To return to the libretto, the belief in ghosts seems, at first evaluation, in denial of death. Death as, not necessarily but “for all intents and purposes,” final. The dead are gone, and aren’t coming back—as most humanists would, likely, say, “...for all intents and purposes.” I am reminded of Ezra Pound (**Stock, 2017**). Who in his *Cantos*, when speaking of the “Gods,” stated:

“The Gods have not returned. ‘They have never left us.’

They have not returned.” (**Pound, n.d.**)

For all intents and purposes...’The dead have not returned. ‘They have never left us.’ They have not returned.’

2030's Planet 50–50 Gender Equality Plan

March 28, 2017

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

[Previously published in Humanist Voices; written by Anya Overmann and Scott Jacobsen]

March is Women's History Month and **International Women's Day** is March 8, 2017. **It is a day** where every "*person—women, men and non-binary people—can play a part in helping drive better outcomes for women.*" The other is a month devoted to the catalogue, display, and public representation of women's accomplishments in history. Why is this an important day for reflection? It is important because, according to the **World Economic Forum**(WEF), **the overall gender gap based on the index called the *Gender Gap Report* published each year will not close until 2186.**

That's a super long time. Even with that dire report, United Nations Women (UN Women) has themed this **International Women's Day**, which is less than a week away. The theme is "**Women in the Changing World of Work: Planet 50–50 by 2030.**" Maybe, not the political, educational, or health outcome areas, but, rather, the world of work, which continues to be an area of major concern. Even if 2186 is the fate of eventual total equality, then the piece-by-piece fitting of the equality puzzle can start with the world of work. But there are difficulties for women here too. Hardships related to the ongoing revolutions before us.

Globalisation and the digital revolution are changing the way we work, bringing big opportunities for all, but continue to present issues within the context of women's economic empowerment. According to the UN, **the gender pay gap stands at 24 cents globally**, with many of these gaps appearing in leadership and entrepreneurship roles. Not to mention, the glaring gender deficit in care and domestic work.

The UN is calling for all economic policies to be gender-responsive and address job creation, poverty reduction, and growth in a sustainable and inclusive manner. It's also pertinent, with the way human work is changing due to technology, for women to have better access to innovative technologies and practices that are good for mother nature and protect women against violence in the workplace.

International Women's Day and Women's History Month are important moments—a singular highlight day and an entire month—to reflect, celebrate, and declare the inherent equality of women based on human rights and women's rights. We've got a long road ahead. And if you do not feel like waiting for the year 2186 to come around in your lifetime, you can always travel to **Iceland**. It'll be just like time travel!

Open Access Venture Incoming from the Gates Foundation

March 28, 2017

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

Open access continues to gain ground with advocacy from Bill and Melinda Gates's Gates Foundation. **Nature** reported on the global health charity's move to self-fund its own publishing channel. In addition, the European Commission will be deliberating on the same possibility.

The Gates Foundation, also known as the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, which is headquartered in Seattle, Washington, will launch the "open-access publishing venture" in late 2017.

It will be called **Gates Open Research**, modelled on another **system** developed by Wellcome Trust. The basic idea is to increase the rate of the publication of articles and data from research, which will be funded by the charity.

What is the Gates Open Research platform? According to the website, it states:

Gates Open Research is a scholarly publishing platform that makes research funded by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation available quickly and in a format supporting research integrity, reproducibility and transparency. Its open access model enables immediate publication followed by open, invited peer review, combined with an open data policy.

The European Commission will spend €80-billion (US\$86-billion) on its own programme, its Horizon 2020 research programme. **F1000Research** has been contracted by both the Gates Foundation and the Wellcome Trust charity.

It is an "open-access platform that rapidly publishes papers and data sets after an initial sanity check by its in-house editors. Papers are peer-reviewed after publication, and the reviews and the names of their authors are published alongside."

There will be zero oversight in terms of editorship by the Gates Open Research foundation, according to Bryan Callahan as reported by **Nature**. He noted that the Gates Open Research foundation will help the masses of researchers in developing countries, as well as helping to "avoid predatory publishers."

The Wellcome Open Research has been able to publish peer reviewed papers within one week after submission. This is a relatively rapid turnaround for the submissions-to-publications (or rejections) process compared to the average.

In addition to this, the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundations will provide the funding for the production of about 2,000-2,500 research papers per annum with "**one of the most stringent open-access policies of any research funder.**"

Practice What You Preach: Moral Reflection on ‘The Global Gag.’

March 28, 2017

Scott Douglas Jacobsen and Julia Julstrom-Agoyo

[Previously published in Humanist Voices; written by Scott Douglas Jacobsen and Julia Julstrom-Agoyo]

Of all perennial ethical precepts in the world, the Golden Rule stands ‘head and shoulders’ above the others in terms of durability and consistency across time and culture, respectively.

Religious institutions, formal or informal, preach the ethic. Secular ethical frameworks advocate for it too. Right into the present, it is presented as an ideal. Maybe it is unattainable, but the ethics hold sway in religious and secular moral universes.

The Golden Rule in the modern context remains consistent with the proclaimed ideal of the religious ethical worldviews and the international equivalent with human rights. Human rights are not equivalent to, but overlap significantly with, women’s rights: do as you would be done by. So if one were a woman, and required appropriate medical attention for reproductive health, and the technology was available and funded, then the moral act would be to provide the access to the medical services because another would want the same. This is consistent with ‘middle-of-the-road’ human rights organisations as well.

“(E)quitable access to safe abortion services is first and foremost a human right.” Human Rights Watch has affirmed, “Where abortion is safe and legal, no-one is forced to have one. Where abortion is illegal and unsafe, women are forced to carry unwanted pregnancies to term or suffer serious health consequences and even death.” Research shows that many pregnant women, desperate in their situation and without access to safe abortion, will undergo dangerous procedures, risking harm unto themselves.

The Golden Rule should compel us to act in accordance with our better natures and provide the “equitable access to safe abortion” for women. Governments pressured by religious groups, whose leadership are made up primarily of men, like the Trump Administration, have posed a direct threat to this affirmation. Take, for instance, the Executive Order signed by U.S. President Donald Trump on his very first day in office, notably surrounded by a group of men.

The “Global Gag Rule” as it is commonly referred to prohibits NGOs from providing abortions or even providing information or services (eg counselling, referrals) about abortions if they want to receive funding from the U.S. for family planning. The U.S. has an undisputed powerful global influence, and with this executive order, countless women around the world will undoubtedly be negatively affected.

According to **Forbes**, “The U.S. hasn’t allowed use of federal funds for abortion since the 1973 Helms Amendment, [applied] internationally as well as domestically. In fact, gag rules that harm women are already widespread in the U.S. under the guise of ‘religious freedom.’”

“There is no evidence that the global gag rule reduces abortion, according to Wendy Turnbull, PAI [**Unparalleled Leadership and Impact**] senior adviser.” **Forbes** said, “Instead, loss of funding from this punitive regulation **eliminates access to contraceptives for more than 225 million women globally,** greatly increasing the need for abortion. It also increases pregnancy-related deaths by about 289,000. How is that ‘pro-life?’”

Exactly whose life is valued and to what extent? Why must the compassion for an unborn fetus ring louder than that for the child that is born into poverty and for the mother and the state who are forced to shoulder that burden?

Can You Be a Humanist Without Being a Feminist?

March 30, 2017

Scott Douglas Jacobsen and Anya Overmann

[Previously published in Humanist Voices; written by Scott Jacobsen and Anya Overmann]

This question is one of the most controversial within the humanist and feminist community:

Can you be a humanist without being a feminist?

Our short answer: No. If you are a humanist, then you are a feminist.

Humanism, broadly or expansively construed, is an ethical and philosophical worldview including religious and irreligious perspectives. Some definitions will exclude the religious because of assertion of the religious as only focused on the theistic and the supernatural.

For example, it could be seen, like in IHEU's official definition, as a democratic and ethical life stance that affirms the worth of every human being and advocates for building a more humane society without a need for religious systems, and instead based on ethics and reasoning through human capabilities.

We disagree. Religion is practices and values, and so is culture and heritage, too. Humanism in a general definitional context incorporates these considerations such as, say, humanistic Judaism. As well, humanism remains theoretical; that is, humanism remains ethical and philosophical in nature. Its practice implies other terminology too.

For example, the development of a more humane society based on reason and free inquiry—and equality in fundamental human rights among and between human beings—posits a tacit egalitarianism.

What is egalitarianism, exactly?

Egalitarianism is a socio-political philosophy that advocates for the equality of all humans and equal entitlement to resources. Humanism, as a theory incorporative of equality for all, implies egalitarianism—as it advocates for and works towards full equality for all. In this, humanism implies egalitarianism. But there's different forms of equality, e.g. ethnic, educational, gender, and so on.

Equal access to quality education. Equal treatment regardless of ethnicity. As well, of course, the equal treatment in legal and social life regardless of gender. Mainstream feminism accounts for gender equality. For instance, the right to vote incorporates the legal equality of women, and the advocacy for social equality between women and men.

Feminism is the advocacy for gender equality based on the belief that women do not have equal rights to men.

Thus, if you are a feminist, then you are an egalitarian, and if you are an egalitarian, then you are for gender equality, and if you are for gender equality, then you are a feminist. **Therefore, if you are a humanist, then you are a feminist, but not vice versa.**

One can be a believer in God and be a supernaturalist, but also engage in feminist activities and believe in gender equality. Hence, you can be a feminist and gender equalist without being a humanist, by some definitions. As well, you can be for equal rights in all relevant respects or egalitarian—so education, gender, ethnicity, and so on, and a believer in God and supernaturalism.

Hence, you can be an egalitarian—which implicates gender equality and feminism—and not a humanist, by some definitions.

So, can you be a humanist without being a feminist?

We say no. If you are a humanist, then you *must* be a feminist. However, by our definitions, you *can* be a feminist without being a humanist.

Philosophy, Science, and the Charge of ‘Scientism!’

March 30, 2017

Dr. Stephen Law and Scott Douglas Jacobsen

By Dr. Stephen Law and Scott Douglas Jacobsen

Some scientists dismiss philosophy. They think science and empirical observation provide the sole window into reality. How can we gain insight into the nature of the world out there by sitting down, closing our eyes, and just thinking about it? How can we find out anything about reality by employing the armchair methods of philosophy?

Simultaneously, some philosophers and many religious people think such scientists are guilty of ‘scientism.’ That is, the arrogant assertion that all legitimate questions can only be answered by scientific methodologies. For example, scientists, like Richard Dawkins, who think science is capable of revealing anything about the supernatural – let alone God – are supposedly guilty of hubris, of pride. Dawkins and others are told to show some humility and acknowledge there are ‘more things in heaven and earth than are dreamed of in their scientific philosophy.’ So, who is right? Is it those charging ‘scientism,’ or those who dismiss anything other than the deliverances of science as, well, *bullshit*?

On the one hand, Dr. Law is a professional philosopher. So, you may expect him to carve out a special non-scientific territory for philosophers. On the other hand, he supposes that in the hands of some – including many theologians – the ‘scientism!’ charge has become an unjustified and knee-jerk form of dismissal, much like ‘communism!’ in the past.

There do appear to be *questions science can’t answer*. Moral questions for example. Science is great at revealing facts about what *is* the case. Morality, however, is concerned not with what is the case, but with what *ought* to be. As the Enlightenment philosopher David Hume pointed out, observation does not reveal ‘ought facts.’

Hume also draws attention to the is/ought gap: It appears that premises concerning what is the case – certainly, premises of the sort that pure empirical science is capable of establishing – fail rationally to support moral conclusions: conclusions about what one ought or ought not to do.

So, it appears science can’t supply answers to our most fundamental moral questions, either by direct observation or by means of an inference from what has been directly observed.

Or take the question: *why* is there something rather than nothing? Science points to the Big Bang to explain *why* the universe exists. But *why* did the Big Bang happen? Whatever science points to explain that will be more, well, *something*. So, it seems something must always be left unexplained by science.

Here is another question:

At a family get-together, the following relations held directly between those present: Son, Daughter, Mother, Father, Aunt, Uncle, Niece, Nephew, and Cousin. Could there have been only

four people present at that gathering? Actually, there could. It's possible to figure that by doing some armchair, conceptual work. No scientific investigation is required or would even be relevant here. So, conceptual puzzles are *puzzles that science cannot answer, but armchair methods can*.

Now, philosophical puzzles also seem to have this conceptual character. Take the mind-body problem. Just how could the activities in our brains give rise to a rich inner world of subjective experience? True enough, scientists might discover everything that's going on in my brain as I savour the taste of this cheesecake, but surely, my experience couldn't *just* be that brain activity, could it?

Isn't there some sort of *conceptual* obstacle to identifying minds with brains? Many think there is: we can know, they think, from the comfort of our armchairs, that minds just couldn't be brains. However, whether or not there is such a conceptual obstacle about something requiring only armchair *conceptual* investigation to figure out, just as it only took armchair conceptual investigation to reveal there could, appearances to the contrary, be just four people present at that family gathering.

Our view is that philosophical problems are, for the most part, such conceptual problems. As such, they require armchair methods, not the scientific method, to solve them. At the same time, we agree with scientific critics of philosophy who say, "How can you discover anything about reality via armchair philosophical reflection or investigation?" You can't.

Philosophical reflection can't discover the basic nature of reality. Pure armchair theorising is an unreliable guide to reality. Science has shown that many of our armchair intuitions about time, space, matter, and so on, are wrong.

Still, while philosophical reflection can't reveal how nature fundamentally is, it can on occasion reveal how nature *isn't*.

Galileo ran a thought experiment to show Aristotle's theory that a lighter and heavier ball will fall at different speeds cannot be correct. Galileo showed through philosophical investigation that Aristotle's theory generates a *contradiction*: if the two balls are chained together, they will fall faster because their weight is now combined; they will also fall slower because the lighter ball will act as a drag on the heavier ball. So, it seems there is an important role for pure armchair philosophical reflection *even in science*, contrary to the views of some scientists. However, we agree that armchair philosophical investigation can't explain how nature *is* – it can at best reveal that certain descriptions cannot be true of it because they involve contradictions.

Have we conceded that the charges of 'scientism!' against Dawkins and others are correct? No. To acknowledge questions and puzzles that science is the inappropriate answer does not mean the supernatural, the gods, or God are off limits to the scientific method.

God and the supernatural are normally unobservable. However, the unobservable is not off limits to science. Electrons are not directly observable. Same with the distant past of this planet (unless, of course, a time machine is invented). Yet, we can confirm and refute theories about

unobservables via the scientific method. Why? Because existence of electrons and the Earth being older than 6,000 years have *observable consequences*.

But many claims about God and the supernatural have observable consequences too. Take, for example, the claim about God answering prayers. Two large scale double-blind studies – researchers and participants do not know the control group or the experimental group – have been done on the effect of petitionary prayer on heart patients.

Both revealed prayer had no effect. There was an absence of evidence for prayer working. But there was not just an *absence of evidence* for the efficacy of prayer, there was also *evidence of absence* – evidence that prayer does *not* work in that way. Maybe science cannot *in principle* answer all questions. Maybe some claims are off-limits. That prayer works is not one of them.

What motivations might be behind the charge of scientism? One seems to be shutting down debate, and immunise religious and supernatural claims against scientific refutation. Bishop James Heiser writes:

“The efforts of scientists to disprove the existence of God is not a pursuit of Science, but Scientism” (Heiser, 2012).

Bishop Heiser seems to have an image of some scientists rubbing their hands menacingly together, cackling, and actively working to disprove the existence of the supernatural or God. As should now be clear, even if that were the aim of some scientists, efforts to test claims concerning the existence of the supernatural or even God do not necessarily involve an embrace of ‘scientism.’ Perhaps science cannot answer every question. Still, it may be able to answer various questions about the supernatural, including various questions about God. To believe this is *not*, in fact, to embrace scientism. And to point out that scientism is false is not to discredit such investigations. In their paper, ‘Has Science Disproved God?’ Ashton and Westacott write:

“It is important to note that science, unlike scientism, should not be a threat to religious belief. Science, to be sure, advocates a ‘naturalistic’ rather than ‘supernaturalistic’ focus, and an empirical method for determining truths about the physical world and the universe. Yet, the proper mandate of science is restricted to the investigation of the natural (physical, empirical dimension) of reality. It is this restriction that scientism has violated...” (Ashton and Westacott, 2006, 16).

Science is, in fact, capable of investigating the supernatural.

When a believer is stung into doubt about the lack of evidence for their belief in, for example, petitionary prayer, they can be lulled back to sleep by repeating over and over, ‘But this is scientism! It is beyond the ability of science to decide!’ The spell is cast, and the faithful return to their slumber.

No doubt *some* things will forever remain beyond the ability of science, and perhaps even reason, to decide. We’re happy to concede that. Still, there’s plenty within the remit of the

scientific method, including many religious, supernatural, New Age, and other claims that are supposedly ‘off limits.’

However, because the mantra, ‘But this is beyond the ability of science to decide’ has been repeated so often with respect to that sort of subject matter, it is now heavily woven into our cultural zeitgeist. People simply assume it is true for all sorts of claims for which it is not, in fact, true. The mantra has become a convenient factoid that can be wheeled out whenever a scientific threat to belief rears their head. When a believer is momentarily stung into doubt, many will attempt to lull them back to sleep by repeating the mantra over and over.

The faithful murmur back: ‘Ah yes, we forgot – this is beyond the ability of science to decide....
ZZZZ.’

An Interview with David Niose – Attorney, Author and Activist

March 31, 2017

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

David Niose is an attorney who has served as president of two Washington-based humanist advocacy groups, the **American Humanist Association** (AHA) and the **Secular Coalition for America**. He is author of *Nonbeliever Nation: The Rise of Secular Americans* and *Fighting Back the Right: Reclaiming America from the Attack on Reason*. He currently serves as legal director of the AHA.

How did you become involved in humanism? Was there a family background?

No, there was no family background in humanism. I come from a Catholic family who were Italian and Irish. There were some family members who were not very religious, but none who were openly atheist or secular humanist. I've been nonreligious my entire adult life, but I didn't get involved in organised humanism until shortly after George W. Bush was elected in 2000. At that point, I realised that the religious right was not going away, and I saw organised humanism as a means of fighting back.

You are the legal director for the Appignani Humanist Legal Center of the American Humanist Association. What tasks and responsibilities come with being the legal director?

I oversee the AHLC's activities, from its litigation efforts to its complaint letters and other activities. Our legal centre is contacted daily by people who feel that constitutional violations are occurring in their communities. We answer their questions and give them the help they need. We have about a dozen cases in suit right now in courts around the country, at various stages of litigation. Some cases that are at the appellate level, some that are fairly new and going through the discovery process, and others that are nearing trial.

What differentiates legal cases and issues for the Appignani Humanist Legal Center of the American Humanist Association community and representatives from the more standard general American public legal cases—themes, media attention, individuals and organisations involved in them, and so on?

Our cases are mostly Establishment Clause cases – litigation suing governmental entities for violating church-state separation principles. Sometimes other issues are also present, such as equal protection and free speech, but the vast majority of our work is Establishment Clause. We have had cases against legislative bodies, school districts, county commissioners, the federal government—all kinds of governmental entities that have violated the wall of separation.

What are some of the main campaigns and initiatives of the Appignani Humanist Legal Center of the American Humanist Association?

We've had many high-profile legal disputes. We successfully persuaded the Air Force to allow an airman to re-enlist without including "so help me God" in his oath, reversing its policy requiring that wording. We've also successfully sued the federal government on behalf of a Humanist inmate who was not allowed to form a Humanist group in his prison. We've challenged "under God" in the Pledge of Allegiance in a couple of different jurisdictions, using an equal protection approach instead of the Establishment Clause. And of course, we've successfully challenged various religious activities in schools all over the country.

Also, what is the Pledge Boycott?

The Pledge Boycott is an effort to encourage people, especially public school students, to opt out of the Pledge of Allegiance in protest of the inclusion of the words "under God." Those two words were added in 1954, and since then the pledge has defined patriotism in theistic terms for several generations of schoolchildren. Many people don't even know that the pledge was once secular, that only lobbying by religious groups changed the wording. The boycott is a way of raising awareness and calling attention to the discriminatory, anti-atheist wording.

What is the Secular Legal Society? How does this society help bring everyone together under one banner and unify legal efforts on behalf of the American Humanist Association?

The SLS is our group of cooperating lawyers from all over the country who make themselves available as a resource to help the Appignani Humanist Legal Center. We currently have over 180 lawyers on our SLS list, from all different kinds of legal specialties. These people are available to help us to the extent they can. Some serve as local counsel when we litigate cases around the country. Others offer casual advice when we reach out with questions about issues that are outside our usual scope of practice – immigration law, for example, or intellectual property. The SLS is a valuable resource, and it's a great way for lawyers who care about the AHA and secularism to lend a hand.

In general, what are the perennial legal threats to the advocacy and practice of humanism in the United States?

Well, almost all the activities of the Christian right in America threaten humanist values in one way or another. Whether its reproductive rights, social justice, prayer in schools—the list goes on and on—all of these issues run contrary to the direction we want to see this country take. It's disheartening that, in 2017, we have school districts that won't teach evolution, we have parts of the country where women can't get safe and affordable reproductive health care because religious activists are in control.

What is the scope and scale of the of the Appignani Humanist Legal Center? Who are some of its most unexpected allies?

As far as scope goes, we are ready to advocate anywhere in the country, thanks to our SLS attorneys and our nationwide network of AHA members and chapters. We have eyes and ears all over the country.

With the current Trump Administration, do you see new threats to the fundamental rights and dignity of humanist American citizens?

Sure. It's no secret that Trump panders to the Christian right. We'll probably see many conservative judges appointed, jurists who disagree with our interpretation of the Establishment Clause. Very difficult days could be ahead for church-state separation.

What have been the largest activist and educational initiatives provided by Appignani Humanist Legal Center, if any—if that's part of its work at all? Out of these, what have been honest failures and successes?

Well, I would categorise all our activities, including our litigation, as *activism*. The Pledge Boycott, which is an AHA initiative supported by the AHLC, has been a big success. And we've had many church-state victories, in courts and via complaint letters. If I had to point to a disappointment, I would say it would be the aforementioned equal protection pledge litigation.

We brought an innovative and valid legal theory before courts in two fairly liberal states, Massachusetts and New Jersey, but neither court would accept our argument.

How can people get involved with the Appignani Humanist Legal Center of the American Humanist Association, even donate to them?

We are not hard to find. The AHA's web site is www.americanhumanist.org. The AHA also has over 600,000 Facebook followers, and you can connect with us there as well. The AHLC's web site is www.humanistlegalcenter.org. Many of the AHLC's activities are posted on the AHA's Facebook page as well. Donations can be made via those links also.

Any closing thoughts or feelings based on the discussion today?

I'd just want to encourage anyone who thinks a church-state violation is occurring in their community to contact us. It can be a lonely feeling to be a secular person or family in a religious town in the Bible belt, but oftentimes those who speak out discover that they are not alone. And the AHA is your link to the community of reason, no matter where you live.

Thank you for your time, David.

Thank you.

Bad Luck is a Major Factor in Cancer Development

March 31, 2017

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

Bad Luck is a Major Factor in Cancer Development

Scientific American, which had an original appearance in **STAT**, reports that the main reason for most cancers is not mostly genetics or heredity. It's bad luck.

The luck of the draw plays the bigger role in most cancer cases compared to the environment or one's parents. There was a study that came out which "launched hundreds of scientific rebuttals, insinuations that the authors had been paid off by the chemical industry..."

So the idea that genetics and environment were less of an impact cancer risk than general poor luck was found to be controversial. For example, the stoppage of smoking and the cleanliness in the local environment were lesser factors than bad chances.

Recently, the authors of the research published a new study in Science with a "double down on their original finding but also labour mightily to correct widespread misinterpretations of it."

The researchers used health records from 69 nations with evidence of cancer mutations coming from simple bad luck with the regular division of a cell. That is, there is a copying error in the DNA with the attempts at normal replication.

However, this does not mean the 66% of the cancers are not preventable. However, the errors occur.

It was noted that this should comfort many patients by Dr. Bert Vogelstein at Johns Hopkins University and the "senior author" of the first study. Dr. Otis Brawley, chief medical officer at the American Cancer Society, described this as a "significant improvement" on the original paper.

It was noted that the in other research "roughly **42 percent** of cancers are preventable by, for instance, not smoking, maintaining a healthy weight, and not being exposed to cancer-causing pollutants."

Others seemed less impressed with the research such as Dr. Yusuf Hannun, who is the director of the Stony Brook Cancer Center. Dr. Hannun's **research paper** in 2015 showed that external or extrinsic factors rather than random DNA copying were greater risk factors.

Not all critics of the first paper were swayed, however. "I am not very impressed with the overall conclusion," said Dr. Yusuf Hannun.

Some nuances were found in the research. For example, the large intestine's cells divide more frequently than other cells. Only 5% of patients develop cancer there. The small intestine cells divide with less frequency, and "only 0.2 percent of people develop cancer there."

Each division gives the chance for a copying error in the DNA. So, the more divisions there are the more cancers there will be. This as the argument put forward by the Johns Hopkins research team. 2/3rds of the difference in the cancer rates depend on the copying rate.

This was a consistent finding for 17 cancer classifications or “types” and in the 69 nations examined.

So the 66% difference comes from the differential rate of division in cell types, e.g. large intestine cells versus small intestine cells. The new analysis of the Johns Hopkins team is based on research in the United Kingdom cancer-causing mutations sources database.

Three categories are looked into in it: “the environment, heredity, or those random DNA-copying mistakes.” It is a first for examination of the “proportions of mutations in cancer and assigned them,” Cristian Tomasetti said, who is a Johns Hopkins mathematician.

After examination, it was found that 66% of the mutations occur in virtue of random copying errors during DNA replication, with 29% due to environment and then 5 percent based on heredity.

So different cancers have difference occurrences, and can “differ significantly.” For instance, 60% of the mutations that can cause skin or lung cancer come from the environment, with 15%, or less, for “prostate, bone, brain, and breast cancers.”

The Johns Hopkins researchers had a prior argument that the bad luck meant that smoking or bad diet, or genetic predisposition, played little role in the acquisition of the various cancers. But this new research takes a different line of approach.

But the other scientists – “cancer experts” – noted that several mutations cause cancer. It takes multiple pathways to get to the goal of cancer with cancer mutations. Single mutations happen, but multiple mutations then can cause the cancer.

“Therefore, if two out of three required mutations arise from copying mistakes, but the third comes from an environmental carcinogen, then avoiding that carcinogen prevents the cancer,” and the John Hopkins research group agrees.

So the new research differentiates “between” the preventability of a cancer and the cancer-causing mutations. “For instance, 65 percent of mutations in lung cancers arose randomly but 89 percent of those cancers are preventable by avoiding smoking,” Tomasetti said.

The environment can play a large role in the development of cancer with more leverage for prevention by implication. For example, the insulin, inflammation, and obesity levels. “Environmental exposures can influence cancer risk in many ways,” Ross Prentice, cancer biostatistician at Fred Hutchinson Cancer Center said.

An Interview with Marieme Helie Lucas – Activist & Founder of Secularism is a Women’s Issue

March 31, 2017

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

Marieme Helie Lucas is an Algerian sociologist, activist, founder of ‘Secularism is a Women’s Issue,’ and founder and former International Coordinator of ‘Women Living Under Muslim Laws.’

What was the moment of political awakening for you?

Being born and raised in a colonised country and having lived through a very bloody liberation struggle from French colonialism... there is no way to ignore politics and their consequences on individuals. Moreover, I was born and raised into a family of strong feminists for several generations; let’s say that I fell into the pot from childhood...

When did your personal and professional attention turn to activism, religious fundamentalism, and women’s rights?

Well, prepared by the colonial situation and by my family’s political awareness, I was an activist – as well as a feminist one – since an early teenager, under various forms, depending on the period of time (pre-independence struggle, during the struggle for liberation, after independence, when women’s rights were curtailed by the new family code, under armed fundamentalists’ attempts to impose a theocracy in Algeria in the 90s, etc...). I became a full-time activist in the early eighties, when I left research and teaching in university, and founded the WLUML (Women Living Under Muslim Laws) network. I remained a full-time activist since then. But my academic research was already focused on people’s rights and women’s rights.

WLUML was a non-confessional network of women whose lives were shaped and governed by laws said to be Islamic, regardless of their personal faith. Our research (1) on laws affecting women in many countries – in North Africa, the Middle East, South Asia, West Africa – show that these man-made laws (rather than of divine inspiration) borrow not just from very different interpretations of Islam, but mostly from local traditions, cultural practices, and even colonial laws, when it suits both patriarchy and religious fundamentalism. Over the past decades, we could monitor the progressive eradication of progressive laws and Muslim fundamentalists’ dedication to exhuming, picking and choosing the most backwards and reactionary practices and passing them off as Islamic. (2)

Interestingly, many journalists and human rights organisations failed to understand our sociological and political approach. They focused on the ‘religious’ flavour in our name, thus attempting to force us into a religious identity we never claimed. For instance, they often renamed us as women ‘under the Muslim Law’ (in the singular!) or even ‘under the Islamic Law.’ This recurrent ideological ‘mistake’ speaks volumes about their urgent need to put us ‘under religious/cultural arrest’ and deny us universal rights and our common humanity.

You founded ‘Secularism is a Women’s Issue.’ Of course, the title provides the general idea. What is the more formal argument to derive the connection between secularism and women’s issues?

Secularism is the legal/administrative provision that separates state from organised religions. It was defined during the French Revolution and later codified in the 1905-1906 laws on separation. Article 1 of the law guarantees freedom of belief and practice to individuals; article 2 stipulates that the Secular Republic does not recognise, therefore dialogue with or fund religions, their representatives and their institutions. The secular Republic only knows equal citizens with equal rights under the law.

The concept of separation at that time successfully challenged the political power of the Vatican and the Catholic Church in the French kingdom. (So much for those ignorant writers and preachers who now pretend secular laws in France were designed against Muslims, since there was NO significant Muslim emigration to France at the time of the French revolution).

In the UK, as the King/Queen is both the Head of State and the Head of the Anglican Church, the concept of separation was hard to swallow. This is why they developed a very misleading re-definition of secularism as equal tolerance by the state towards all religions – which indeed involves and ties together the State and organised religions.

This distortion of the original revolutionary concept spread across European countries where Churches had a strong base. In the present context in Europe, we witness an increasing trend to grant in the name of rights – what a perversion of the very idea of rights! – to separate laws to different religious ‘communities.’ This breeds communalism and creates inequalities between citizens, especially women. For instance, some UK citizens may have rights that other UK citizens will not have access to, if they are, let’s say, Muslims. Sharia courts do not grant equal rights to women in the family. All the recent attempts by Muslim fundamentalists in the UK to promote gender segregation in universities or sharia-compliant wills point in the same political direction. Governments are so keen to trade hard-won women’s rights to appease the religious extreme-right!

This is also the situation in the former British Empire. For instance, in South Asia, where the definition of secularism that prevails is not separation, but equal to tolerance by the state. We deplore that even the Left is hardly aware of this unholy colonial legacy...

It should not be necessary to explain here that, within all religions, reactionary forces generally prevailed that justified women’s oppression by god’s will. It is certainly the dominant political trend today, especially but not exclusively among Muslims.

Moreover, when laws are designed as representing god’s intentions on earth, they become unchangeable, a-historical. Theocracy is the antithesis of democracy where laws are voted by the people and can be changed according to the will of the people.

Women always have a hard time in getting patriarchal laws changed according to international standards of human rights, but it is obviously more so when they can be accused of hurting

religious sentiments by doing so, or worse, of apostasy or blasphemy – crimes that are punished by death penalty in Muslim contexts.

In Europe today, xenophobic extreme right movements are attempting to co-opt and manipulate the concept of secularism and to use it against citizens of migrant descent, especially those deemed to be Muslims. This certainly does not make the struggle of secular opponents to Muslim fundamentalism any easier. We need to walk the fine line, challenging at the same time both the new religious extreme rights which condemn secularism and atheism, and ‘traditional’ xenophobic extreme rights which are hijacking the concept of secularism to justify their claim to white Christian superiority. Unfortunately, the European Left and Far-Left, that should have our natural allies, have not yet understood that they should not throw themselves in the arms of Muslim fundamentalists in order to counter the traditional extreme right parties... thus choosing to support one extreme right against the other. Instead, they should support us, who confronted Muslim fundamentalists in our countries of origin and now have to do it all over again in Europe.

As an Algerian sociologist, i.e. as an individual with an expert opinion in sociology, what is the situation for women living under Muslim laws throughout the world?

As varied as one can imagine in one’s wildest guess. It ranges from being able to become an elected head of state, to being closeted between four walls with no education and no rights, and all the intermediary shades in between these extremes. There exists absolutely no homogeneous ‘Muslim world.’

However, I must add a few caveat:

- Although very progressive provisions for women existed in different periods of history and in different locations around the world, in predominantly Muslim contexts, we witness everywhere today the rise of fundamentalism, i. e. a political extreme-right which camouflages its power greed behind religion.
- Everywhere and at all times (3), women in Muslim contexts fought for their rights, using different strategies, just as we do today: demanding right to education, political rights, freedom of movement, financial autonomy, equal rights in marriage, etc...Religious interpretation was only one of the many strategies they used. The struggle still goes on now, in these very difficult times.
- An important new dimension of the struggle now takes place in the countries of immigration. Every right we lose in Europe or North America to the mermaids of cultural relativism heavily impacts the situation in our countries of origin. Conversely, being able to bypass the smokescreen of the ‘main enemy’ to convey to our comrades and sisters back home the reality of Muslim fundamentalism having opened a new front in Europe and North America is part and parcel of building our common struggle beyond national borders. (4)

What is the general status for international women’s rights, empowerment, and advocacy in these contexts?

One cannot look at it in terms of ‘countries’ or cultures. For instance, one can find places where the promotion of economic rights improves women’s autonomy, while FGM is tolerated or repudiation legal, or countries where women enjoyed a notable degree of legal autonomy which is suddenly reduced in practice by the coming to power of extreme right fundamentalists.

One must abandon the idea that there exists a homogeneous ‘Muslim world’ where everything would function under the banner of religion. I believe this idea of a Muslim world, highly promoted by fundamentalists, is derived from that of ‘Umma,’ i.e. the assembly of believers, which exists also in the Catholic Church as ‘Ecclesia.’ In reality, we all know that countries are the location of various political forces and classes which fight for political representation or domination. This is in no way different in Muslim contexts, and religion per se has little to do there – except, as a generally right-wing form of political organisation.

You are the founder and former international coordinator for ‘Women Living Under Muslim Laws.’ What tasks and responsibilities came with this position?

It has been a very inspiring and rewarding time in my life, even if one had to work around the clock while raising small kids and living in poverty – a formative time, too. I came to realise that women’s struggles already existed everywhere in Muslim contexts but that they fought in isolation. Women needed to know about each other’s projects and be inspired by each other’s strategies, and eventually that they could come together on specific actions and/or support collectively the local struggles or initiatives.

The idea was timely and everyone grabbed it across Africa and Asia, quickly gathering together the very best of smart committed women activists.

This network was not a pyramidal organisation, it had no membership, it was a fluid network in which women and groups could step in and take responsibility for specific projects depending on their local needs.

It gathered together in mutual solidarity women who were religious believers, human rights advocates, secularists and atheists.

The tasks of the coordination office were that of a clearing house of information, of a publishing house, of a coordination secretariat for research programmes and for collective projects, of an urgent response/ emergency rescue organisation, of a board – lodging – therapeutic safe place for endangered or burnt out activists, etc... Now that most revolutionary women’s networks of the nineties have been tamed and ‘professionalised,’ my heart goes out to the Women In Black–Belgrade, whose humble coordination still performs so many of these exhausting and exhilarating tasks, under very difficult political circumstances. I salute these great resisters to NGOs normalisation!

Needless to say that, with the growing success of our network, funders were eager to ‘own’ it. There were growing pressures on me to come to my senses and conform to the corporate sector’s norms of organisation, believed – despite the evidence provided by the enormous success and achievements of our very network – to be the only efficient ones. A membership organisation

with a classic top to bottom pyramidal structure, ‘professionalised’ activists appointed to specific tasks and responsibilities with afferent titles and fat salaries, and a well-paid ‘director’ (myself), with a clear religious identification, etc...

If you look at funding organisations’ NGOs normalisation plans during the nineties, you will see clearly exposed what I am talking about... I managed to keep them at bay and to protect the revolutionary spirit of the network for 18 years, till I left it.

As an organisation, the network WLUML circulated information on a regular basis; published a very good journal that mixed together sophisticated academic analysis and on the ground information on struggles and strategies of local women’s groups; produced knowledge that was needed to enhance women’s struggles through coordination of collective research; organised cross-cultural exchange of women from one predominantly Muslim area to another, culturally different Muslim areas so that participants could deconstruct the idea of a homogeneous Muslim world by living a very different reality; organised collective support for local actions; organised rescue; etc...

What have been the observed, if possible, measured impacts of ‘Secularism is a Women’s Issue’ and ‘Women Living Under Muslim Laws?’

WLUML definitely was instrumental in putting on the agenda, worldwide, the issue of women’s rights in Muslim contexts. It projected not the usual image of the ‘poor oppressed Muslim woman’ (which was instrumental in justifying military occupations and wars), but that of universalist (believers as well as secularists) women human rights defenders.

As for SIAWI, it performs very similar tasks in a new political context where secularists and atheists are more and more endangered while they become more and more vocal especially among the youth. SIAWI takes part in the circulation of information on the struggles of secularists and atheists in Muslim contexts and in the diasporas by maintaining a website (siawi.org). It gives visibility to the new forces for secularism in Muslim contexts and in the diasporas; it supports struggles and endangered individuals; it produces analyses on secularism in the times of rising armed fundamentalism; it participates in secular gathering and conferences; it challenges cultural relativism in Europe and North America and supports women’s local secular demands.

What are the historical, and ongoing, problems with religious fundamentalism?

There always were reactionary forces aiming at governing in the name of god. Secularism, understood as separation, is the best way to keep them at bay, away from directly exercising political power. Historically, progressive religious interpreters and liberation theologians have been defeated within their own religions.

Who is your favorite philosopher or scientist?

The one who will enlighten us tomorrow.

We must not forget that all philosophers and scientists are grounded into their times. The French revolution failed to grant equal rights to women and executed Olympe de Gouges who drafted a constitution that incorporated women's rights to the social revolution. So did Darwin. Many otherwise progressive thinkers did not see any problem with colonial exploitation of Africans and slavery. We do not need to throw the baby with the bath water but we definitely have to look for thinkers for our times and our future.

What about activist?

What is the question?

Any recommended reading?

I suggested some books and articles in the foot notes. To those who read French, I could suggest, *Bas les Voiles* by Chaadortt Djavan, any book by Mohamed Sifaoui, *Marianne et le Prophète* by Soheib Bencheikh, articles and books explaining the concept of secularism by Henri Pena Ruiz.

English-speaking people need to access original literature that makes the difference between separation and equal tolerance by the state... such a source of confusion in any discussion on secularism... Fight for translations into English!

Any feelings or thoughts in conclusion about our discussion today?

Secularism – understood as separation between state and religions – is today's best response to growing communalism in Europe and North America, as well as to the murderous armed Muslim organisations that want to impose theocracies and eradicate democracies. As imperfect as democracies are in Europe today, we need to fight for their survival in wake of the growing danger of seeing them replaced by theocracies, in the name of religious rights, cultural rights, minority rights, etc... Confront the erroneous idea of a 'Muslim world.' It exists no more than 'the Christian world' or 'the Crusaders' that Daesh pretends to destroy...

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