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Scott Douglas Jacobsen



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Scott

An Interview with Anya Overmann, Communications Officer of IHEYO

March 31, 2017

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

[Previously published in Humanist Voices]

This interview has been mildly edited for clarity and readability.

Tell us about yourself—family background, culture, first language, and religious/Humanist background.

I was born and raised in St. Louis. My parents were raised Catholic. Independently, they decided Catholicism and Christianity were not for them. They didn't want to follow that any further. When they had kids, my brother and I, they realised that they did want us to have a religious education, but not necessarily in a Christian context.

We found the Ethical Society in St. Louis. We learned about the different religions and the core values of ethical humanism. That is what had me 'hooked'—the core values. I believed in them. I thought they were good principles. As I got older, I became more involved with it. I took on leadership roles at every stage. That's my background.

My parents are still members. They attend regularly. They have a role at the local ethical society. English is my first and only language. I can speak some Spanish, but that's from speaking Spanish in school.

When did you find IHEYO?

I found it a couple of years ago. FES, the Future of Ethical Societies, is the group that I was a part of. The connection to IHEYO grew from the national level of FES. At IHEYO, I applied to be the social media manager. Over time, that evolved into communications officer. Now, I am managing the social media and the blog. All outreach for Humanists between the ages of 18 and 35.

Any demographic(s) analyses of Humanist youth?

A lot of our Humanist activity is in Europe. That's not that surprising.

(Laugh)

Right.

There's a lot of different organisations there. That's where the funding comes from. What I found with our social media is a large number of people from Pakistan, India, and Nepal are active in following our page and reading our content, I found that interesting.

Anyone from Bangladesh?

There are quite a few from that region, specifically. Western Asia and the Middle East are becoming more active. They are up and coming.

So, what are some tasks and responsibilities that come along with being the social media person and communications manager?

I try to keep our presence active. It can be difficult. It is a volunteer role. I do what I can with the time that I have each day. I try to make the content diverse. I don't want too much being posted on specific region of the world too. I know I can get carried away by posting on what is going on here, in the US. There's a lot to be said now.

(Laugh)

There's a lot going on in the world. I want that represented on the page because we are an international organisation. Also, I manage our blog, *Humanist Voices*. I look at the content submitted to us. We have the regional groups submit one piece per month. Then I edit them or somebody on the team edits them. We look over them, have them published, and try to distribute over social media. We're trying to get our newsletter back. We want to expand our presence online.

Who are some Humanist heroes in history for you?

I always look to Felix Adler, who is the founder of the ethical societies here in the US. He came from Germany. He grew up Jewish. His father was a rabbi. He decided that he wasn't really feeling being Jewish.

(Laugh)

(Laugh)

He came up with his own thing, ethical humanism. which I find different from classical humanism. People tend to associate atheism and agnosticism with traditional humanism. Ethical humanism is more inclusive, in my opinion. It welcomes people of all backgrounds, religious or not. It focuses more on the principles that we stand for rather than the beliefs and how we got to those principles which I really admire in the motto: deed before creed. That's something that I believe in.

If you were to take one core argument for humanism, what would it be?

It's that we have this one life that we know of and we have science to help us understand how life works. That is really the best that we have. I think that we can make the most out of life with this scientific approach and by appreciating this life. Also, the placement of humans first is the main thing that I stand behind. It is human rights as the main principle.

It is like the Bill Nye line: 'I want to save the planet for me!'

Yea, exactly!

(Laugh)

(Laugh)

It is silly that we prioritise profit. How can we prioritise profit when we don't have a home to live in later? If we kill the planet, how can we prioritise profit later? With the Dakota Access Pipeline, for example, it blows me away. People can be obtuse about the world and what it offers us. The prioritisation of the transfer of oil over access to clean water blows me away.

From an international vantage, what do you consider the most pressing concern for Humanist youth?

This rise in pushing-back against principles of the classically 'Left.' It is threatening the principles held dear by us. It is the result of hatred from both sides. Hatred isn't doing any favours for us, as Humanists. I know many, especially young Atheists, who maintain the idea that their beliefs and values are superior to those who don't have those beliefs and values.

It is a grave mistake, I think, to have that attitude. It doesn't do us any favours. It makes people less inclined to support the movement. They think the movement is supported by an elitist organisation, which creates more of a push-back. We're up against it. It creates a hateful divide.

Some of us are complicit in it.

We need to reform the way we think about ourselves and our values. We need to take a step back and ask, "What are we doing here?" We say, "We stand for all humans." But do we, if we act like we're superior to some humans? We need to do some self-reflection as Humanists. We need to ask, "Are we trying to value *all* human beings?"

Does that trend, which you're noticing among younger Atheist-Humanists, of considering their own values superior to others lead to a certain type of self-exaltation that can exacerbate the trend seen in youth in general—possibly across time—of seeing their time as 'The Time?'

Yes, it is hard not to think of it as that, when everything is coming to the climactic point with things as inevitable. Millennials have always prized themselves. That is not necessarily a bad thing. It has an innate value, but can have its disadvantages. One is thinking this time, this place, these values are the most important thing. If we don't communicate those values for people to

stand behind and with us, then we will create a greater divide. It will get worse. The way we go about standing behind this change is in an inclusive way.

You mentioned the push-back from the Left and the Right. Can you clarify that?

The push-back follows politics and social behaviour, which, I think, follows the laws of physics. For example, we had Obama as president for 8 years, which is a long time. A lot can happen in 8 years. We saw many not liking anything done by Obama because it was Obama. That is some of the push-back seen now.

The whole Donald Trump era is the pendulum swinging back towards the Right. The more swing that this pendulum has, then the more extremism that will result. With this push-back from the Right, and Donald Trump as president, we are seeing this push-back against the Left and the push of the Left against the push-back of the Right. It is getting tense.

There's a large, swinging pendulum. That's what I mean by the physics of politics and social behaviour. The more you push in one direction; the more push-back you'll get in the other direction.

What are some near-future initiatives for IHEYO, communications-wise?

I want to push the outreach more as a resource for people concerned for our future. People are looking for guidance. They are looking for words of encouragement, which inspire hope. I hope IHEYO can jump on it, can provide it. I hope IHEYO can provide this need without furthering the divide.

What are your hopes within your lifetime for the Humanist movement?

I would like to see the youth organisation in a grand, sweeping effort. I think there's a lot of activity going on around the world. It is so off and away. So, it can be hard for others to notice. I went to the youth section of the BHA, the Young Humanists. My vibe was that there's a lack of awareness about other humanist organisations. They are unique, but they thought they were one-of-a-kind. I was surprised to hear it. There is a lot of Humanist activity ongoing around the world. If people made more effort to connect around the world in a productive way, we could accomplish great things.

Ranking Happiness – The Happy Planet Index (HPI)

March 31, 2017

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

There have been tremendous gains over the last few decades, and over time in general, for the development of both happiness and sustainability with improvements in livelihoods and general health around the world.

It is part of a global agenda to have a happier, healthier, and greener, and more sustainable planet. It is tied into the progress of nations. Countries are progressing if you track them on metrics of citizen well-being and infrastructural development.

The **World Economic Forum** (WEF) reported with the Happy Planet Index (HPI) on that progress: “There’s wealth, there’s health, there’s basic human freedoms.” Indeed. Those are good factors in a measurement.

In fact, these factors, or “criteria,” are included in a number of rankings: “**the Better Life Index** to the **Sustainable Economic Development Assessment** and the **World Happiness Report**.”

With the newest measurement, the HPI, these factors come into the metric with the additional inclusion of sustainability.

The calculation is as follows: “take the well-being and longevity of a population, measure how equally both are distributed, then set the result against each country’s ecological footprint.” That is, the life span, health span, and ecological footprint as a single index.

Ecological footprint as a factor related to sustainability. Sustainable societies produce less of an impact on the environment. The wealthiest countries found in the West and the progressive Nordic nations do not make the top of the list for this particular metric, or index, the HPI.

Nation states in the top 10 tend to be the “Latin American and Asia Pacific countries” with “green and pleasant land.” For the “third time,” Costa Rica is the “happiest and most sustainable country on Earth.”

Life expectancy is 78.5 years, which is older than the US. The health and wealth come to about ¼ of the cost compared to the US. Some reasons include, if all factors for the HPI are taken into account, “99% of the country’s electricity supply is said to come from renewable sources, and the government has pledged to make the country carbon neutral by 2021.”

As well, the investment in social programmes: education, health, and no national army since 1949. “Wealthier Western countries tend to score highly when it comes to life expectancy and well-being, but the high environmental cost of their way of life sees their ratings plummet,” the WEF said.

One More Citation for You, Eugene Garfield (1925-2017)

March 31, 2017

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

Eugene Garfield (1925-2017) has died. He died on February 26, 2017. He created the foundation for the Science Citation Index or the SCI. To quote Nature quoting Garfield's friend, Joshua Lederberg, circa 1962, "I think you're making history, Gene!"

And indeed, he did. The SCI became the Clarivate Analytics Web of Science. Citations are important in science, and other fields. It can mean the difference between tenured professor and instructor.

It is difficult to imagine modern scientific research with metrics of citations, or indexes of scientific utility. That is, if a colleague or a scientist finds a research paper or article useful, or of utility, they then use that article in their research articles and papers. They put it in the references. So they cite it.

Anyway, he enabled an entire field: scientometrics, the quantitative study of science and technology. As well, he not only enabled, but launched, *The Scientist*, which is magazine for life scientists. So, at least, two major contributions to the unification, academic and professional-social aspects, of the sciences.

Many of the services he constructed were able to summarise, filter, index and classify articles. Also, he wrote, a lot, over 1,000 articles that continue to have utility for many, many people. He earned a chemistry degree from Columbia University, which is in New York. He wasn't good as a lab assistant. So he chose to work on information science rather than chemistry.

'51 comes around the bend, and he begins to work at the "Welch Medical Library at Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore, Maryland, where almost all information services of the National Library of Medicine were born."

He noticed the medical literature was pacing beyond the human index system. He made machine ones, automatized methodologies. Another bend to 1953 in the road of Garfield's life. He was at the "First Symposium on Machine Methods in Scientific Documentation."

Here was the introduction to the Shepard Citation system, which is a legal indexing system for citations from 1873. William Adair was contacted by Garfield. Adair was an ex-vice president at Shepard's, which means expertise in the indexing system.

Garfield began to learn about it, and earn a MA in library and information science at Columbia University in 1954 plus a PhD in structural linguistics at the University of Pennsylvania in 1961.

When 1955 had come around, Garfield invented the scientific citation index and “introduced it to readers of the journal *Science* (**E. Garfield** *Science* **122, 108–111; 1955**).” It was one of the top articles by citation with a “lukewarm” response, at least at the time.

He went out everywhere to get funding – no good. Until, it was 1957 and the Sputnik launch by the Soviet Union made a panic in the US. High-rankers wanted to know about the efficacy of science.

So Lederberg and Garfield teamed up, and they built an automated citation index across science. The SCI was a net loss for many years, though. After the 1970s, the influence, so power and extent, of the SCI took greater hold.

In 1975, another metric was introduced for journals as a whole, which publish sets of articles as periodicals: Impact Factor. The Impact Factor is a measure of the frequency of citation in a given year within a specific journal.

“Garfield’s enthusiasm was not the bookkeeper’s but the visionary’s. He saw in his creations a better science for society and the ideal of a unified body of knowledge accessible to all,” Nature said.

Namib Desert Recycles Fog and Dew

March 31, 2017

i Scott Douglas Jacobsen

Cindy Fox Aisen of the The World Economic Forum (WEF), reported on the phenomena of the ocean not being the “sole source of life-sustaining fog and dew for the Namib Desert’s” flora and fauna.

Ecohydrologist – from ecohydrology, which is the field for studying the interactions of ecosystems and water – Lixin Wang, assistant professor of earth sciences at Indiana University-Purdue University Indianapolis, said, “Knowing exactly where the fog and dew come from will help us predict the availability of non-rainfall water in the future...we may be able to determine ways to harvest novel water sources for potential use in water-scarcity situations.”

So, there’s fog from the ocean and fog from soil, or ocean-derived fog and non-ocean-derived fog. According to the WEF, non-ocean-derived fog accounts for half of the fog in Namib, which was based on a one-year study of the phenomena.

There’s soil water and ground water. Soil water is below the surface and groundwater is higher. When rainfall comes, then it seeps into the ground, and the rainfall eventually becomes the fog. Soil water, in other words, “turns out to be an unexpected source of moisture.”

In light of global warming or climate change, which is the increase in temperature of the Earth due to human activity starting with the First Industrial Revolution, many areas of the Earth are becoming drier, and drier, and unable to hold as much water because warm water evaporates. Warmer land becomes drier land. “With global warming, more areas in the United States and around the world are becoming drier and more desert-like,” **the WEF said**.

The programme officer for the earth sciences division of the National Science Foundation, Tom Torgerson, said, “In the driest places on the planet, even seemingly minor components of the water cycle, such as fog and dew, become major and are critical to keeping the environment alive and functioning.”

There is a consistency in the ecosystems around the world with their hydrological cycles, The Namib Desert, or Namib in general, is no different. It borders the Atlantic Ocean by precisely 2,000 kilometres with a temperature range of 0°C to 60°C.

It is “almost completely devoid of surface water.” Throughout the entire year, very few days have rain. Some years have no rain, with at most 2 to 3 inches, maybe 4 inches, and the flora and fauna of the area survive because of fog and dew.

Wang described the “long-term goal” as the expansion of the Namib research into the globe.

Ancient Particle Accelerator Discovered on Mars

April 1, 2017

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

New images of the surface of Mars taken by NASA's Mars Reconnaissance Orbiter probe have revealed the presence of the largest particle accelerator Credit: Daniel Dominguez/ CERN.

European Organization for Nuclear Research (CERN) has reported making a massive, and what some argue is incredible, discovery on the surface of Mars. The news, which came as a surprise to many of the 10,000 scientists involved, was the finding of another super-collider on Mars – **CERN reports**.

This substantial discovery has, quite ultra-remarkably, fallen on a remarkable day: April 1st, 2017 – today! That's right. Today!

According to the 'reportage' by Arnaud Marsollier, and posted by Harriet Kim Jarlett today, NASA's Mars Reconnaissance Orbiter appears to have discovered a large, ancient particle accelerator on the surface of Mars.

Ancient Egyptian hieroglyphs, the meaning of which was previously a mystery, seem to corroborate these observations, leading scientists to believe that the pyramids might have served as giant antennae.

With the continual search for Earth-like planets and signs of life, especially intelligent life by SETI (Search for Extra-terrestrial Life), by various scientific groups, with proxies such as water, Mars has been a prime candidate. Could life be just this close?

NASA and CERN scientists believe we may have made an incredible discovery with the interdisciplinary team's analysis of the archaeological, geological, and particle physics importance of the discovery of an ancient super-collider.

It was found on Olympus Mons. CERN reported that it was "previously thought to be the largest volcanic formation in the solar system," but, it is "in fact the remains of an ancient particle accelerator thought to have operated several million years ago."

The circumference of the machine on Mars is thought to be about 75 times the size of CERN at 2,000 kilometres. Not only that, it is thought to be millions of times more powerful.

Amazingly, ancient Egyptian hieroglyphs came along with it, too. The pyramids must have served as an important communicator. "The pyramids on Earth might therefore have allowed the accelerator to be controlled remotely," Marsollier reports.

Head of technical design at CERN, Friedrich Spader, examined the situation and the evidence and came to the probabilistic conclusion, "The accelerator control room was probably under the pyramids." Remarkable.

This particle accelerator may in fact be a portal from the Solar System to an unknown location. Another solar system, or galaxy, or what might such an advanced civilisation? “The papyrus that was recently deciphered indicates that the powerful magnetic field,” said Fadela Emmerich, who is the lead scientist. He went on to say that “the movement of the particles in the accelerator were such that they would create a portal through space-time.”

The portal would be thought to be used almost 2 million years ago based on the examination of the evidence on hand, according to Eilert O’Neil, who said, “We’re probably talking about forgotten technologies and a highly advanced ancient civilisation.”

Scientists Edge Closer to Solving Mystery Element of Earth's Core

April 1, 2017

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

The final puzzle piece in the jigsaw of the Earth's core was discovered by scientists to complete the image of the contents, regarding elements, of the Earth's core. The experiments and findings were by scientists from the University of Tohoku, according to the World Economic Forum.

The innermost part of the Earth, or the 'core', is made almost entirely of iron at 17 parts in 20. It is 1 part in 10 nickel. However, the remaining 5% – the remaining 1 part in 20 – appears to have been, for some time, a mystery. Based on research by Japanese team, the missing element has been discovered, which is now known to be silicon.

The BBC has reported on this. The solid core of the Earth lies about 3,000 kilometres below the surface with a radius of 1,200 kilometres, or a diameter of 2,400 kilometres ($2r=d$). It is deep, so deep as to almost be impossible to make direct tests about it.

The deepest mines in the world reach to only about four kilometres. Many of these mines are for gold mining. Many researchers thought that the element *must* be lighter because of the easy bonding of the metals, which might explain the properties of the mystery element while at the time not knowing its precise label.

So there was a minor model, a miniature model, of the Earth composed of a crust, mantle, outer core, and inner core. Alloys were made from iron and nickel and silicon with the admixture. They put them under tremendous pressure and temperatures upwards of 6,000°C.

The conditions in the experiment matched those from seismic data gathered about the Earth's core. That seismic data is based on waves that appear to have emanated from the Earth's core. The team then use this to extrapolate for sufficient evidence – and from the experiment – as to the contents of the core of the Earth as silicon, which was then claimed to be the missing element of the core of the Earth.

The Japanese team presented their research in the Fall meeting in San Francisco of the American Geophysical Union.

Simon Redfern, professor of mineral physics at the University of Cambridge, said:

These difficult experiments are really exciting because they can provide a window into what Earth's interior was like soon after it first formed, 4.5 billion years ago, when the core first started to separate from the rocky parts of Earth...But other workers have recently suggested that oxygen might also be important in the core.

Tuberculosis Given New Guidelines from the World Health Organization

April 2, 2017

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

The World Health Organization (WHO) states that there are new tuberculosis ethics guidelines launched on March 22, 2017. The WHO aims to “ensure that countries implementing the End TB Strategy” (End Tuberculosis Strategy) continue to hold fast to standards of ethics. End TB Strategy adhere to sound ethical standards to protect the rights of all those affected.

Tuberculosis kills 5,000 people each day. Some of the most affected communities are those that come from socioeconomic disadvantage. For instance, these can include ethnic minorities, miners, refugees, migrants, and many, many others.

These people come at intersections of sanitation, income, nutritional, and housing or home problems. These people come at increased risk of alcohol use and diabetes, HIV and other things. And about one-third of tuberculosis cases go unreported or undiagnosed.

Indeed, this means many individuals with tuberculosis go without any adequate care. That’s why the WHO ethics guidance or guidelines are important. As part of the protection of human rights, the ethics around appropriate tuberculosis treatment is important.

There will be an upcoming conference that will then inform the United Nations General assembly high-level meeting on tuberculosis, which will be held for deliberation in 2018.

The WHO director-general, Dr. Margaret Chan, said, “TB strikes some of the world’s poorest people hardest...WHO is determined to overcome the stigma, discrimination, and other barriers that prevent so many of these people from obtaining the services they so badly need.”

The five key ethical obligations or responsibilities listed for care providers, governments, health workers, researchers, and NGOs are as follows:

- *provide patients with the social support they need to fulfil their responsibilities*
- *refrain from isolating TB patients before exhausting all options to enable treatment adherence and only under very specific conditions*
- *enable “key populations” to access same standard of care offered to other citizens*
- *ensure all health workers operate in a safe environment*
- *rapidly share evidence from research to inform national and global TB policy updates.*

The implementation of these ethical obligations has been said to be difficult by the WHO news release. The current tuberculosis is multidrug-resistant. That is, if one form of tuberculosis is resistant to a specific form of drug, then giving multiple drugs increases the odds of non-resistance.

For example, if the odds of a disease being resistant to one drug is 1 in a 100, and if you want to increase the probability of a cure or immunity with the shot, and if the odds of the same disease being resistant to another drug is 1 in 20, then the odds of the drug being resistant to both used at the same time in the multidrug mix is 1 in 100 times 1 in 20, or 1 in 2,000.

However, the current multidrug-resistant TB (MDR-TB) is creating a “crisis and the health security threat.”

“Only when evidence-based, effective interventions are informed by a sound ethical framework, and respect for human rights, will we be successful in reaching our ambitious goals of ending the TB epidemic and achieving universal health coverage,” director of the WHO Global TB Programme, Dr. Mario Raviglione said. He also claimed that, “The SDG aspiration of leaving no one behind is centred on this.”

The conference to be held will be the Global Ministerial Conference in November of this year in Moscow. That will be the basis for informing the high-level UN meeting in 2018.

Evolution vs. Creationism: Inside the Controversy

April 3, 2017

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

[Previously published in Humanist Voices]

Scientific American recently published a short e-book, **Evolution vs. Creationism: Inside the Controversy**. It relates to the perennial social controversy – creationism versus evolution. Where the substantive evidence supports the bottom-up theorisation around evolution rather than the top-down face value plus scriptural assertion from numerous religious sectors within the religious subpopulation, not all, by any stretch, but, many, many religious folks, especially in America and the Muslim-majority countries adhere to creationist or quasi-creationist perspectives on the development and speciation of species.

In the world at large, evolution remains the minority view. Creationism remains dominant. Why? In-built agency detection mechanisms, legacy of fundamentalist-literalist interpretation of holy scripture, indoctrination of youth reliant on inculcation of ignorance to keep congregations at a low cultural level, newness of *On the Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection, or the Preservation of Favoured Races in the Struggle for Life*, many reasons exist. What's the solution? It depends on what you want and how you define the problem.

From the experts in biological sciences with full comprehension of evolutionary theory, and who have encountered the counterarguments in continual barrages from minority sects of the religious population that claim to speak for the totality of religious believers, well-funded fundamentalist preachers and literalist doctrines argue for the young Earth and the top-down narrative provided by literalist readings of the Book of Genesis.

Also, time is a big one. If a philosophy exists for a long time, more than others, and more people happen to believe in it, then the truth might have a hard time overcoming the continual message of top-down design. We seem hardwired, or wet-wired, or evolved to perceive patterns without appropriate natural reality to the pattern, outside of the conceptualisation in our mind's eye.

Back to **this book** that you should be reading instead of this, the controversy for evolution and creationism, among the majority of qualified professionals in the biological sciences—which can sound like argument from authority, but seems more akin to argument from authoritative authority, those with relevant expertise rather than irrelevant expertise or no expertise—amounts to ‘controversy’ because the unanimous vote is “for,” or “aye,” rather than “against,” or “nay,” regarding evolution.

We evolved. We remain evolved Great African apes from the Great Rift Valley. We can't not have genetic relation in the beautiful phrase: the “Tree of Life.” It runs along Lebanon to Mozambique, and even makes for a **good topic** around Christmas and associated cultural celebrations. Evolution is like a random cousin from a faraway country, who barely speaks your language, hardly knows your culture, and stinks, but you come to grips with them because you realise, to them, you barely speak their language, hardly know their culture, and stink.

There's a distant, yet deep, kinship in an evolutionary framework. It speaks to the commonality of everyone, but without reference to things outside of confirmed natural processes, except in idle speculation for fun. Humanism speaks to the same impulses. It describes, at least in its core values—not everyone agrees to the letter of the law, one common species—not 'races,' whatever that means—with common evolved cousins and common ancestors in a massive Tree of Life spanning up to **3.77 billion years ago**. Wow. So yea, life is super old and evolved, not young and created all-at-once in an act of creation only a few thousand years ago. (I'm bad at endings.)

Solar Energy Systems Become More Viable and the Global Energy Chain Changes

April 3, 2017

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

The world's energy systems are changing at an increasingly rapid rate, which is changing the dynamics of the global energy system. All of this bound by the needs of the public based on growing global population and the increased consumption patterns of the public.

Solar energy is becoming more dominant with each passing year. The **World Economic Forum** (WEF) reports that Germany reached 41GW by the end of 2016. "In contrast to earlier energy system evolutions, the arena this time is undergoing a truly disruptive transformation," WEF said.

There is a modern wave, global change, in the energy sector driven by both the customer and the focus. The focus, too, being on the customer. The grid edge technologies pitched by the Paris agreement with distributed batteries and solar energy are important.

The scene is being set for more and more engaged and active customers. The customers will be able to profit from modern technologies in addition to be able to transform the system of energy production and distribution throughout the world.

"So the customer today is not a consumer, but rather a prosumer combining own generation of energy with ever more efficient and increasingly smarter consumption. This is why I believe, the change is not customer centric. The customer is the change itself," the WEF said.

The WEF related two sides to the issue. One was the production side and the other was the consumption. With production, the services and products will be decentralised. With consumption, billions of assets throughout the world will be more thoroughly integrated than ever before.

This digital enabling of the customer with the energy grid is revolutionising the global energy system. This is part of modern and upcoming, and ongoing, connectivity, which is described in three parts.

The first is the sharing that involves people such as communities and regions. The second will be the transformed energy system based on the customer sharing of energy including the transfer of renewable electricity for heating and mobility. The third part of this energy sharing will be the connection between the aforementioned prosumers – those creating their own energy and using energy – and the regular consumer with energy or assets, e.g. the use of e-vehicles or the sharing of energy generation plants, and so on.

So this sharing will be a platform that will allow those kinds of sharing.

“A platform which provides to the customers on the one hand the efficient and flexible physical exchange of energy just as the indispensable security of supply.” the WFF said. “A better world, where it is only about the customer.”

According to Research, Negative Emotions Are Vital to Well-Being

April 4, 2017

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

It has been reported, according to the research, negative feelings are in fact part of the process of feeling well and essential for mental health.

The research showed that negative motions were likely important for our very survival.

Over time, species become carved out. Human beings are no different. Therefore, the fact that we have negative emotions as well as positive emotions is important to keep in mind about general well-being. In fact, the suppression of various feelings and thoughts can turn out to be harmful.

As noted by Tori Rodriguez in 2013, “A crucial goal of therapy is to learn to acknowledge and express a full range of emotions, and here was a client apologising for doing just that.”

He takes his psychotherapy practice as a time to help clients deal with some of the most difficult emotions – some of the most extreme negative emotions – in human life such as “extreme anger” or “suicidal thoughts.”

But there is a trend among some to hide those feelings because of a feeling of guilt associated with having the emotions perceived to be or given a blanket negative valuation. Rodrigues attributes this to our culture’s hyper-focus on the positive.

As Richard Pryor instructs us: “All humour is rooted in pain” or “I had some great things and I had some bad things. The best and the worst . . . In other words, I had a life.”

Rodrigues continued, “Although positive emotions are worth cultivating, problems arise when people start believing they must be upbeat all the time. In fact, anger and sadness are an important part of life, and new research shows that experiencing and accepting such emotions are vital to our mental health.”

He goes on to talk about the various ways that the suppression of positive emotions can be a bad thing for the individual affecting even one’s own eating patterns for the worst. It is important to express oneself he stresses.

Family Trees for Our Stars

April 4, 2017

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

Mary Johnson-Groh discussed the methodological cross-over act from biology to cosmology with the attempt, **recently**, of astronomers to build the family tree of the stars in our galaxy, the Milky Way Galaxy, akin to methodologies found in biology to classify species, and families, orders, and so on.

With the classification in biology as taxonomy, the field of biology has become much more complex with the increase in evidence. However, the ability to catalogue provides a systematised manner in which to find and classify species, whether new or old.

This has been termed the family tree in terms of the tracing of the lineages of organisms. Apparently, astronomers are beginning to borrow from biology to catalogue and organise, in a systematic way, the stars.

In particular, this is being used for the Milky Way Galaxy. In a way, the information encoded into DNA can be used to decipher the lineage of an organism and the relationship of one organism to another, in that tree of life.

The chemical composition of the elements within stars can be used to determine its history. What fuel is it burning? Hydrogen, Helium, Iron? There are proxies as to the composition and age of the stars based on their spectra because some fuels emit different electromagnetic radiation – or light – than others.

Anyway, this can give a tree of the evolution of the Milky Way Galaxy.

The laws governing galactic evolution and stellar evolution, or the evolution of the galaxy and the stars, differ from those of organisms, but the information is passed down in a general way – and in this general passing down can be used in similar way, in an analogous way, with the stars in the galaxy.

Some have termed this “astrocladistics” after cladistics. It is a way to determine the characteristics inherited by stars over time in the galaxy. So astrocladistics deals with the formation and evolution of stars over time, or stellar evolution and formation. For this particular example, the Milky Way Galaxy that we inhabit.

The younger stars are to be found in the central thin disk of the Galaxy with the older stars in the thicker disk. The thickness of the disks differs for the young and the old stars. The thick disk, apparently, is said to be like a “diffuse cloud.”

However, researchers found a third category of stars, or stellar family. This raises questions. What is the origin of the newly found family of stars? As things move through the ‘heavens,’ we can see the trajectory and the age of the stars.

Did they form within the Galaxy or outside of it? The third category appears to be a family of stars termed “late-bloomers” because of their apparent formation from a possible galactic merger or the “collision” of two (or more) galaxies into one.

However, there are difficulties in the appropriate translation of the methodologies found in the biological sciences to the astronomical sciences, but the generalised analogous methodologies are used to suss out the general information about the family of stars in our Galaxy.

In that, the researchers found three classifications: the young and the old from within the original galaxy, and the late-bloomers from the collision of one (or more) galaxies together.

Q&A on Philosophy, with Dr. Stephen Law – Session 1

April 4, 2017

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

Dr. Stephen Law is Reader in Philosophy at Heythrop College, University of London. He is also editor of THINK: Philosophy for Everyone, a journal of the Royal Institute of Philosophy (published by Cambridge University Press). Stephen has published numerous books on philosophy, including The Philosophy Gym: 25 Short Adventures in Thinking (on which an Oxford University online course has since been based) and The Philosophy Files (aimed at children 12+). Stephen is a Fellow of The Royal Society of Arts. He was previously a Junior Research Fellow at The Queen's College, Oxford, and holds B.Phil. and D.Phil. degrees in Philosophy from the University of Oxford. He has a blog at www.stephenlaw.org. Stephen Law was Provost of CFI UK from July 2008-January 2017 taking on overall responsibility for the organisation, and particular responsibility for putting on talks and other educational events and programmes.

Scott Jacobsen: One of my favourite ideas I have come across from you is the “Going Nuclear” method. When losing an argument, Going Nuclear involves the adoption of a super sceptical position, which blows up the foundation for discussion. What are some examples of this?

Dr. Stephen Law: That's right. It's a rhetorical move. When it looks like your intellectual opponent is about to lose the argument, they suddenly get *super sceptical*. That gives them a great get-out-of-jail-free card. One way they may get super sceptical is to run the following argument:

'You are using reason in this argument. But how can you justify your use of reason?! Any justification you supply will itself use reason! So it will be a circular justification. And circular justifications are no justifications at all: like trusting a second-hand car salesman because he says he is trustworthy. But if you can't justify reason, then your entire argument collapses!'

Having detonated this sceptical bomb, your opponent can now insist that it's 'faith positions all round'. Your view is really no more reasonable than theirs. I call this 'Going Nuclear' because the effect of their bringing in this super sceptical argument is that this lays waste to every position – both yours and theirs – achieving what in the Cold War was called 'Mutually Assured Destruction'. It looked like you were about to win the intellectual battle, but by Going Nuclear, your opponent has made it all square again. Both your positions now come out as equally (un)reasonable!

This strategy is particularly popular in religious and New Age circles. You might think you have established beyond reasonable doubt that Mary's wrong to believe there are fairies living at the bottom of her garden, but then Mary Goes Nuclear and says: 'Ah, you're using *reason*. And reason is *just another faith position*. So your belief that there are no fairies in my garden is just as much a *faith positions* as my belief that there are!'

Mary became super sceptical about the foundation for debate. In this example, it is equivocation between reason and faith. Although, of course, the use of reason, proper, reduced Mary's belief in fairies living at the bottom of her garden to rubble. Going Nuclear is also commonly employed by religious folk – including theologians who should know better – when they start losing an argument with an atheist.

What's bad about 'Going Nuclear' is that it's applied in a selective and partisan way; it only occurs to Mary to get sceptical about reason when she starts *losing* the argument. It does not happen when Mary's winning the argument. Up until that point, she was happy to rely on it. In this case, the distinction between faith and reason, which is pretty foundational. Of course, she's happy to rely on it, all the time, in other contexts, when trusting the brakes on her car or figuring out how many tiles she needs to tile her bathroom. So Mary is just using the scepticism as a smokescreen device: as a trick to (i) distract attention away from the fact that, by the standards of reason she accepts in every other corner of her life, you're winning the argument and (ii) get you bogged down in dealing with a thorny – and largely *irrelevant* – sceptical puzzle.

SJ: Do you think that the religious or the New Age are more problematic in general – not only in the use of techniques of shutting down losing arguments such as the 'Going Nuclear' method – but in the promotion by the government and in the educational system? For examples, the 26 Church of England, or C of E, bishops in the House of Lords as well as considerable numbers of faith schools. We do not see explicit requirements for Atheists or Humanists in the House of Lords or the permission for humanistic schools. According to the BBC (2011), there are 7,000 faith schools out of the 20,000 schools in the United Kingdom (UK). 35% of the schools seems like too many.

SL: I am more concerned about mainstream religion than New Age belief because mainstream religion wields considerable political power in the UK. Indeed, they are working hard to gain more. The UK is fairly politically secular, but, as you say, there is state funding of religious schools (not humanist schools) and the C of E automatically gets to put its bishops in the House of Lords where, e.g. they can potentially block legislation.

SJ: How early is it reasonable to teach critical thinking, logic, science, and statistics? How might this change the culture in the UK?

It is an empirical question, "How early are children able to engage productively in these activities?" However, the evidence suggests early. There have been pilot studies with philosophy in the classroom with children as young as 5, where it has been successful. So the evidence suggests these can be taught young.

Of course, not everyone is keen on children being encouraged to think critically about the beliefs they bring with them into the classroom. Particularly when it comes to religious beliefs, while paying lip service to the goodness of free thought, the truth is many religious individuals find excuses to place their own religious belief off-limits.

There is growing evidence that independent and philosophical thinking is good for kids' emotional, social, and intellectual health. It can be tempting, when faced with the threat of young

people being indoctrinated into dangerous belief systems, to try to get our own indoctrination in first. However, the best defence against young people getting radicalised and drawn into dangerous belief systems is not to get our own indoctrination in first, but to make them resistant to indoctrination in the first place – whether religious or otherwise.

That means raising them to have the sense and skills to spot when someone is trying to manipulate them, to spot when bad arguments are being passed off as good, and so on. Raising young people to be good, independent critical thinkers is, I think, our best defence against the kind of moral horrors that marred the 20th century. Sure, you always run a risk when you encourage people to think independently and make their own judgements. What if they end up rejecting the values we'd like them to have?

But the *greater* risk comes from raising moral sheep. That is, people who may do the right thing, but only because they are told to the right thing. When some more seductive pied-piper comes along, they may then be drawn into walking down some very dark alleys. They will lack the intellectual and emotional defences they'll need to resist.

The Mother of Iranian Feminism – Sediqeh Dowlatabadi

April 5, 2017

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

Based on work by Fuuse called sister-hood, I recently came across someone whom I did not know about before, and will never know in person or in correspondence – to my detriment – named Sediqeh Dowlatabadi, who was born in 1882 in Estafan.

She is described as the founding mother of Iranian feminism and one of the pioneering figures in the Persian women's movement.

But this does not limit taking in the data with a critical eye and sympathetic heart. And hey, it's the way to go. Her heritage was an "old and respected family" in the area. While studying in Tehran, she married at age 15, while divorcing shortly after.

Age 35, she created the "first girl's schools and women's organisation." However, the school was attacked – by Conservative clerics – in addition to Sediqeh being beaten by them. 2 years later, so age 37, she founded "The Woman's Voice" – or *Zaban-e Zanan* – in Esfahan.

The publication was banned by the authorities in Iran. It only accepted submissions from women and girls. With the closing of the magazine, she worked to fight the British influence on Iranian politics as well as continued the campaign for women's rights.

Come 1926, she went to Paris's Sorbonne University and earned a degree in education. In sister-hood it reads, "1926, she served as the representative for Iran at the tenth congress of the International Alliance for Women's Suffrage."

She became the supervisor of Women's Education in 1928, when she returned to it – as well as the director of the Inspectorate of Women's Schools.

Also, she was crucial to women's suffrage, according to the profile. That is, Dowlatabadi "persuaded Mohammad Mossadeq to grant women the vote; but due to the British/American sponsored coup, this never came to pass. In 1962, Sediqa died, at 80 years of age." In her will, it said: "*I will never forgive women who visit my grave veiled.*"

Lifespan in the US is Behind Other Nations

April 5, 2017

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

The **World Economic Forum** (WEF) has reported – in coordination with **Fortune** – that the United States of America is behind other countries in the average lifespan of its citizens. American citizens are living shorter lives than other nations' members.

WEF noted that the crime rate and the bad provisions for healthcare were the main reasons to blame for the lowered life expectancy for its citizens, **Sy Mukherjee** wrote in the WEF report. In fact, the gap is projected to grow between 2017 and 2030 on average, based on a **new study** in the Lancet.

Based on research from the World Health Organization (WHO) and Imperial College London, the average length of lives for the world will increase, but the deal with the United States is that its rate of improvement will be much slower compared to other countries.

For example, women will have an average lifespan of 83.3 while men will have an average lifespan of 79.5 there, by 2030. However, South Korea will fair much better with women living upwards of 91.1 years *on average* and men living to 84.1 years on average, also by 2030.

The reason for the current and growing discrepancy in the lifespans, apparently, comes down to the healthcare system in the US without a universal coverage policy tied to an attenuated – a weakened – safety net.

Other things include a fat nation, an obese nation. The authors of the study said, “The USA has the highest child and maternal mortality, homicide rate, and body-mass index of any high-income country...”

For the first time in 20 years, according to the projections from the Centers for Disease Control in the United States, the life expectancy could actually drop for the citizenry of America. “The only top 10 killer of Americans where the survival rate increased that year was for cancer, which has seen a flurry of interest from the biopharma industry.”

Stability of Personality Less Certain Over Time

April 5, 2017

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

It has been **reported** by the **World Economic Forum** (WEF) that in a study – with implications for the concept of “self” or “personhood” – an individual changes significantly over time to the point that a senior does not even recognise himself/herself very much as a teenager.

This has been called an ‘ongoing psychological and philosophical debate,’ according to research on personality over time. In fact, this is the longest personality study ever published. The study has been published in the journal entitled *Psychology and Aging*.

The British Psychological Society highlighted the research suggesting that over the course of time the cells in your body, the appearance to yourself, *and your personality* are significantly changed to the point of non-recognition.

The study involved 14-year-olds from 1950 a survey in Scotland totalling 1,208 people There were six questionnaires to measure core personality traits: “self-confidence, perseverance, stability of moods, conscientiousness, originality, and desire to learn.”

The collected results from the questionnaires where then titled one trait: “dependability.” After 6 decades, the researchers were able to track down a little over half of the participants or the research subjects.

Of those 635, 174 participants consented to a repeat testing from the 1950 survey. In other words, 1,208 14-year-olds in Scotland in 1950 took part in a 6 questionnaire test for the amalgamated “dependability” trait with 635 being tracked down over 60 years later – and of those 635 there were 174 taking part.

The participants were 77-years-old. The findings are reported to have surprised the researchers because over shorter periods of time personality traits appear to be robustly consistent, and the several decades study in regular intervals of life such as “childhood to middle-age, or middle-aged to older age.”

There was also stability, but there does appear to be change in fundamental personality characteristics in the participants of the study. A 63-year gap for the participants, which is much more significant than the age ranges of childhood to middle age, or middle-age to older age.

63 years can probably be considered a range of childhood to post retirement age. The author of the WEF article argues that there is then truth in the Buddhist conception of a non-stability in the sense of the self. That is, it is more or less an illusion. This is a statement of the writer based on increasing neuroscientific research.

World Health Organization Meets with Partners at Summit

April 5, 2017

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

The World Health Organization (WHO) met at the South Sudan National Health Summit with its (the WHO's) various partners with over 500 participants coming to the meeting to discuss, and face, the challenges and opportunities that are potentially there for the "years ahead."

The Republic of South Sudan's Ministry of Health is the main partner with the World Health Organization in the subject area of challenges and opportunities for the years ahead. Some of the aims of the meeting will be new strategies and financing mechanisms being tied to political developments for the strengthening of the national health system.

However, there will be resource restrictions for the country and, therefore, for the ministry. The socioeconomic context of the country is fragile. And there are increased risks with the reduction in funding of communicable disease outbreaks in addition to malnutrition.

Also, there has been a famine with over 100,000 people facing starvation and another 1 million on the brink of famine. What is more, the average life expectancy for the country is, circa 2012, 55.

And the means of dying are far-ranging, and relatively common, which makes the importance of this summit even more clear.

These causes of death include: HIV, tuberculosis, malaria, acute respiratory infections, other infectious diseases, maternal, neonatal, nutritional cardiovascular diseases, diabetes, cancers, chronic respiratory diseases, other NCDs, Suicide, homicide and conflict, and unintentional injuries.

The main purpose of the South Sudanese National Health Summit is to "build a resilient health system and obtain greater access to health services," according to the WHO. The theme for the 5-day event is "Harnessing Strong Partnerships for a Resilient Health System towards attainment of Universal Health Coverage."

The South Sudan Minister of Health, Dr. Riek Gai Kok, "convened the National Health Summit" in order to "foster understanding on South Sudan's new National Health Policy (2016-2026)."

The needs of the population in terms of humanitarian assistance have increased in a significant way. So there is impetus behind this.

The WHO representative to South Sudan, Dr. Abdulmumini Usman, said, "We are facing an immediate crisis from famine that requires immediate action by South Sudan's health sector...However, the National Health Summit also must give a voice to all of the 12 million

people in South Sudan because this is a country facing a myriad of health crises from conflict to disasters to disease outbreaks impacting everyone.”

According to the WHO report, there is a predicted Famine Response Strategy agreement amongst the partners and the WHO meeting at the summit. However, the report for the 5-day conference was on March 27, so the agreement should be reached, or not, by now.

Regardless, there are millions who require health services: “5.4 million people are in need of health services, including 1.9 million internally displaced persons (IDPs), 1.4 million refugees...WHO estimates that 12.3 million people in South Sudan are at risk due to disease outbreaks.”

Even with these critical cases in the millions, there have been significant signals as to some of the positive changes that have taken place within South Sudan for the Sudanese population with health risks.

For example, WHO provided support for a “nationwide vaccination campaign against polio for 3 million children under age 5, including in famine-affected areas...[and] a cholera vaccination campaign.”

Much of this includes training and educating practitioners for these campaigns. “Dr Helen Rees, WHO Chairperson for WHO’s Africa Regional Immunisation Technical Advisory Group,” acted as the chair for the National Health Summit.

For further information:

Statement by WHO Representative at the 3rd National Health Summit of South Sudan

Europe has had a Measles Outbreak

April 5, 2017

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

The United Nations (UN) has made a recent **announcement** about the outbreak of measles in continental Europe.

It is unexpected. Hundreds of measles cases have been reported in continental Europe where the disease was thought to have been eliminated in full by the United Nations health agency devoted to it.

This elimination was thought to be due to vaccinations for children on the part of families and national authorities. In addition, there were more drastic measures to have transmission stopped at the borders. There were hundreds of cases with most in “France, Germany, Italy, Poland, Romania, Switzerland, and Ukraine,” recently.

The largest outbreaks have been found in Romania. There have been over 3,400 cases since January, so three months at 3,400 cases comes to about 1,130 to 1,140 cases per month – January, February, and March – since the start of 2017.

In addition, there are expected to be 850 cases in Italy in the coming weeks there. The national immunization estimates are assumed to be very good in continental Europe. It is important to bear in mind that “measles is a highly contagious virus that remains endemic in most parts of the world.”

Zsuzsanna Jakab, World Health Organization (WHO) Regional Director for Europe, said, “Outbreaks will continue in Europe, as elsewhere, until every country reaches the level of immunization needed to fully protect their populations.”

The “estimated national immunization coverage with the second dose of measles-containing vaccine is believed to be less than the 95 per cent threshold,” the Jakab said.

With the lower than desired immunization rates, the potential for the spread of measles is high.

“I urge all endemic countries to take urgent measures to stop transmission of measles within their borders,” Jakab said, “and all countries that have already achieved this to keep up their guard and sustain high immunization coverage. Together we must make sure that the hard-earned progress made towards regional elimination is not lost.”

Make Your Life Meaningful

April 6, 2017

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

The Mayo Clinic, in a little ditty in their news network section caught my eye, which was a report or a post, more accurately, on global meaning and personal meaning. It was entitled *Something to Think About: Personal and global meaning*.

A certain Dr. Amit Sood, a well-qualified professional as the director of research in the Complementary and Integrative Medicine Program on Mayo Clinic's Rochester campus in Minnesota, wrote the piece.

Being the Mayo Clinic, he knows what he's talking about. He opens with "It is easier and more useful to make your life more meaningful than to search for the ultimate meaning of life."

He spoke to the nature of science and the ease with which one can find, at least, some meaning without ultimate meaning. To me, it is like asking, "What can help me build some more meaning?" Rather than, "Why are we here?" Both important questions.

However, one is more doable, and the doable one seems to be the former, for anyone with the will to put in the work, which seems to be the big tip.

"Awareness of the unimaginably large size of our universe (estimated at ninety-one billion light-years) creates a sense of awe—about the vastness of it all," Dr. Sood said. "Knowledge about the subatomic quantum world with awareness of the power of intentionality is truly fascinating. But the details of physics at both the cosmic and the quantum levels still leave the curious mind dissatisfied."

I see what he is driving at. I assume you see the same. The driving towards *how* before *why*, and sometimes the never-found *why* can be the big disappointment, where the littler *how* can be an infinite source of daily, and moment-to-moment, curiosity.

"I...know how to align my limited mind with what I believe is my primary evolutionary responsibility—to help create a safer, happier, kinder world for our planet's children," Dr. Sood said.

Making piecemeal influence, working for the world at large, taking part in the individual pursuit – and responsibility – of the construction of meaning, and being that drop in the proverbial ocean.

"I believe contextual, transient meanings all converge to a global meaning. If I can take hold of my own little meaning and pursue it to the deepest place it can take me, the reflection of the global meaning might reveal itself. That will be enough."

And how about you, is it enough...got meaning?

Education News in Brief – April 6th, 2017

April 6, 2017

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

Inspire Maths textbooks series make “inroads” in Britain

According to the Straits Times, the maths style taught in Singapore is being used in the United States in “thousands of schools.” It is beginning to be used in the British schools too. There is a textbook series entitled Inspire Maths.

The textbooks were given a trial run in 70 primary schools in Britain via the Department of Education over the past 2 years. In terms of mastering the subject more, the textbooks appeared to be helpful.

“Now, with another £41 million (S\$72 million) from the British government – to fund a network of “mastery specialist teachers” – the Singapore style of teaching maths may reach as many as 8,000 primary schools in Britain over the next few years.”

200,000 might be in poverty due to benefits changes

BBC News states that the changes to the benefits plans could lead to 200,000 being placed in poverty. That is, the payments to a limited number of benefits, will go to the first two children. Families are said to be £3,000 worse off per annum due to this.

That is according to the The Child Poverty Action Group and Institute for Public Policy Research. “Ministers say they are determined to tackle the root causes of disadvantage and make work pay,” the BBC said.

“The changes affect families who claim tax credits and Universal Credit;” a process that is intended to replace tax credits by 2022.

Religious countries less educated

The Independent reported that talented students from poor families earn less than those from richer families that achieve less in education, according to the Education Secretary. Justine Greening called this a “cold, hard, economic imperative.”

Greening, who spoke at a conference on social mobility said, “Children from high-income backgrounds who show signs of low academic ability at age five are 35 per cent more likely to become high earners than their poorer peers who show early signs of high ability.”

This was based on Greening’s “experience growing up in Rotherham” and observing the challenges faced by poorer families.

Philosophy News in Brief – April 6th, 2017

April 6, 2017

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

Rutgers University world-class philosophy department

According to the Daily Targum, the Rutgers philosophy programme was listed as having one of the best philosophy programmes in the United States. In fact, the department has taken the attention of Tsinghua University in China.

Tsinghua University has produced a “special book series where they publish Western philosophical studies. Their March issue includes a section dedicated to philosophy at Rutgers, and they translated six influential articles from some of the University’s most famous philosophers into Chinese.”

Many philosophers from Rutgers have earned various national and international awards, honours, and fellowships including those from Harvard, Oxford, Princeton, and Stanford.

Yoga good for physical and mental wellness

Quartz has reported that the local yoga class can improve one’s physical flexibility and “serenity.” A philosophy professor at the University of Pennsylvania, Lisa Miracchi, said behaviour, reasoning, and relationships can improve with its practice.

Miracchi notes that it is possible to examine the “emotions and sensations” for life as well as a complex philosophical worldview. Something that is “missing from contemporary Western philosophies, [and] can help make you a better person.”

“These benefits are not a coincidence. Yoga is part of a Hindu philosophy that, alongside a metaphysics and epistemological perspective, teaches yoga as a practical element.”

African Philosophy ‘Ubuntu’ as Students’ David Peace Grant Project

University of Virginia stated, “University of Virginia students will spend their summer in South Africa trying to rekindle a deeper appreciation of “ubuntu,” an African traditional philosophy focused on compassion and community, with a Davis Projects for Peace grant.”

The second-year students included: Jillian Randolph, Naki Kaur, Madeline Curry, and Sophie Binns. They are majoring in global studies. The aim is to develop a youth development centre in Khayelitsha in South Africa.

Randolph said, “We will create sustainable activities for youth through engaging the community in discussions of ubuntu...that emphasizes human commonality, community relations and compassion.”

The Upcoming Era of the Edible Drone

April 7, 2017

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

Magdalena Mis **reported** through the World Economic Forum (WEF), originally through the World Bank, that there is a new type of drone that is in fact, edible. That's right, eatable.

These "edible drones" could be used for humanitarian purposes, such as being, "filled with food, water or medicine" for the purposes of humanitarian emergencies. Areas that are difficult to reach by other means could have supplies delivered via drones, which could be a major benefit to humanitarian efforts trying to reach those remote areas.

It should be noted that over 50 kg of food can be stocked inside the edible drones, only costing 150 British pounds. Additionally, the drones could deliver "supplies to feed up to 50 people per day" and the prototype is mostly made of wood. Thus, the edible drone will be the post-prototype version of the drone, by implication.

In the report, there were notes to some of the most dangerous areas of the world today, in terms of war or combat, such as Aleppo and the Islamic State or ISIS. An ex-army catering officer and the founder of Windhorse Aerospace in the UK, Nigel Gifford, said, "Food can be component to build things."

Gifford continued, "You fly (the drone) and then eat it...In combat zones like we have in Aleppo or Mosul nothing will work except what we have...With parachuted air drops the problem is you can't guarantee where the loads will land."

Gifford and the team are waiting for the appropriate financing for the full experimentation of the idea of the edible drone. Windhorse Aerospace presented the idea to the aid minister of Britain, Priti Patel, and "initial testing" is expected "in May and should be ready to be deployed on its first mission by the end of the year."

An Interview with Jim G. Helton – President of Tri-State Freethinkers

April 7, 2017

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

So many terms float around the Web, but they're generally overlapping, such as secular humanist, bright, and so on. For the Tri-State Freethinkers, what is the definition of a freethinker?

Basically, somebody who makes decisions using science, logic, and reason without dogma.

How did you become a freethinker?

It started with my wife. We were getting-married Catholic. And we were going through the process; she knew nothing about religion. The priest was explaining the Eucharist. My wife said, "You want me to drink who and eat what?" She was being serious.

[Laughing]

[Laughing] That started my doubts and got me out of my bubble. It was a 10-year downward spiral from Catholicism to Christianity to Deist to agnostic to atheism over a period of researching the Bible and questioning things. That's what started my questioning.

Based on conversation with others, and based on reading about the topic extensively, what seems like the main reason for people becoming freethinkers?

It is different for a lot of people. For me, when I started researching the Bible, it wasn't to disprove it. Being raised Catholic, I thought some of these are truths. Some of these are moral stories. I wanted to find the fact from the fiction. I was horrified when I found out it was pretty much all fiction—like none of it was true. It was eye-opening for me. For some, it is morality.

That was also a part of it. When you start looking at the moral of the story, even though you say it isn't true historically, people say to look at the moral of the story.

The Internet has been a huge boost for people to have access to information. That's been huge. For Millennials, it seems to be the anti-equal rights stance the church has taken on issues, e.g. LGBTQ, women's health care. It has pushed a lot of people away from the church.

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

The best argument for it. It just makes sense. If you were using common sense and you were using logic and reason with no agenda, you would want to know the truth. It's not necessarily where religion comes from. Religion starts with the answer and then they do everything they can to prove that it's true. Science starts with a question & then searches for the truth no matter where it takes us.

If life was lived that way, and politics was that way, the world would be so much of a better place.

Now, you are the president of Tri-State Freethinkers. Did you found it?

Yes, my wife and I founded it 4 years ago.

What bumps and setbacks, and successes, came along with founding it with your wife?

It was an amazing thing. I got back from the Reason Rally and was motivated to do something.

The original Reason Rally; and my wife wanted to do community service projects, but it was all churches proselytising. We founded Tri-State Freethinkers on the foundation of doing activism for myself, and community service for my wife. But we needed a way to bring people in, so we used education as a way to do that by having meetings.

Then we created some social events because we really enjoyed each other's company. We have 1,900 members in our parent organisation within 4 years. We absorbed 3 other organisations, which gives us about 5,500 members, with some overlap. It has been an amazing journey. We've made national and international press based on protests against the Ark Encounter. We changed the public perception of what a freethinker & atheist is. But it has also come with a price. It cost me my original job.

I've received death threats. My family and kids have also received threats. That's the baggage that comes with the territory, but I would say that's few and far between compared to all of the good that we're doing. It provides a sense of community for people. I would do it again if I could.

With the 5,500 members based on the absorption of the other organisations, what are some of the demographics? Who is most likely to be a freethinker?

So, age-wise, we're very mixed. We have kids come to some of our events all the way up to seniors. We are very, very age diverse. We're also not very heavily male-dominated. 70% of our board are women & about 50% of our members are women. Where we need to get better on diversity is with race. We live in Kentucky, which isn't very diverse & other races tend to be more religious, it is even harder to break that barrier.

You mentioned the change in perception of the public in the local area of atheism, or freethinking, in general. As well, you noted national and international press for the organisation. What explicit activist causes has Tri-State Freethinkers taken up, what were they, and what were their successes?

We've taken on quite a bit. Our first one, we adopted the highway in front of the Creation Museum.

[Laughing]

[Laughing] We also followed up with the highway in front of the Ark Encounter. That got us a lot of press in the atheist and freethought community. In addition, we were doing a community service project. It brought people out to do atheist community service. People will do it. It was a huge turnout. That was the first thing we did. The second thing we did was challenging Gideon Bible distribution in the public schools.

We were successful in removing them from the public schools in Kentucky. Not all of them because they are like whack-a-mole. They pop up everywhere, but we have been successful in stopping it. I get calls from all over the country. I even got a call from Canada asking, “How can you combat the Gideons?” There are ways to stop them. We have become very, very good at it. So, that got us a lot of recognition on our success.

We tackled sex education. There were churches teaching abstinence only sex education in public schools. We have gotten very good at throwing out the churches that teach that. We struggled at getting comprehensive sex education implemented. It is an ongoing process. We have created a little noise there. We’re stilling working on that.

We put an international project together where people from around the world come in from the Ark Encounter. We were on *Fox & Friends Live*, *The New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, and all of the local TV. People from the UK and Sweden. We are in the Bill Nye Film that is coming out. It is a small piece, but we have a cameo in the Bill Nye film. *We Believe in Dinosaurs* documentary about the Ark Encounter. We have a fairly decent-sized role in that.

We help pass women’s resolution in Cincinnati saying we have to pay them equally, give them health care and services, and so on. We hope to have the ordinance passed this year. We’ve taken on equal rights issues. We are doing the March for Science. We were behind the Women’s March here in Cincinnati. So, with equal rights, we try to get involved from an activism standpoint to bring out our members.

What is the general perception of freethinking in America?

90% of people don’t know what it is. That’s why David Silverman from American Atheists doesn’t use it because nobody knows what it is. [Laughing] That’s exactly why we chose the name because people don’t know what it is. A lot of people join our group because they agree with our social issues. But if we said we were an atheist organisation, they wouldn’t come to us.

So, we don’t ask what your religion is. We don’t ask if you have any.

With most people, once they get in the social circle and start talking, they realise they have the same values. They’re probably either deist or agnostic. They just didn’t identify as an atheist, just because of the terminology. Personally, I identify as an atheist, but as a group we’re open to beyond atheists. A lot of people that hang around us end up identifying as atheists as well, but we don’t ask and we don’t care.

We do so many things it's hard to name them all. We've taken on the death penalty. We are for dying with dignity. We support Planned Parenthood. We're there almost every week. We don't expect everyone to agree with us on every issue to be part of our group.

By my read of the United States in recent history and currently, there are rather extreme religious perspectives—religious fundamentalism. At the same time, the majority of religious individuals are like most non-believing individuals. They live their lives decently and get along with their neighbour. What are some activities that you're coordinating with religious groups for good causes?

For instance, you were mentioning feeding the homeless. Are there initiatives akin to that where you're building bridges like that among communities, between communities?

Let me go back a question because it will tie in together. I think when people take action, they worry about offending people or trying to appeal to a wide range of people. When we do something or we do an action, for instance, we protested the Ark Encounter by putting up a billboard and it was on the site for a day. It got everybody's attention. People were like, "You're going to piss off the Christians." We were like, "Don't care." "You are only appealing to your base." "Yes." "You are only doing this for hardcore atheists." "Yes, that was my goal."

We want it because those hardcore people that would come out for that are the ones who are going to run the organisation. They are the ones who are going to work 1-20 hours a week volunteering for free. That's my appeal. That's what I wanted. I wasn't extending an olive branch to my Christian neighbours. They were not my target. I still knew the creationists were going to go. At the same time, our interfaith committee says, "We have a meeting with the church."

I'm like, "I've got a meeting with the mayor next week." "This is going to make it harder for us." I'm like, "I agree." We were feeding the homeless once a year. We need to do it once per month. We need to do more community service. That is our outreach. We are at a church every month feeding homeless people. We're with Habitat for Humanity who has never met an atheist before.

Then it creates dialogue. We were building a porch with a Christian group. I'm like, "We're never going to get this porch done." He's like, "Jim, you just gotta have faith." I'm like, "I have no faith, that's the problem." Then we both laugh. At the end of the day, the porch got done. He's like, "See, all you had to have was a little faith." I'm like, "You call it faith. I call it I convinced 6 more people to help." But we can argue who gets credit.

[Laughing] But it got done, that's the point.

It creates dialogue. It breaks down these barriers. When we do that, we do a lot of interfaith outreach. We say, "Do you agree with us on women's issues?" I went to the state council with a Catholic nun. We're fighting against the death penalty. A couple of months later, the Catholic church is protesting Planned Parenthood while we're supporting it. If we find allies on an issue, I don't care who they are.

We will partner and accept them for that issue, which I think gives us a lot of credibility. We're going after legislation. We are going after state legislation for sex education. So, we take a multipronged approach from our activism. We are trying to reach our base that people here in the community, nonbelievers, are just like them and that we care about the community as well. We do social events like a movie night. We do a multipronged approach, very targeted, of who we are targeting and why.

We don't worry about the people who are not targeted. The Ark Encounter, the Christians aren't happy about it. When we are at a church feeding people, some of the atheists aren't happy, but they aren't our target. We do very targeted approaches on how to grow the group and the movements as a whole, and we are not afraid to do so and to reach people we feel need reaching.

How can people get involved with Tri-State Freethinkers?

With the Tri-State Freethinkers, all of our meetings are on **Meetup.com**. For example, February is 28 days, we had 29 meetups in February. We are probably one of the most active groups in the country. Meetup.com, you type up 'Tri-State Freethinkers.' You **Google** us. There are more pages. We also have, if you're not close us, **<http://www.tristatefreethinkers.com/>**.

There's a 'support us' page, where people can support us financially. Or because what we do is relevant to other states and organisations around the country, you can email me or call us about sex education, Gideons, and women's rights issues. We share this information freely with other groups. Also, our Facebook page is where we post most of our news stories. On average, we get from 50,000 to 500,000 hits per week depending on what we're doing at the time.

The news is **Facebook**. The events are Meetup. The website if you need a resource for some of the previous things.

Thank you for your time, Mr. Helton.

An Interview with Christine M. Shellska – President, Atheist Alliance International

April 8, 2017

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

Christine Shellska is a Ph.D. Candidate in the Department of Communication, Media and Film, Faculty of Arts, at the University of Calgary, Canada. Her research involves studying the rhetorical strategies employed by the Intelligent Design Creationism movement, and her areas of focus include history, philosophy and sociology of science, and rhetoric.

Among other involvement in the secular community, she is the President of Atheist Alliance International, the first Canadian to be elected to the Board of Directors for the American Humanist Association, and a regular co-host on the Calgary-based *Legion of Reason* podcast.

What is the standard, straightforward definition of atheism?

The most accurate, succinct definition of “atheism” is a lack of a belief in a god or gods. But if you want a slightly longer description, American Atheists has an excellent summary, here.

How did you become an Atheist, e.g. arguments from logic and philosophy, evidence from mainstream science, or experience within traditional religious structures?

I was raised in a non-religious household, and I grew up in a large, ethnically and religiously diverse city in Canada. Most of the religious people I knew growing up were very moderate. There is quite a robust community of new-agers here, who reject organised religion and self-identify as non-believers. Atheism is very normalised here.

In terms of philosophical influences, I was introduced to scepticism at a very young age, when I asked Santa for a toy, despite my parents warning me that it wouldn’t be what I expected. It wasn’t. I learned that I shouldn’t always believe what I see in TV adverts (especially ones targeted at children prior to Christmas).

My Dad was also involved in advertising, and I am by trade a graphic designer with a specialisation in corporate communications, marketing and advertising. I’ve always been fascinated by how language and imagery are used as tools of persuasion, and there is plenty of fodder in advertising to pique the sceptical mind and cultivate a healthy “bullshit detector.”

I went to public schools, and the curriculum was secular; science was understood as factual, but subject to change in light of new discoveries. I don’t remember anybody denying evolution, so I find this Intelligent Design movement very interesting.

I’m studying it from a rhetorical perspective for my PhD dissertation, and that’s how I entered the atheist community, when I attended my first American Humanist Association conference (I’m now on their Board of Directors).

In terms of traditional religious structures, my family rarely attended religious services, except for things like weddings and funerals. While I briefly explored some religions in my youth, and concluded they were mostly nonsense, I've never been constrained by the boundaries of traditional religious structures.

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

I can't narrow it down to one reason; I've heard many compelling stories about why people have left their faiths. Some people have witnessed or suffered cruelty at the hands of their religion; some have come to atheism because they got in an argument, went online to prove their religion was true, and stumbled upon refutations.

I don't have those experiences; for me, atheism is the default. I've never had to leave a religion, which for many atheists is an enormous risk, an act of bravery, and a painful process. One of the best reasons I've heard for religion is that it provides comfort, but atheism provides no such comfort. I don't know if I would say this is the "best" reason for atheism, but I find it the most oft cited and compelling: a commitment to being honest to one's self.

Is it more probable for atheism it to be accepted among the younger sub-population?

It depends on a number of factors, personal as well as geographical location, culture, access to education, internet access, and so on. But some societies are infested with proselytisers who take advantage of basic human needs; some societies live under oppressive regimes where media is highly censored, religious or political dissent is harshly penalised, and so on.

There are undoubtedly Atheists among those populations, but they might not dare to identify as such. De-stigmatising atheism will be more challenging in these areas, but the internet has facilitated the establishment of groups and on-line Atheist communities who are actively working to normalise atheism, many of whose members are young adults.

There are regions where younger generations are increasingly accepting atheism, and I think that will continue. Campaigns like Richard Dawkins' "There's Probably No God" bus signage and the Out Campaign helped normalise atheism to the Western world, and elsewhere. Many prominent academics and celebrities proudly identify as Atheists.

In societies where it is normalised through avenues like social media and popular culture, youth are more likely to accept atheism. Strategies to normalise and cast a positive light on atheism will vary from region to region. In some areas, engaging in activism means risking one's life.

Being an 'Atheist' in some countries can mean being labelled a "terrorist" – such as in Saudi Arabia. What are your thoughts—well, more feelings—on this?

It must be terrifying to live in societies like that, not only for Atheists, but for religious minorities as well. There are a lot of places that I would like to visit at some point, but I've crossed some off my list, for awhile anyway. I have a unique last name, and goodness knows

what would happen if an unfriendly border guard agent decided to Google it. I'm glad I live in a peaceful country, where I don't fear anybody. The people I fear are the ones who fear me.

You are the president of Atheist Alliance International. What tasks and responsibilities come with being the president?

I'm responsible for the overall management and operation of AAI. I chair our meetings and oversee the activities of Board members, their teams, and their projects. I act as AAI's public representative and media spokesperson.

What are the popular activities provided by Atheist Alliance International?

We support a number of educational initiatives, including two yearly scholarships, grants, and fundraising for projects and campaigns launched by our member organisations. Among these are the Kasese Humanist Primary School in Uganda, the Critical Thinking Project in Guatemala, and the Humanist Association for Leadership Equality and Accountability's (HALEA) "Stand Up for Reason," campaign, bringing awareness to the plight of children and adults accused of "witchcraft" in Uganda. Our communication outreach includes *Secular World* magazine, formerly a membership benefit, but now available for free at issuu.com/atheistalliance, and we support, attend, and participate at various conferences worldwide.

In 2013, AAI was granted UN Special Consultative Status. We defend the rights of religious non-believers and others harmed by religion and superstition, and we advocate secular, evidence-based public policy. We attend meetings in New York and Geneva, submit written and deliver oral statements, and collaborate with organisations on issues of mutual interest.

In 2013, we also launched our Asylum Project, to help support Atheists and Secularists known to our member and partner organisations who have received threats or been targets of religious violence. Due to budgetary restraints and the overwhelming number of asylum-seekers seeking our help, our role is primarily limited to offering asylum-seekers information on relocating to safe countries, and endorsing their applications with letters of support.

Occasionally asylum-seekers need immediate assistance with legal fees and short-term living expenses, and we collaborate with several international and national humanitarian organisations to collectively contribute to these expenses.

Sadly, not everybody who seeks our help will qualify for asylum. Many of those who are aware of this harsh reality have asked us to give them a voice, to share their experiences, and to overcome the restrictions that prevent individuals living in closed societies from being able to speak freely without fearing for their lives, and the lives of their families.

Many atheists and secularists live lives of secrecy, forced to deny their basic human rights to freedom of conscience and belief, fearing violence and death, even at the hands of their own families. We also try to lend a voice to Atheists and Secularists living in closed societies by translating and disseminating their works across our communication platforms.

What have been the most emotionally moving experiences in your time as the president?

My interactions with asylum-seekers, and Atheists and moderates living in closed societies have definitely been the most emotionally moving experiences I've had. Many of the requests we receive to be included in our asylum project are accompanied by heartbreaking stories, sometimes photos. I've developed a few friendships through social media and Skype, people who want to leave their countries because they live in fear, sometimes even in hiding. Some of people have even asked me to personally intervene, and the worst part is telling them I can't help them, that I have neither the means nor the power to overcome laws and procedures.

Some of the asylum-seekers we've helped have been successful with their applications, and those are moments of profound joy, worth celebrating.

Atheist Alliance International is, as per the title, an international atheist collective. That is, it is representative of the global Atheist community. However, even looking at geographic distribution, on one variable, the number of Atheists can differ drastically, even region-to-region (Europe, MENA, etc). What countries and regions have the most Atheist members?

I think that the methods and reporting mechanisms of many studies do not accurately capture global atheism accurately. If self-reporting is involved, some might fear participating in research surveys. Categories of identity like "none of the above," "agnostic," and "non-believer" can be contentious and vaguely interpreted. Some countries demand their citizens identify with the dominant religion, and some measure religious affiliation based on, for example, religion recorded at birth, thus studies that rely on census data can be inaccurate.

Due to the challenges of acquiring accurate data, I think there are more Atheists globally than these studies can reflect.

Having said that, the most comprehensive studies I'm aware of are Pew's *Global Religious Landscape*, the International Humanist and Ethical Union's (IHEU) *Freedom of Thought Report*, and the US Department of State's annual *International Religious Freedom Report*.

In terms of AAI's membership, we have 36 global affiliate and associate member organisations representing six of the seven continents. Of our individual members, 45% are located in the US, 15% in Australia, 10% in Canada, 6% in each of Germany and the UK, and the remainder in various countries throughout the world.

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

We don't track our individual members' social demographics, nor do we have data on the composition of our member organisations. However, AAI hosts the Atheist Census project, a brief survey that queries on country of origin, preferred non-religious identity, religious background, education level, age, and gender identity. Anybody can participate our survey and access our results through an interactive graphical interface located at www.atheistcensus.com. So far, we have nearly 285,000 responses.

We do not purport the Atheist Census to be a scientific study; it is an informal survey that in large part serves as a tool of solidarity to let Atheists in closed societies know they're not alone. However, our findings on gender imbalance are consistent with other research (see, for example, Phil Zuckerman's 2009 publication, "[Atheism, Secularity, and Well-Being](#)," originally published in *Sociology Compass*, hosted by the Secular Policy Institute. At the time of writing, only about 26.3% of our Atheist Census respondents identify as female, compared to 73.1% who identify as male (0.6% identify as "other").

Last year, we issued a questionnaire to prominent women activists, parliamentarians, academics, journalists, and scientists, to understand their perceptions of male over-representation within Atheist and Secular organisations, and to recommend best-practices to address gender imbalance for our Board of Directors and our member organisations. Our *Gender Imbalance Report* is located [here](#).

What have been the largest activist and educational initiatives provided by Atheist Alliance International? Out of these, what have been honest failures and successes?

I hope that throughout this interview, I've highlighted a few of AAI's and its member organisations' recent successful projects and initiatives. We have recently applied for Participatory Status at the Council of Europe, and among other projects, our future plans include launching billboard campaigns focusing on normalising atheism in Uganda and Guatemala.

It is difficult to regard our challenges as "failures," rather than unsuccessful experiments and lessons-learned. Much of our work is uncharted territory, so we have few empirical measures to evaluate the intangible aspects of our work. Most of our initiatives involve some degree of risk, which we carefully assess on the basis of their potential returns, financial as well as intangible.

Some of our initiatives and projects are not fully realised because of the usual challenges that many non-profit organisations face – lack of financial and human resources (with the exception of one paid employee, we are all volunteers), competing for donor dollars, and so on.

Who/what are the main threats to atheism as a movement?

Islamism and radical extremists seek to not only destroy atheism, but to impose their theocratic agenda worldwide.

There is an element on the political left, among them many atheists, for whom Maajid Nawaz coined the term "regressives" (shared [here](#) by The Friendly Atheist:). Nawaz, along with figures like Sam Harris, Bill Maher, Ayaan Hirsi Ali, Maryam Namazie, Faisal Saeed Al Mutar, Ali Rizvi, Sarah Haider, Armin Navabi, and many others, draw hatred from both Islamic extremists as well as certain liberals for challenging the claims of Islam.

Even though they explicitly condemn anti-Muslim bigotry, such allegations have, for example, led to cancellations of some of their talks, and [landed Nawaz and Hirsi Ali](#) on the Southern Poverty Law Center's "A Journalist's Manual: Field Guide to Anti-Muslim Extremists,"

located **here**. They are often accused of bigotry, racism, or “Islamophobia,” a made-up word deployed as a rhetorical device to pressure those who speak out against Islam into silence.

Consequently, there has been a breakdown of dialogue among the Atheist movement, a hesitancy to critically and honestly engage in discussions on Islam, and a tendency by some to marginalise the very voices who have experienced Islam first-hand. Some who condemn criticism of Islam have a uniquely and narrow western perspective, advancing Islam as a “feminist religion,” fetishising the hijab, and so on, seemingly oblivious to the plight of their sisters forced to live under Islamic theocracy.

No religion is exempt from sceptical criticism. We need to call out our apologists, and unite around the common cause of advancing secularism and defending the rights of Atheists worldwide.

How can people get involved with Atheist Alliance International, even donate to it?

Our website is located at **www.atheistalliance.org**. The Support AAI drop-down menu takes you to information on how to become a member, volunteer, or donate to our various projects and campaigns.

If you’d like to donate to our Asylum Project, our GoFundMe is located here: **<https://www.gofundme.com/2ekrkgrv>**.

Our social media:

Facebook: **<https://www.facebook.com/AtheistAllianceInternational/>**.

Twitter: **<https://twitter.com/atheistalliance>**.

Thank you for your time, Christine.

Thank you, Scott; the pleasure was mine.

Airstrikes in Syria by the US Causes International Fallout

April 8, 2017

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

Dozens of Tomahawk cruise missiles were launched from two US Navy ships in the Mediterranean US Navy

The US has launched a missile strike against Syria for the first time since the civil war began, targeting an airbase from which the US said this week's chemical weapons attack on civilians was launched by Bashar al-Assad's regime. The attacks have made one of the most damaging wars in recent years even more unstable, raising the spectre of a confrontation between the world's two most powerful international military powers.

The United Nations yesterday **affirmed** that any actions in Syria must be in line with international law. Iran and Russia are opposed to the actions by the United States. Britain, Canada, France, and Israel have shown varied degrees of support for those actions.

The United Nations political affairs chief, Jeffrey Feltman, stated that any actions should be "rooted in the principles of the United Nations and international law" and that the actions that are needed immediately should be in line with those as well as protecting the Syrian people.

"There can be no genuine protection if the parties to the conflict, government and opposition alike, are permitted to act with impunity," Feltman said to the UN Security Council, "and if the Syrian government continues to commit human rights violations against its own citizens."

The United States cruise missiles on the Syrian airbase have been close to partaking of a clash with the Russian military. The Russian Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev stated that the United States President Donald Trump and his first "foray" into the Syrian Civil War is a potential problem.

The Russian representative to the UN Council, the UN Security Council, has decried the airstrikes by the nine states with the cruise missiles. However, the United States and its allies have shown support for the strikes.

The United States ambassador to the UN Nikki Haley stated that the Trump Administration will be prepared to take more steps in Syria as necessary. She has stated that it is not something they hope will be necessary, but that the United States military is prepared to do more.

Haley said, "The United States will not stand by when chemical weapons are used. It is in our vital national security interest to prevent the spread and use of chemical weapons."

The airbase in Syria was the Shayrat airbase and actually was home to Russian special forces and military helicopters. It is in part of the Kremlin's efforts to support the Syrian government's efforts.

The Kremlin, in a public statement, stated, "President Putin views the U.S. strikes on Syria as aggression against a sovereign state in violation of the norms of international law and on a made-up pretext."

This is in the Kremlin's effort to fight the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria or ISIS. This has been reported as a 'battering' of United States-Russia relations. Moscow is hoping that Trump will revive the relationship between the United States and Russia.

The main airbase and naval facility of Russia were not hit by airstrikes by the US. The Russian President Vladimir Putin has openly condemned the airstrikes as illegal with a warning that further moves by the Trump Administration could damage the relationship between the two nations.

The ties were reported, by the CBC, to be at post-Cold War lows. Russian Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev claimed that the strikes were 'one step away' from "causing military clashes with Russia."

Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau stated that "Canada fully supports the United States' limited and focused action to degrade the Assad regime's ability to launch chemical weapons attacks against innocent civilians, including many children."

Prime Minister Justin Trudeau said Friday Canada was briefed in advance of U.S. missile strikes against the Syrian regime's chemical weapons capabilities, and 'fully supports' the U.S. move.

The Canadian prime minister made further statements about the use of chemical weapons in addition to the crimes of the regime in Syria against its own people.

"President Assad's use of chemical weapons and the crimes the Syrian regime has committed against its own people cannot be ignored. These gruesome attacks cannot be permitted to continue operating with impunity," Trudeau said, "This week's attack in southern Idlib and the suffering of Syrians is a war crime and is unacceptable. Canada condemns all uses of chemical weapons. Canada will continue to support diplomatic efforts to resolve the crisis in Syria."

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu stated that he "fully supports" the actions by the Trump Administration with the airstrikes in Syria. "In both word and action...[Trump]...sent a strong and clear message...the use and spread of chemical weapons will not be tolerated." Netanyahu said.

Iran has condemned the missile launch and noted that this will "strengthen terrorists." Foreign Ministry spokesperson, Bahram Ghasemi, said, "Iran ... condemns use of chemical weapons ... but at the same time believes it is dangerous, destructive and violation of international laws to use it as an excuse to take unilateral actions."

Religion News in Brief – April 8th, 2017

April 8, 2017

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

Ireland losing its religion

According to **BBC News**, there has been a decrease in Irish belief in religion. Those who have identified as having no religion increased by 73.6% from the previous numbers compared to the recent census statistics office report.

“The number of people who stated they had no religion increased from 269,800 to 468,400, the census found. “Some 3,729,100 people identified as Catholic – 78.3% of the population – compared to 84.2% in April 2011.”

The number of Muslims in the country went from 63,400 to 49,200 since 2011. Orthodox Christianity rose 37.5% to 62,400 with Hindus rising by 34.1% from about 10,000 in 2011 to 14,300 now.

Religion and Ethics department loss from BBC

The Church Times reports that the BBC will be losing its Religion and Ethics department, which is Salford, Manchester. This is purportedly on the sole “loss of *Songs of Praise* to independent producers, earlier this month, it was confirmed last week.”

The remaining television producers – “religious television producers” – have been eliminated. The BBC removed the in-house guarantee for the program. Lisa Opie, director of factor at BBC Studios, had an email leaked about the redundancy of staff.

“Moving forward, we intend to continue to use Salford as a base to make some Religion and Ethics programmes,” Opie said, “These will be on a seasonal basis, staffed mostly by freelancers. We’ll also make some Religion and Ethics programmes in Glasgow.”

American hard power as science power, and vice versa

BBC Culture states the major influence on Western culture has been an obscure and oft unnoticed religion called Zoroastrianism that worships Ahura Mazda and believes the world is in a cosmic battle between good and evil.

“The concepts of Heaven and Hell, Judgment Day and the final revelation of the world, and angels and demons all originated in the teachings of Zarathustra.”

The religion has influenced a variety of thinker such as Freddy Mercury, Nietzsche, and Voltaire as well as popular culture in the modern era such as Star Wars and Game of Thrones.

The Death of Don Rickles

April 8, 2017

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

Numerous outlets have reported on the death of the “insult comedian” Don Rickles, who died at the age of 90 on April 6. **Jimmy Kimmel** provided a heartfelt and teary-eyed series of personal stories about the late insult comedian. Kimmel was moved in reminiscing about the passing of Don Rickles.

He said that he loved Rickles “very much.” He noted that he went to dinner with Rickles after 17 appearances on his show. He described Don Rickles as a man of great warmth to the audience.

Seth Meyers another comedian in the late-night television show world described how he introduced himself to Don Rickles after a party where he was a member of the *Saturday Night Live* crew at the time.

Stephen Colbert considered the meeting of Rickles at the Emmys an “incredible honor.” **Variety** reported that Don Rickles had a career spanning six decades. Rickles was common in the nightclub acts as well as in performances in Las Vegas.

He took part in films such as *Toy Story*, in which he voiced Mr. Potato Head. Rickles had a career with many “ups and downs” changing with the comedic taste of the culture. **The San Diego Chicago-Tribune** provided some of his best lines:

1. *“Show business is my life. When I was a kid I sold insurance, but nobody laughed.”*
2. *“Is that your wife, sir? ... What was it, a train?”*
3. *“You are a politician. Black, white, Jew, gentile, we’re all working for one cause: to figure out how you became governor.”*
4. *“It’s tough having the last name ‘Rickles.’ Luckily, my kids handled it great.”*
5. *“Room service is great if you want to pay \$500 for a club sandwich.”*
6. *“Struggling is hard because you never know what’s at the end of the tunnel.”*
7. *“I’ve got an accountant who’s been with me forty years. If he makes a mistake, he dies.”*
8. *“Eddie Fisher married to Elizabeth Taylor is like me trying to wash the Empire State Building with a bar of soap.”*
9. *“Clint’s idea of a good time is sitting on a pickup truck watching his dog bark.”*
10. *“Who picks your clothes – Stevie Wonder?”*

Politics News in Brief – April 8th, 2017

April 8, 2017

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

The UK is said to need to be ready to ‘vote against EU measures’

According to **BBC News**, “EU proposals should be considered by the UK both as an EU member state, and in terms of their Brexit implications, the European Scrutiny Committee said. Policies would affect the UK up to, and in some cases after, Brexit, it said.”

Prime Minister Theresa May started the formal proceedings for the Brexit process with the “triggering” of Article 50 of the Lisbon Treaty. That is, without 27 other EU member states and the UK extending the talks deadline, then the Brexit will proceed.

The UK government has stated that it “will continue to negotiate, implement and apply EU legislation” until the time of the completion of the Brexit processes. until Brexit. Officially, the UK will leave the EU on March 29, 2019.

UK F-35 jets in Turkey have become a security concern

BBC News reported on the UK’s F-35 jets that are in Turkey in the moment and have been brought forward as a concern. A security concern because there will be “major servicing work” on those F-35s in Turkey.

George Kereyan, SNP MP, has made a call for an inquiry to the policy surrounding this. The reason being the Turkish attempted coup in addition to the tensions association with the NATO partners.

However, the Ministry of Defence stated that this was an “international project with a global support network.” Kereyan stated that the UK “should” put together contingencies in the light of the possibility of a diplomatic crisis tied to Turkey.

New \$10 banknote for Canada

CBC: Politics reported that the Canada 150 celebrations came with the unveiling, by the Bank of Canada, of a new \$10 banknote. It features the portraits of 4 Canadian politicians with Canadian landscapes and Inuit art.

On Canada’s sesquicentennial, it was unveiled in Ottawa. This is “only the only the fourth time in Canada’s history that [the Bank of Canada] has created a commemorative banknote.”

“Bank of Canada Governor Stephen Poloz and Ginette Petitpas Taylor, parliamentary secretary to the minister of finance, made the announcement,” and there will be 40 million of the \$10 banknotes printed.

Science News in Brief – April 8th, 2017

April 8, 2017

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

25th annual Malofiej International Infographics Summit and awards

According to Jen Christiansen in Scientific American, there was a contest with 1300 entries from over 130 media companies and more than 30 countries. Participants in the context submitted written material.

“The 25th annual Malofiej International Infographics Summit—hosted in Pamplona, Spain by the Spanish chapter of the Society for News Design and the School of Communication at the University of Navarra—concluded last week with award announcements.”

Scientific American won a silver medal for the print category in January 2016. Some of the “Best of Show awards were bestowed upon *La Lettura* (Italy) for “The Journey of Foreign Fighters” (print), and *The New York Times* (U.S.) for “Olympic Races Social Series” (online).

Research community let down by Budget 2017 in Canada

The Calgary Herald reported that the university research community has not received as much as it would like from the new budget proposed by the federal government. However, there are “notable investments in higher education” for the coming years.

Nevertheless, the universities were in “anticipation mode” for the funding. The current announcements are that the investments added to the previous years’ investments will be \$2 billion for various research spaces in addition to infrastructure.

The budget 2017 from the Canadian federal government has also been heavily invested in “research excellence such as artificial intelligence.” An additional \$221 million for research internships will be had through the MITACS program, which is a “major investment in young people.”

American hard power as science power, and vice versa

Peter J. Hotez in Scientific American talked about hard power and soft power. The typical phraseology in the international community is soft power and hard power. Science, Hotez argues, or America’s science, is its hard power and, therefore, its greatness.

It is “vital to our homeland security.” With reflection on World War II and the expansion and building of the military in United States, the scientific infrastructure that was built at that time even through the Cold War.

However, the infrastructure in the United States for science are at a point of decay with many people giving second thought to the possibility of embarking on a career in science. The author of the article is an academic dean and stated that we are “losing or may have lost a generation of young scientists.”

BREAKING NEWS: 13 Christians Reported Dead in Tanta, Egypt NEWS

April 9, 2017

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

At least 13 people have been killed in an explosion St George's Coptic church in the city of Tanta, north of Cairo., Egypt.

According to various television channels, whilst the cause of the explosion is not yet known, at least 40 people had been injured in the Palm Sunday attack.

Egypt's Christian minority has often been targeted by Islamist militants in recent years. 25 people died in December of 2016 when a bomb exploded at a Coptic cathedral in Cairo

Women's Rights Fight in the Balkans

April 9, 2017

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

The McGill International Review discussed the Western Balkans, which is a region of Europe that comprises the former Yugoslavia and its neighbours. It changed the status of women throughout the 20th century into the early 21st century.

Group of female Yugoslav Partisans in Mount Dinara (near the border of present-day Bosnia-Herzegovina and Croatia), July 1943.

Before, in the earlier parts of the 20th century rather than the 21st century, women were by and large disenfranchised from the “social, economic, and political spheres.” The path to equality has been bumpy. That bumpiness comes from setbacks in and challenges to gender equality.

These are reported to “persist...to this day.” There is a purity culture with the practice of women having to be “sworn virgins” and that without an heir who is a male, the daughter takes on the role of the son and must live her life as a male. It is seen as reminiscent of the southeastern Europe’s patriarchal traditions.

The practices of “sworn virgins” remains a remnant of medieval practices that were part of some of the “poorest parts of Europe in terms of GDP per capita.” The “staunchly patriarchal societies” that can be found in southern Montenegro and northern Albania have this practice for families that have not birthed any sons.

The sons are typically associated with the transference of wealth and property. One reason for this is that women were not considered to be owners of property “under any circumstances.” The promise of swearing to be virgins and to never marry became the practice of sworn virginity.

The rights were therefore reserved solely for men. The women sworn to virginity would “dress in men’s clothes, smoke, carry weapons, and socialise with other men in male-only spaces.” Some of these women that were sworn to this saw themselves as honoured and privileged rather than the estranged woman of the house. To this date, this is in some regards a continuing tradition.

Some women might express regret as to not being born male within these circumstances. In addition to the distinction of a patriarchal southeastern European cultural tradition found in the practice of “sworn virgins,” there are divisions of labour that are customary and can be found in the Partisan army. 12% of the combat units are women; 88% are men.

However, the roles given to these women were often as nurses rather than soldiers because nurses were seen to be women’s positions rather than the common soldiers or the common soldiery. After the postwar period, there was a commitment to women’s rights.

This was stated as “state, economic, and sociopolitical affairs” commitment connected to the constitution for the “newly formed Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia.” It was after this point that women were given the right to vote, but only after several centuries lacked universal suffrage and general disenfranchisement.

There are some current significant efforts to get rid of the “archaic practices” associated with the sworn virginity practices. An influential women’s organisation spans across the entirety of Yugoslavia today.

One educational initiative is the mass education and literacy courses provided for “400,000 women” for them to learn how to write and read only one year after the conclusion of the war at the beginning of the post-war period.

The period with the advancements of the 20th century followed the postwar period. Technically, all times after that major war are possible as there were transgressions of human rights as well as women’s rights that “indelibly marked the collective consciousness.”

There were cases seen here as seen in other areas of war such as rape as a weapon of war in addition to genocide. This was during the Balkan Wars of the 1990s, mainly executed by the actions of the nationalist Serbian forces.

The international criminal tribunal of the former Yugoslavia had “set a legal precedent clasping rape as a tool of genocide and a form of torture when used in war and proceeded to convict multiple war criminals on charges.”

Some see this as a win for women’s rights; however, it can be seen also as a tragedy for the victims – rape for war purposes is rape. In any case, there have been reports from the European Union stating that there have been advancements as well as challenges to the institution of laws and rights for them.

“While crucial progress has been made, the situation remains significantly less than ideal, even compared to the imperfect status of women’s rights in the West. Much remains to be done, like changing the dismissive attitude many hold towards feminism,” the author of the article said.

Implementing laws and institutions that ensure the promotion and protection of women’s rights, and adequately enforcing the gender equality that so many Balkan states formally espouse. If we ever want to see lasting peace and prosperity in the Balkans, women’s rights must be a priority for all current and future politicians that want to be taken seriously.

Venezuelan Riots and Protests – Antichavisti

April 9, 2017

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

Translated from Italian to English for quotes.

La Repubblica reported on the week of the ‘antichavisti’ recently with the third demonstration in a single week. Now, Venezuela is in the midst of a protest against the current president Maduro, who is both liked and disliked by separate groups of protesters. 17 people have been injured in Caracas in Venezuela from the activities of the protest. The offices of the opposition, Capriles, have been torched.

The police have been brought forth and fired both rubber bullets and tear gas. In other parts of the country, there have been marches and parades as another form of public demonstration. The injuries to 17 people were based on clashes between the opposition and the police.

Both the “Bolivarian” and the National Guard responded to the events of 4,000 protesters in the Campiña district at which point they then fired the rubber bullets and tear gas. The protesters then threw stones at the police. The mayor of the Chacao municipality disclosed the number of the wounded.

“The men of two bodies of security ‘Bolivarian’ (police and National Guard) responded advance of the 4000 protesters in the Campiña district by launching tear gas and rubber bullets.”

Other areas of the country had protests as well outside of the state capital. Others in opposition to the protesting opposition also marched to defend the current presidency of Nicolas Maduro; the opposition has made a public announcement that it will host five novel events.

“The protests were held not only in Caracas but also in San Cristobal, Tachira state of the capital and in other cities of the country. In parallel with the opposition march, even the ‘Chavismo’ took to the streets to defend the government of President Nicolas Maduro. The opposition has already announced that in the coming days will hold five new events.”

British Columbia, Canada Celebrates Centennial for Women's Right to Vote

April 9, 2017

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

Women were enfranchised on April 5, 1917 in B.C. — the fourth province to allow women to vote after Manitoba, Saskatchewan and Alberta. But First Nations people and Asian-Canadians of Japanese, Chinese and South Asian couldn't vote until the late 1940s. Credit: Sunday Edition.

CBC News made a report on the centennial of women's right to vote in British Columbia, Canada. It was at that time that British Columbia provided the right for most women to vote.

The enfranchisement of women was April 5, 1917 in British Columbia, which was the fourth province to make voting legal for women. The provinces in Canada that allowed women the right to vote earlier were Manitoba, Saskatchewan, and Alberta.

That is, Canadian democracy is only about 100 years old by definition. The suffragette movement in British Columbia began over a period of several decades, according to SFU Gender and Women's Studies professor Lara Campbell, which had its roots in the temperance movement.

"Suffrage didn't extend to all women at the time. First Nations people and Asian-Canadians of Japanese, Chinese and South Asian descent didn't get the right to vote until the late 1940s," the **article said**.

There were movements such as the women's Christian Temperance Union that considered alcohol as one main issue for women of the time. Campbell said, "Women bore the brunt of men drinking alcohol particularly at a time when women didn't have control over their wages and how to spend family income."

The first groundwork for the movement according to Campbell occurred in the 1870s, almost a century and a half ago, with Susan B. Anthony, the American suffragette who visited Victoria, British Columbia and 'gave a talk.'

Anthony was "shocked" by the attendance of men at the talk. "Women in B.C. cities were first allowed to vote for school board trustees in 1884, if they owned property," CBC News reported.

When 1912 came around the corner, the opposition party – the liberals – took women's rights (women's suffrage) as one of its causes. "It put enfranchisement to a vote in a referendum during the fall election of 1916 — it was the only Canadian province to do so."

That passed in addition to the legislation in the following spring. At that time, women aged 21 and older were given the right to vote, and eventually in 1918, federally. "I think that suffragists would have maybe been disappointed that women were still so underrepresented politically," Campbell stated when speaking on the present state of affairs.

Circa 2013, BC Speaker Linda Reid made the statement that British Columbia provided or had the greatest number of women or proportional women parliamentarians in Canada.

This was at a total of 36% of the MLA's. Of course, it is important to note that more work is needed at this time.

Solar Power Improves Farming and the Lives of Farmers

April 9, 2017

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

Farmer's lives have been improving with the increase in the efficiency, and even automation, in the domains of agriculture and farming. The World Economic (WEF) **reported** on the changing trends in the energy systems of the world of farming.

The author of the article, Mehrin Mahbub, described making a trip into the north of Bangladesh: "a young man working in a rice field under the scorching sun caught my attention. Habibur, 28, looked content amidst the wide green vista of fields."

The life of this 28-year-old farmer was hard due to family and finance struggles. As a rice farmer, a rice cultivator, Habibur purchased a cow and leased land for rice cultivation, which "is a common practice in rural Bangladesh."

With the rural Bangladeshi farming for Habibur, the irrigation is important for the yield and quality of the crops. However, for the irrigation, Habibur's family needed diesel generators. Access to these is limited.

And "the diesel price [was] hiked in the local market, and he had to pay more than the government approved rate." Circa October, 2015, Habibur and his family were able to have solar-powered irrigation, which allowed for solar pumps.

It "covers around 12 hectares of land and provides 500,000 liters of water daily. Habibur and 28 other farmers share the cost of a single irrigation pump that waters their fields. Their irrigation cost has dropped almost by half."

Solar has less of a negative impact on the environment than diesel as an energy source. The cost in terms of finances and the environmental impact decreased from October, 2015 to the present. These solar pumps have made life easier for the farmers.

Money saved is money earned, and was used to buy more cattle. With the Bangladesh successes, there are solar-powered systems in homes for the provision of electricity in the rural areas of Bangladesh.

The World Bank is supporting this endeavour. It will help install 1,250 solar irrigation pumps by 2018. With the flatter terrain and higher levels of sunlight, the solar energy sources are adequate sources of energy for the farmers.

"The Rural Electrification and Renewable Energy Development Project II (RERED II) is piloting solar-powered irrigation solutions using a public-private partnership model." The WEF said, "The implementing agency, Infrastructure Development Company Limited (IDCOL) channels

grant and credit funding to the non-government organisations and private investors who install the solar pumps.”

300 pumps are helping 8,000 farmers to date. The pumps need little maintenance and will reduce the emissions of carbon. About \$0.9 billion is spent on diesel fuel per annum by Bangladesh for irrigation purposes. This will cost less, assist farmers and improve environmental conditions.

Two Islamic State Terrorist Attacks Kill At Least 43 in Egypt

April 10, 2017

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

More than 38 people have been killed in today's blasts in Tanta and Alexandria which have been claimed by ISIS.

Two Islamic State (IS) attacks on Egyptian Coptic Christian churches in the last 24 hours have injured more than 50 and killed at least 43.

Egypt has declared a three-month state of emergency. The first attack occurred in the northern Egyptian city of Tanta, with the second attack on the city of Alexandria.

The Christian Copts are the repeated victims of these terrorist attacks based in Egypt.

ISIS has claimed responsibility for today's attack which targeted churches in Tanta and Alexandria.

At least 43 people have been killed after two explosions targeting Coptic Christians in Tanta and Alexandria today. IS laid claim to the attacks. There is a known tension between Christians and Muslims within the country. Christians account for about 10% of the population.

The total population for Egypt is about 94 million people. Copts make up 10% of the population.

The tensions appear to be in isolated rural communities. However, the Egyptian President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi stated that the Islamist attacks have been on the Copts. The president has been emphasising that there is a need for continued unity of the religions within the country.

There have been other attacks such as in 2010 and 2011. "In a severe bombing of a church in December, nearly 30 people had been killed. At that time, the terrorism "Islamic State" (IS) confessed to the act." **Süddeutschen Zeitung** said.

Süddeutschen Zeitung stated, "As the first Egyptian head of state, Egypt's President visited the Coptic Christmas festival in January. In 2010, six Copts were killed during an attack by Islamists on a Christmas festival in the Egyptian Naj Hammadi; On New Year's Day 2011, 23 people died in a bomb attack on a church in Alexandria."

The end of April will see the visit of the Roman Catholic Pope Francis in Cairo, Egypt. It has been announced officially. He expresses solidarity with the Egyptian Copts.

“Read the Quran”: Wife of Vice President of India, Salma Ansari, Speaks Out on Triple Talaq

April 9, 2017

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

The Times of India reported that the vice president Hamid Ansari’s wife, Salma Ansari, asserted that she could find no reference to “triple talaq” in the holy scripture.

Salma Ansari’s views on triple talaq come at a time when there is a nationwide debate on the practice and the validity of triple talaq, ‘nikah halala’ and polygamy practices among Muslims challenged in the Supreme Court.

“‘There is nothing like triple talaq in the Quran and women in India are being misguided over the issue,’ Salma said while addressing an event in Aligarh’s **Madarsa** at Civil Lines here on Saturday. ‘Read the holy scripture to clear your doubts,’ she advised.”

The wife “exhorted women to read the Quran” and further affirmed the fact that within the “holy scripture” there is no practice or justification for the practice within the text. Some of her comments have been “hailed by Muslim women, particularly the educated ones.”

“Zakia Soman, co-founder of the Bhartiya Muslim Morcha Andolan (BMMA), said that Salma Ansari is absolutely correct as the Quran has no mention of triple talaq.”

That is, they want this to be finished and done with and no longer part of the culture. Even further, she did raise doubts about some interpretations of the holy text and that women should not take things in the text for granted, within the Quran.

Furthermore, the issue has been “unnecessarily” fabricated during the developmental periods up to the present of Islam. In response to the question of divorce, Ansari stated that the statement three times of Talaq does not necessarily have any meaning to her.

“She said that women who fall victim to this practice have no option but to live with it, as Maulanas and Qazis support it. She said Salma Ansari should use her position to spread this word and save Muslim women from harassment.”

Dr Shadab Bano, assistant professor in History department, Aligarh Muslim University has stated that the practice is in fact un-Islamic and regrets the fact that the practices have become very common among Muslims and men against women, especially as the men can use this to their advantage over women.

By implication, this can be seen as a form of oppression overtly in the marital sphere against women and for men in this sphere of life, which apparently does not have an existence in the holy Scripture.

South Korea Going Greener with New Charging Stations

April 10, 2017

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

South Korea will be expediting the building of 200 charging stations to continue the ‘greening’ of the country. That is, the charging stations will be for “green cars.”

That means the charging stations and the cars that they charge will be operating on electricity with electric fuel cells and liquefied petroleum gas by 2025. There are ongoing discussions amongst legislators and there is preparation for the revision of bills for this too.

“The Ministry of Land Transport is set to unveil plans to open multipurpose service areas for motorists driving green cars at a roundtable discussion to be held Friday together with the National Assembly and the ministries of environment and commerce.”

The government intends to provide the business opportunities for “private operators for the next 30 years.” This will be the basis for the station development in the beltways and highways throughout South Korea.

Each station will come with a hydrogen charger and another for the upcoming pure electric vehicles, according to an official from the Ministry of Land and Transport. This is part of a South Korean government plan of development of the fuel cells that will reduce the amount of net emissions, or the reduction of fossil fuel use in transports with these fuel cells.

Kang Ho-in, the Transport Minister for South Korea, reported that the other ministries in the relevant areas of the government in addition to legislators will be working together to implement this long-term plan for the future of transport.

It could be the basis for a slew of new job opportunities in the “hydrogen technology” sectors. “Establishing infrastructure such as charging stations and supporting R&D projects on green energy are part of promoting the new technology, officials said.”

In order to deal with the upcoming and ongoing challenges of climate change, this greening of the transportation of the country is something the government of South Korea believes will “help the nation to better deal with climate change as well as micro dust pollution.”

Study on Science Denialism Reveals Surprising Results

April 9, 2017

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

Troy Campbell and Lauren Griffin in Scientific American reported that individuals who reject vaccinations and the consensus within the scientific community on climate change or global warming can, and often do, embrace the scientific research and facts from other areas of science.

In April, numerous people will be marching across America in the “March for Science” and will use it as a platform to push against the anti-scientific movements within the country. This is based on the November, 2016 elections in United States to some degree.

The comprehension of science or the appreciation of science at the very least are becoming more, and more, important. It is reported that there are television shows and spokespeople devoted to proper science and the consensus in the scientific community in addition to the proper dissemination of that consensus to the public in a respectful and constructive manner.

However, there are sceptics of climate change. As well, there are anti-vaccination initiatives throughout the US. One misconception pointed out is that people in general distrust scientists. In fact, based on a Pew Research Center poll done in 2015, people respect scientists in healthcare, food, and the environment.

It is the same for vaccinations. In other words, scientists and science have moderate to moderate-high levels of respect in the United States. Another misconception is that people do not use scientific findings and arguments. In fact, people will use scientific findings.

The difference is someone using what they believe to be credible scientific findings that aren't and others who will use actually credible scientific findings, usually based on the scientific consensus among experts or those that know what they're talking about.

Another misconception is that the disagreement with the scientific consensus or the scientific research findings are the main motivation or even a motivation for the denialism; whereas, the reality of the matter is that the implied solutions of scientific findings will motivate denial.

So, for instance, Republicans will more likely agree with climate science if within a market solution framework, which means a political ideological stance more appropriate to Republican principles of governance and political life.

One more misconception is that the correctness of facts is the reason for the denial of science by the “anti-science”. The reality is that “people often denying the relevance of facts, not just their correctness.” In other words, the situation is not as clear-cut in terms of denial is as one might think. People have their reasons.

6,000 Flee ‘Terrifying’ Violence in South Sudan

April 9, 2017

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

The UNHCR or the UN Refugee Agency’s Mary Theru Wambui described the situation in the South Sudan difficult. 6,000 refugees have been reported to be fleeing South Sudan and escaping the violence into Uganda.

As well as the fighting near Pajok in Eastern Equatoria, ongoing fighting is also occurring in the districts of Magwi and Oboo near the border with Uganda, now the main host of the world’s fastest growing refugee crisis.

The UNHCR has expressed alarm at the deterioration in the security situation for South Sudan. At the moment, a northern Ugandan district has received over 6,000 South Sudanese Refugees with only 1,500 entering and over 4,500 crowded at the border.

“This spreading of violence signifies a worrying development,” Babar Baloch, UNHCR spokesperson said, “People fleeing the recent incident claimed that the town came under an indiscriminate attack by the South Sudan armed forces.”

The violence continues to be a significant concern for international organisations in addition to the refugee situation. There has been looting and beatings and killings. Children and women have been fleeing as well. Some have reported that bullets have been flying as they are escaping, or as they have been forced to lie on the ground as the bullets fly.

Auma Lucy Yubuan escaped with her kids and said, “I am so happy even though I have nothing to eat and I have lost everything, my children are alive. I was so scared I didn’t know if I would see them again. The bullets were flying everywhere and you couldn’t move, you had to lie on your belly. I am very grateful I am alive.”

In northern Uganda, the UNHCR has been stated to be “helping...desperate women, children, elderly, and the disabled.” These are officially refugees that are “in dire need of immediate humanitarian assistance including food, shelter, water and medical care.”

“Baloch said families fled the attack in Pajok in different directions; the elderly and disabled who could not run were shot dead. Many people are still hiding in the bush trying to find their way to Uganda, while homes and properties were looted and burned.”

The situation in Pajok has been estimated to be terrible, and the population is upwards of 50,000 people. At present, Uganda hosts over 832,000 refugees of South Sudanese dissent with 192,000 arriving in 2017 so far. There have been about 2,000 refugees “fleeing insecurity, violence and famine every day.”

3 out of 5 of the new arrivals of the refugees are children. “Some 1.7 million refugees have fled the world’s youngest country and the continuing brutal conflict. For more details, [click here](#).”

Hawaiian Island to be Powered by Tesla Solar Power

April 9, 2017

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

Danielle Muoio published **an article** in collaboration with Business Insider and the World Economic Forum reporting on solar energy. In that, it has been reported that the Hawaiian island is instituting about 55,000 solar panels to power itself.

“Tesla officially unveiled the project Wednesday morning in Kauai following opening remarks by CTO JB Straubel and David Ige, governor of Hawaii. Tesla partnered with the Kauai Island Utility Cooperative (KIUC) to launch the project.”

Tesla, the solar power company, will be providing solar panels in addition to “giant battery packs” to a small Hawaiian island called Kauai. This was officially unveiled as a project, recently. The farm is expected to be composed of 54,968 solar panels with a mega wattage capacity of 13 in terms of solar generation capacity.

Tesla installed 272 large commercial batteries called the Powerpack 2 for the storage of the solar energy for use in the night. Fossil fuel use is expected to decrease by as much as 1.6 million gallons per annum based on estimates from Tesla.

“KIUC signed a contract with Tesla to purchase 1 kilowatt-hour of electricity for \$.139 over a 20-year time frame,” Muoio said, “Before Tesla acquired SolarCity, the two companies agreed in February, 2016 to use Tesla’s 52 MWh Powerpack to bring 20 years of power to Kaua’i, so this project has been in the works for quite a bit.”

The solar system for the island will come in phases. It should be noted that SolarCity and Tesla were separate companies as of October, 2016, but were merged into one. In that, Tesla acquired solar city in November 2016.

“Tesla is also **powering nearly the entire island of Ta’u** in American Samoa with solar power and its Powerpacks.”

China Protests to India Over Dalai Lama's Visit

April 10, 2017

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

The Times of India reported on the recent statements by the Dalai Lama. Beijing has repeatedly warned against India having the Dalai Lama visit Arunachal Pradesh. However, the Dalai Lama has not taken these cautionary notes very heavily via Beijing and has decided to make a trip to India without cancellation.

It will be a 13-day trip to the northeast of the country, of India. The Tibetan spiritual leader has remarked that “things are normal” from his point of view.

He appears unfazed by the possibility of the repercussions of the 13-day trip to India. A foreign ministry spokesman from China reported that the visit by the Dalai Lama will “have serious damage on bilateral relations” for India.

He will attend, the Dalai Lama, a festival – the “Namami Brahmaputra festival on Sunday after addressing students at Gauhati University – along with other events. For example, the Dalai Lama will give an address at Dibrugarh University for the students in upper Assam.

After this, he will leave to Lumla – near Tawang – and will consecrate a Buddhist temple that is opening in Lumla.

The Nobel laureate will present a talk entitled “a human approach to world peace” that assisted the Dalai Lama; however, the “Ulfa (I)” appealed the laureate – who is the Dalai lama – to not speak negatively or “against China in public or in private.”

This was seen as a political issue rather than a talk alone. On April 10 and 11th, the Dalai Lama will visit Dirang and Bomdila, respectively, which is a sensitive area because it is where, in 1962, the Chinese army retreated. At that point, the Tibetan spiritual leader will then take a trip to the state capital on April 12.

Islamist Culture War on Beauty Industry Worth Several Billion Dollars

April 9, 2017

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

Gatestone Institute's Shireen Qudosi reported on Islamism's culture war on the beauty industry worth several billion dollars.

She opened the article with four main points. One of these is that there are western Muslims averse to standard Western values, and that there is a new cultural landscape to be attacked by the Islamist culture – the culture in fashion and beauty.

“In 2016, the elite fashion label Dolce and Gabbana launched an ‘Abaya and Hijab Collection.’ Months later, at New York Fashion Week, a sartorial Mecca, hosted the first catwalk spotlighting models fully donned in hijabs,” Qudosi reports.

Anniesa Hasibuan Brought Hijabs To The New York Fashion Week Catwalk

There have been advertising campaigns meant to be more appealing and friendly to the consumer. So even though the face has shifted in content, the underlying message and purpose remain the same.

Melanie Elturk, CEO of Haute Hijab, said, “...Fashion is one of the outlets in which we can start that cultural shift in today's society to normalize the hijab in America.”

According to Qudosi, the Islamist beauty industry has “two faces of Islamist thought, one which underscores the myth of peace while privately exiling dissenting voices as ignorant, racist or bigoted.”

With the defeat of Hillary Clinton and the win of Donald Trump for the American presidency, some saw this as a possible resolute victory against Radical Islam.

There was now a transition into the area of culture for possible influence with Islamist ideological stances on fashion, as noted. Fashion and beauty are the linchpins in the domain of culture. Some of the campaigns by CoverGirl, for instance, have been used to portray “diversity.”

Qudosi said, “Later in the year, CoverGirl, a popular affordable makeup line, announced Muslim beauty blogger Nura Afia as its newest ‘brand ambassador.’ A 23-year-old wife and mother, Afia hosts a YouTube channel, with over 200,000 subscribers, for hijab and makeup tutorials.”

Many believe that there appears to be an attempt to homogenise the American values through a “funnel of multiculturalism.” With this attempt to shift the cultural conversation and values in America towards something appearing as, but not being, multiculturalism, the author argues that the mantra of Islamist groups is that they have lost their political ground.

Now, the battleground has been shifted to culture. There appears to be an assumption that if a woman, a Muslim woman, wears an Islamic garment, then non-Muslim men will recognise this and not harass the Muslim women: "...if Muslim women don an outer garment (jil-bab), non-Muslim men will recognise them as such and not harass them," Qudosi said.

"A handful of Islamic scholars believe the practice of hijab grew out of exclusionary practices designed to draw a distinction between "believing" women (Muslims) and "non-believing" women (non-Muslims)." Qudosi argued.

"Beautiful Nura Afia in an advertising campaign is a far more appealing and consumer-friendly alternative to CAIR's Nihad Awad," Qudosi said, "or the political complexities of the Muslim Brotherhood. The face has changed but the message has not."

Qudosi states that "Islamic culture embraces piety through" the covering of the female body, the Muslim woman's body, which removes non-Muslim women of their dignity by viewing their bodies as mere property.

"The origin of the hijab tradition in Islam likely pre-dates the Quran, and comes from early Islamic society," Qudosi said.

It has been argued that the mandatory wearing of the hijab for women does have merit with regards to the Quranic verses, but the "larger point", according to Qudosi, is that at the same time "slavery was a standard practice. It thrived culturally through acts of social and religious demarcations, such as the hijab, which became to many Muslims a sign of class supremacy, whereas women who were not veiled have been, and continue to be, harassed and attacked."

This appears to be from earlier slave-owning cultures in Arabia that had the "law of the veil." So "social and religious demarcations" could be made with such symbols on women as the Hijab. In that, the sign of class supremacy was a Hijab in older times.

That is, the Muslim women would wear it based on the class supremacy and would not be harassed by non-Muslim men.

"It is then a fantastic stretch of the imagination when brands such as CoverGirl try to have consumers associate 'equality' and 'diversity' with hijabs and make-up. It also does not mirror the 'Islam of peace' that many Muslims try to emphasise," Qudosi said.

Although, the current fashionable opinion is that the wearing of the Hijab is both chic and barrier breaking, it has been used "historically" as a barrier in life.

The concern of the author, one of many, is that "if you are not covered, you are not respectable and therefore not acceptable."

The New Oil Battle Might Be Between Russia and Saudi Arabia

April 10, 2017

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

Business Insider reported that international oil markets could be heading towards a new war, as leading OPEC and non-OPEC producers are “vying for increased stakes”.

There has been an unexpected cooperation between countries with the full support of both Russia and Saudi Arabia for the crude markets, which has happened from the year-and-a-half of stabilisation concomitant with it. The predicted oil crisis, crude oil crisis, was averted by this unexpected cooperation.

“As long as Saudi Arabia, Russia and some other major producers (UAE, Kuwait), are supporting a production cut extension, financials will be seeing some light at the end of the tunnel.”

The second shale oil revolution has been “mostly mitigated by a reasonably high compliance of OPEC and non-OPEC members” based on agreements to cuts by the members. The stabilisation associated with the market deals with economics, geopolitics, and the national interests of the OPEC and non-OPEC member states.

“...geopolitical and security issues have prevented Libya, Iraq, Venezuela and Nigeria, from entering with new volumes. Stabilisation in the crude oil market, as always, is not only fundamentals but also geopolitics and national interests.”

There are some growing fears that Saudi Arabia, an OPEC leading producer, might not be happy in the near-future based on the overall effects of the production cuts. However, there are other smaller OPEC members including Iraq and Iran that have predicted an increase in production.

Nonetheless, the main rivals are Saudi Arabia and Russia, who are the big ones of the OPEC and non-OPEC countries. Russia is the biggest non-OPEC country. Saudi Arabia is the biggest OPEC country. With regards to the European oil markets, Russia remains the largest supplier with about 3/10 of the total supply in 2016.

“Even if Moscow is still fully behind the official production cuts, Russian oil companies have been aggressively fighting for additional market share in Saudi Arabia’s main client markets,” Business Insider said, “China, India and even Japan. Iraq and Iran, in contrast to what was expected, have been cutting away share in Europe.”

With regards to the non-European oil markets, Saudi Arabia is the big generator and supplier. This is all to do with the Russian-Saudi oil war, who both “need...stabilisation in the market.” There apparently is a “conflict...brewing, but has not yet come to the surface.”

Europe's industry is both a stable and a growing crude oil market. The price war could play out in the European oil or crude oil market sphere. Saudi Arabia and Russia are not necessarily willing to risk that price war.

Business Insider said, "Threatened by its own successful agreement, Saudi Arabia is now feeling the heat on all sides. Some analysts are even [proposing] a doomsday scenario, implying that Riyadh has lost its grip on the largest oil markets."

In addition, Putin is at risk in the next 12 months of maintaining power with elections upcoming in addition to the heavy dependency on the oil market. "Iraq and Iran have been very smart by attempting to sneakily take market share from both sides." Business Insider called this the "Iran-Iraq axis."

Saudi Aramco's first moves to re-enter Europe, however, clearly show that they are not willing to keep picking up the bill for others...Money will talk as additional outlets (refinery projects) were acquired by Aramco last month...Riyadh's decision to change its European price setting is, however, a clear signal that there is a red line for the Oil Kingdom."

St. Petersburg Bomber Suspected Islamist

April 10, 2017

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

According to recent reports, the metro bombing in Russia is suspected to have been done by Akbarzhon Jalilov.

The St. Petersburg bombing suspect is reported to have been an Islamist who developed an interest in Islam and may have “travelled to Syria before” the attack. Former colleagues of the bombing suspect stated that he disappeared after a trip to Turkey.

The St. Petersburg Metro bombing recently resulted in the death of 14 people. Jalilov was 22. He travelled to Turkey in 2015. The movements of the suspected terrorist are unknown at this point in time. In that, he seems to have disappeared between 2015 and 2017.

However, the colleagues are not sure if for sure the terrorist suspect travelled to the war-torn nation of Syria. Radical Islamists have used Turkey as a route for parts of Syria, which are controlled by ISIS.

The terror suspect was born in 1985 and we grew up in Kyrgyzstan. It was a mainly Muslim ex-Soviet Republic in Central Asia that he grew up, which is called Osh. The man is suspected to be the one who exploded himself inside of the St. Petersburg Metro station that killed those 14 people.

Russian President Vladimir Putin made a visit to the St. Petersburg Metro station. There has been no claim to responsibility for the attack by any organisation, terrorist or otherwise, at this point in time.

By implication, this might be a ‘Lone Wolf’ phenomenon rather than an organised targeted terrorist attack from a larger more well-known group. The man worked low paid occupations from 2011 onward.

One of Jalilov’s former colleagues described him as “an even-tempered man who didn’t drink or curse when they worked together.” In that, there did not seem to be signs of extremism of this man, or in his thoughts or behaviour.

In 2014, he did develop an interest in Islam and begin to pray, “going to the mosque, reading the Koran and growing a beard.” It is suspected that his trip to Turkey in November, 2015 was to join his uncle.

However, the uncle stated that the man left in September, 2015 to return to Osh where he grew up. The terror suspect showed up in Osh in February, 2017. He had rented an apartment at the time of the previous week’s attack.

The Russian officials have declined to comment on the travel history of the terrorist suspect.

“Do Not Politicise the Plight of Refugees” – UN Refugee Chief NEWS

April 12, 2017

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

The UNHCR, the main UN Refugee Agency, stated an open warning about the use of refugees and their difficulties as a political subject or a political tool. Filippo Grandi, the UN High Commissioner for Refugees, discussed the matter after a landmark four-day visit to Syria where he witnessed first-hand the massive destruction caused by nearly six years of conflict.

“Grandi urges developed countries to show generosity to those fleeing conflict or risk undermining principle of solidarity...[he] met displaced people in Aleppo and witnessed the destruction.”

He met with numerous children in Jibreen, which has a population of 5,000 people. People are living in shelters within warehouses in Jibreen. According to Grandi, the politicisation of the plight of refugees is a risk: “the principle of international solidarity with those fleeing war and persecution...Refugees urged rich countries to show generosity to refugees, rather than regarding them as a threat.”

Grandi noted that the refugees are facing considerable danger: “we have serious concerns, and these are not new concerns, we’ve had them for some time, that the refugee issue in the industrialised world – in Europe, the US, Australia – is very politicised. It shouldn’t be,” Grandi said.

He is the first senior official to visit Syria since Turkey and Russia brokered a nationwide ceasefire. The refugees come from many places, and they need international solidarity, Grandi said. However, actions by the US has weakened that solidarity.

The UNHCR has estimated on the number of refugees at 20,000. They are living in an uncertain environment. The US has a 120-day suspension. “Grandi expressed his hope that the US would resume resettlements following its internal review of the programme,” the UNHCR said.

He made notes to the difficulties of many people to reconstruct their livelihoods in the “ruins of east Aleppo and the old city of Homs.” The UNHCR is in negotiations with the Syrian government for the provision of support to those in need, even in the “hard-to-reach areas.”

“People need to return eventually to Syria, and we all agree that that’s the ideal solution. But we need to be patient,” he said. “More progress needs to be made politically, then economically and infrastructure-wise in order for conditions to be there to have large returns.”

Antisemitic and Islamist Messages in X-Men Comic Book

April 12, 2017

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

Do Not Politicise the Plight of Refugees” – UN Refugee Chief

Antisemitic and Islamist references within a popular comic book **were recently discovered** hidden in an *X-Men* comic book. Marvel comics claimed to be taking “disciplinary action” on at least one of the artists who had inserted the antisemitic and Islamist references into the *X-Men* comic book.

Indonesian artist Ardian Syaf says he included in *X-Men Gold #1* **hidden references** to the election of the governor of Indonesia’s capital Jakarta. The **vote** has been one of **Indonesia’s most polarising elections**, and is about much more than about choosing the city’s leader.

There was a bitter contestant between the Chinese Christian incumbent named Basuki “Ahok” Tjahaja Purnama and the rivals who were Muslims. The Muslims rivals won the favour of the “hard-line Islamists.”

This was reported by Time as an increasing split between the choice for pluralism and fundamentalist Islam within the “world’s most populous Muslim nation, where many religious conservatives say a non-Muslim should not hold high office.”

It can be seen within the book that one of the characters has a Quranic verse reference on his t-shirt that, from fundamentalist interpretations of Islam, can be read as recommending the prohibition of “Muslims from electing a Christian or Jewish leader.”

“In another scene, the Jewish character Kitty Pryde is also drawn together with a sign reading ‘Jewellery,’ her head next to the part of the sign that reads ‘Jew.’” Time said.

Marvel Comics made a public statement stating that the insertion was without its prior knowledge and that the references “do not reflect the views of the writer, editors or anyone else and in direct opposition of the inclusiveness of Marvel comics and with the X-men have stood force and the creation.”

The artwork that included the antisemitic and Islamist references will be omitted in digital versions in addition to digital and trade paperback versions.

Social media has criticised Ayaf based on taking part in the demonstration in December. “‘Choosing a non-[Muslim] as a leader is forbidden’ he **said**, as reported by the Jakarta *Post*. “‘That’s what the [Quranic verse] says.’”

A fellow Indonesian artist named Anindito stated the work done to the *X-Men* comic book by Ayaf was “very disrespectful and unprofessional.”

An Interview with Ron Millar – PAC Coordinator for the Center for Freethought Equality

April 12, 2017

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

What's your own story? How did you get into the Freethought Equality business? Was there much of a family background?

My family has no history in atheist and humanist politics. I was raised in a fundamentalist Christian church and enjoyed interacting with many of the people there, but their narrow view of reality and restrictive proscriptions on varying lifestyles distanced me from the church. I explored other forms of Christianity and non-Christian religious traditions in search of the "Truth." The process was much like trying on various hats, and I found that nothing really fit (before ultimately realising that I didn't like wearing hats – to continue a strained metaphor). In the last semester of my senior year in college, which was in the early 1980s, I came to Washington DC to intern at a Ralph Nader publication, *Multinational Monitor*, and I left religion and my childhood home behind.

You have done research and conducted interviews with political candidates, and elected officials, looking into the possibility for the endorsement from the Freethought Equality Fund. What is the general narrative there? How do things play out?

The U.S. Constitution prohibits any religious test for public office. However, being an atheist in the electoral arena has been a powerful political taboo in our nation.

The Freethought Equality Fund was founded in 2013 to change this. Our mission is to increase the number of open humanists and atheists in public office at all levels of government. The Freethought Equality Fund is affiliated with the **Center for Freethought Equality** which is the advocacy and political arm of the **American Humanist Association**.

When I started this position in February 2016, I was aware of only three open elected officials from our community at the state level (and no one at the federal level). Ernie Chambers, a state senator in Nebraska; Juan Mendez, a state representative in Arizona; and Jamie Raskin, a state representative in Maryland.

The 2016 election cycle was very productive for our community as we quintupled the number of open elected officials from our community. These wins are an important step in removing the negative stigma against atheist and humanist candidates, but since the secular community is nearly a quarter of the population, these wins represent less than 0.25% of state and federal elected offices. So, we need to obtain an additional 1,500-1,600 seat to obtain equal representation.

We have a lot of work to do!

The Center for Freethought Equality has a list of secular elected officials and you can view our endorsed 2016 candidates and their election outcomes **on the Freethought Equality Fund's endorsements page**.

How many closet atheists, agnostics, and freethinkers do you think are currently in public office?

This number is hard to determine but there are a lot. As I said before, the negative stigma against atheists has a long tradition in American politics but fortunately, our efforts during this past election cycle shows the paradigm is shifting.

The reason for this change is simple demographics; the number of secular Americans is growing rapidly. The Pew Research Center uses the short hand of “nones” for the religiously unaffiliated, which includes people who identify as either atheist or agnostic and those who say their religion is “nothing in particular.” According to Pew research, “nones” have grown from 16% in 2007 to 23% in 2014, and are the largest “religious group” in the Democratic Party. With a third of Millennials in the “nones” category, the religiously unaffiliated community will continue to grow. If you just consider Americans who self-identify as atheists and agnostics, our community is as large as the Jewish, Muslim, Mormon, Orthodox Christian, Buddhist, Jehovah’s Witness, and Hindu communities combined!

Americans are also becoming more and more open to voting for atheist candidates. Since 1958, Gallop has asked Americans if they would vote for a well-qualified presidential candidate who was an atheist. In the first poll, only 18% of Americans said they would vote for an atheist. In 1999, for the first time, a slim majority said they would vote for an atheist candidate. In Gallop’s 2015 poll, 58% of Americans said they would vote for an atheist presidential candidate. The willingness to vote for an atheist presidential candidate varies greatly by generation: 75% of those 18 to 29 years of age, 63% of those 30 to 49, 50% of those 50 to 64, and 48% of those 65 and over; and by political party: 64% of Democrats, 61% of independents, and 45% of Republicans.

Because of the changes in demographics and the increasing acceptance of atheists by voters, the time has come for atheist, agnostic, humanist, and other nontheistic elected officials to serve openly as secular Americans and for more openly secular candidates to run for office. Our democracy is impoverished and the quality of our political candidates is diminished. If a quarter of the population is effectively removed from the electoral arena, the negative stigma that still exists will only be eliminated when Americans see respected and ethical secular leaders in public office.

You work with the Center for Freethought Equality. You’ve been in the Washington, District of Columbia area for 30 years or more. You’ve worked with nonprofit education, advocacy groups, and so on. How has this work bolstered your work through Center for Freethought Equality?

I’ve worked in a variety of advocacy and education nonprofits in DC, and learning from my prior experiences, both successful and unsuccessful, help me in managing this project. For example, in

1988, I was the campaign manager for an openly gay candidate running for the Council of the District of Columbia. We ran a professional campaign and increased the political visibility and involvement of the LGBTQ community in the electoral arena. We lost that election, but subsequent candidates were able to build on our successes in breaking down barriers against the LGBTQ community and win seats on the DC Council.

Also, you were the associate director of the Secular Coalition for America (2005-2009). What was fulfilling about the work there?

I was the second staff member to be hired by the Secular Coalition for America, where I worked under the wonderful Lori Lipman Brown, our community's first full-time lobbyist on Capitol Hill. I was not involved in the secular movement prior to this position but was thrilled at the opportunity to promote this cause. During my tenure there, we were able to help Congressman Pete Stark make his announcement that he did not "hold a god belief" – the first member of Congress to ever identify with our community.

I understand you earned a PhD specifically looking at the organisation learning in groups that are litigating church-state cases in the Supreme Court—no less. What was the main research question? What was the main finding?

Earlier research had concluded that organisations litigating cases before the Supreme Court did not change their legal arguments when faced with a change in legal precedent. My finding was that when faced with legal change, litigant groups did analyse the new precedent and the opinion(s) that supported the decision to modify or craft new legal arguments in seeking to win future cases. Looking at church-state education cases was ideal because *Agular v. Felton* (1985) and *Agostini v. Felton* (1997) offered essentially the same litigants and same case facts, separated by twelve years of a changing Court. This allowed me to explore the arguments used prior, during, and after these cases to map the evolution of the legal arguments used by church-state separation advocates and why.

Now, back to the Center for Freethought Equality. You are the PAC coordinator for the Center for Freethought Equality. What is PAC? How are you coordinating it? What are the hopes for it?

The Freethought Equality Fund has both a traditional political action committee (PAC) that makes donations directly to candidates and a SuperPAC that makes independent expenditures to promote candidates and campaigns.

In the 2016 election cycle, the Freethought Equal Fund PAC, the traditional PAC, endorsed 61 candidates from 22 states and the District of Columbia. Of the 61 candidates, 32 were running for Congress (6 from our community and 26 allies), 26 were running for state legislatures (23 from our community and 3 allies), and 3 were running for local seats (all from our community).

All but one of our 26 Congressional allies won their seats and one member of our community won his Congressional seat, Jamie Raskin from Maryland. All three allies won re-election to their state legislative seats and 14 members of our community won their state races (6 re-elected

and 8 new – two of the new held seats in the House and are now in the Senate). One of the three local candidates won their elections.

The 2016 endorsements were the result of sending questionnaires to over 900 candidates in 38 states in open seats or interesting races. We also sent an additional 700 questionnaires to incumbents in legislatures of the 13 least religious states and the District of Columbia. From these USPO and email solicitations we received over 180 completed candidate questionnaires.

Our efforts were also made possible by local activists. For example, in Arizona, Serah Blain and Evan Clark helped us connect with a great cohort of candidates. Their efforts are a model for the Freethought community in recruiting and campaigning for secular candidates.

My hope is that our successes in 2016 will encourage other members of our community to get involved in the electoral arena and run for office, and for current elected officials who identify with our community to publicly announce their affiliation.

How can people get involved with the PAC or the Center for Freethought Equality, even donate to them?

First, become a member of the **Center for Freethought Equality** – it's free! As a member, you will get our emails about our candidates and activities. Only members of the Center for Freethought Equality can donate to the PAC. Also, follow us on **Facebook** and **Twitter**.

Most importantly, I want to stress that elections don't just happen every four years. Obviously, presidential elections are important, but state and local officials have more control over what happens in your neighbourhood and daily lives than the President does. Be an informed voter and participate in every election. Get to know your state and local elected officials. If they are not working for you, help replace them, and perhaps be the person who replaces them.

We have resource pages on our website to **help make your voice heard** and **to run for office** for anyone hoping to make a difference.

Last, and this is very important, since many of the Freethought Equality Fund **endorsed candidates** and **secular elected officials** are new to our community, they need to get to know us better. If you are a member of an atheist or humanist group, invite these candidates to speak at one of your events. Also, nonprofit groups can be politically active while retaining their tax exempt status – see our **resource page** for what nonprofits can and cannot do in the electoral arena.

Any closing thoughts or feelings based on the discussion today?

I urge members of our community to use their time and talents to become politically engaged. Be visible as a secular American in the electoral area and build a political network of friends and allies. Then select an elected or appointed office that seems attainable — and run for that office.

You can also run, even if the seat is unattainable, to promote issues that are important to you and to build the visibility for our community. Please be active and visible – this is the only way we can make our Constitutional protection that no religious test (Article VI, Clause 3) can be imposed for public office a reality.

Thank you for your time, Ron.

Thank you for doing the interview.

Peking University Goes Global with Oxford Campus

April 12, 2017

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

Peking University will begin the enrolment for its Oxford campus starting in June, 2017. This is according to the dean of the HSBC business school of Peking University.

The university officials signed an agreement with Open University in February, 2017, for the purchase of a 15-acre campus for the cost of 8.8 million British pounds. This is the first time a Chinese university used its own finances to manage and set up a school within a foreign country.

Hai Wen, the dean of the HSBC business school, stated that there will be 100 international students enrolled in the school during the opening of August, 2018. This is purposed to occur simultaneously with the elite Beijing university's 120th founding anniversary.

"The timing is monumental. In 1818, China's first foreign-founded school, Ying Wa College, was set up by a British missionary. Now 200 years later, a Chinese university will set up its own school in Britain," Wen said.

Wen also pointed out that many foreign universities over the years have opened schools within China and that Peking University is one of China's top universities. It will be taking the "leading role" of the Chinese universities going global, he said.

A movement that is a change in the dynamics of internationalisation of Chinese education via its top universities. Peking University will be the first to endeavour to accomplish this effort through the UK-based Oxford campus.

"He said HSBC Business School's finance, management and economics courses will feature Chinese business cases to help students become better acquainted with the Chinese economy and reforms," XinhuaNet News reported on some aspects of the campus, "Students will take the first year course in the Oxford campus and the second year at the school's campus in the city of Shenzhen, southern China."

China Invests in Science Initiatives

April 12, 2017

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

China has **invested** several billion yuan in science initiatives in 2016 on topics including, “brain science, new materials, advanced manufacturing, quantum communication, robots, and information security,” according to the Natural Science Foundation of China (NSFC).

41,184 programmes have been financed in science in 2016 alone in China. The total amounts to approximately 22.7 billion yuan or 3.3 billion US dollars. The programmes can include such esoteric physics and cosmological topics such as gravitational waves.

The NSFC was the funder for these 41,184 programmes. Yang Wei, the head of the NSFC, noted that the foundation has also launched several research projects to deal with, for instance, “cognitive robotics,” as well as, several foundational programmes of science noted at the outset.

These are some of the more important topics to be researching because these influence all areas of science. They work from the bottom level of knowledge. If you can discover something about the lowest level of the scientific topic, then you can use these basic principles that are newly discovered to influence the higher-level aspects of science projects.

Not only this, there are numerous other topics that have been deeply invested in China for their science, which means that China and its associated leaders in these areas of the government understand that the appropriate investment in science is the wave of the future.

Wei also noted that about 91 people and 33 programmes have been punished for misconduct.

The people were punished and the programmes were revoked in 2016.

So, not only is this funding being broadly spent on a variety of topics, it is being enforced in a way to “improve the research integrity system, ensure fairness and promote innovation,” Wei said.

Former Aide to South Korea's President Park Geun-hye Ousted

April 12, 2017

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

Park Geun-hye can be detained up to 20 days during investigation into accusations of bribery and abuse of power that led to impeachment.

According to **The Korean Herald**, president Park Geun-hye's former aide was ousted. He recently appeared in court to "fight against the prosecution's request for his arrest warrant over charges tied to the scandal."

The former aide and previous prosecutor, Woo Byung-woo, is associated with the scandal that "led to Park's removal from power and arrest." Byung-woo was the senior presidential secretary for civil affairs between the 2015 and 2016. He is suspected of meddling in state affairs.

Byung-woo "turned up at the Seoul Central District Court in southern Seoul at 10:05 a.m. to attend the hearing, which will likely continue for several hours. A decision on whether he will be arrested is expected to come near or past midnight."

His charges total 8: peddling influence to boot "uncooperative" officials in addition to negligence of duty and abuse of authority, and perjury. He is suspected to have lied under oath during a parliamentary inquiry.

External to these charges are allegations "of embezzlement and disruption of a probe into the 2014 sinking of the Sewol ferry are not included. He has been separately investigated for alleged embezzlement involving his family members."

There have been 50 witnesses who have been inquired as to the situation with Byung-woo. Byung-woo, as an important note, has avoided both indictment and imprisonment in spite of the numerous allegations and charges in his recent career.

"A number of ex-ministers, presidential aides and Samsung Group's de facto chief Lee Jae-yong are standing trial in connection to the corruption scandal."

On March 10, president Park Geun-hye was "forced" from office and 'stripped' of the immunity typically afforded to presidents from criminal investigations, based on the charges and allegations. On March 31, Geun-hye was arrested with inquiries ongoing while in jail.

India's Solar Power Revolution to 2030

April 12, 2017

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

Daniel Muoio from the *World Economic Forum* and *Tech Insider* recently reported on the solar power boom that is ongoing in India.

He reported that solar companies and renewable energy are the big bet from India. Prime Minister Narendra Modi stated that he wants to spend about \$3.1 billion in state aid “for India’s solar panel manufacturing industry to increase India’s photovoltaic capacity and create an export industry.” This is a quote from **Bloomberg News**.

SunPower CEO Tom Werner said India is about to become the biggest market for solar energy, primarily because of Prime Minister Narendra Modi’s interest in growing the sector.

Some plans have not been made public. The government plans are that 4/10ths of the country’s energy will be from renewable energy by 2030. Currently there are 300 million people who aren’t connected to an electrical grid or solar reserves or energy reserves in India.

“The market that’s going to boom is India”, Werner told Business Insider. SunPower. The second biggest solar installer in the US, is owned by European oil giant Total.

However, solar energy could provide an affordable way for the self-generation of energy by Indian citizens. In November, 2016, “India built the world’s largest solar plant that can produce enough energy to power roughly 150,000 homes.”

“SunPower has already **partnered with Mahindra EPC**, a solar subsidiary owned by Indian conglomerate Mahindra Group, to build a 5-megawatt solar plant in Rajasthan, India. The plant generates enough electricity to power 60,000 rural homes.”

According to many environmentalists, a commitment to solar energy is an extremely important thing to both the government and society at large in terms of the long-term capacity building as well as the big growth seen in the near-term.

Werner didn’t disclose whether SunPower has any upcoming projects in India. However, Werner said the market will become increasingly more important in the future.

“SunPower isn’t the only company taking note — Tesla is also eyeing India and could enter the market as early as this summer, CEO Elon Musk **tweeted** earlier in February. **Tesla acquired SolarCity** in a deal worth \$2.1 billion in November and is continuing to **expand its battery division**.”

Rising Tensions with North Korea – USS Carl Vinson Deploying to the Korean Peninsula

April 12, 2017

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

The Financial Times reports that “the USS Carl Vinson aircraft carrier” has been deployed at or near the Korean Peninsula. This is expected to “raise anxiety in Pyongyang just days after President Donald Trump launched a barrage of missiles against Syria.”

The message sent by the Trump administration based on the strike in Syria has been noted by many countries, even outside of Damascus and its territory. North Korea has openly called the act “unforgivable” with the regards to the aggression. It has considered this an impetus to maintain its nuclear arsenal.

This was in response to the White House spokesman, Sean Spicer, who stated that this “sends a very strong signal not just to Syria but throughout the world.” China got the message too. President Trump has stated that he would act unilaterally against North Korea if China did not place “pressure on Pyongyang,” tying in to the need to abandon the North Korean nuclear program.

The Secretary of State for the Trump Administration, Rex Tillerson, has stated in the first trip to Asia that the “policy of strategic patients has ended” with possibility for all military options on the table. There might be unease in China. Some of the options included the assassination of Kim Jong Un, the North Korean leader.

A former top CIA China analyst, Dennis Wilder, said, “It’s very difficult to know the effect of this on Kim Jong Un, but his elites will worry about a more aggressive US policy.” Chinese analysts remain skeptical about the alteration of the Beijing assessment of the situation. China continues in a cautious mentality and approach, or strategy, with North Korea.

“Zhao Tong, a foreign affairs expert at the Carnegie-Tsinghua Centre, said the Syria strike had changed China’s perception of Mr Trump to a certain degree.” Zhao noted that the context of Syria is not directly related to the situation in North Korea.

“The US needs to take the consequences of an attack on North Korea into consideration, such as the safety of its troops in South Korea and Japan, and also its allies,” Zhao said. South Korea and Japan share concerns about the nuclear threat coming from Pyongyang.

A professor at Renmin University, Pang Zhongying, stated the possibility for a strike against North Korea remain low, “very low.” “North Korea is not Syria,” he said. “North Korea is totally different and even a surgical strike could bring disastrous consequences.”

US president Donald Trump talked to both Japanese prime minister, Shinzo Abe, and the acting South Korean president, Hwang Kyo-ahn. The talks revolved around the North Korean peninsula and the recent strikes in Syria.

A former CIA officer with experience with North Korean officials, Joe Detrani, said, “His father, Kim Jong Il, literally went into hiding after the first Gulf war when the US used overwhelming air power to destroy Iraq’s military...Kim Jong Un may do the same.”

Second San Bernardino Shooting in 2 Years

April 12, 2017

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

According to the San Bernardino Sun, the police are investigating the shooting that took place near the elementary school in California. There are 3 dead and a wounded student from the shooting that was a murder-suicide. In that, the shooter shot three people, injuring one, and killed himself.

This is “less than 18 months after San Bernardino was hit by terrorist attack.” It was a cop from the Redlands that had assisted in the take-down of the attackers. The recent attack was on a teacher who was gunned down, with two children critically wounded in the murder-suicide on Monday.

“Redlands Sgt. Andy Capps, who took part in the Dec. 2 shootout that killed the suspects after they fired at him and other pursuing police, said his first reaction was to be glad the school shooting wasn’t any worse than what had then been reported — that two adults were dead and two children injured,” the San Bernardino Sun reported.

One death was a teacher, aged 53, who was fatally shot. Another was a student that was 8-years-old. The teacher who was 53 was Karen Elaine Smith that was murdered by an estranged husband named Cedric Anderson from Riverside, California.

“Both deadly attacks in San Bernardino were shootings. The Dec. 2 attack left 57 survivors, with 22 shot. Martinez and an unidentified 9-year-old boy were critically injured at the school Monday. Martinez was flown to Loma Linda University Medical Center, where he died.”

This was based on the San Bernardino police making an open, public statement in a recent press conference. In the December 2, 2015 attack, there were 14 people killed with police and armed security guards on standby. One survivor from the 2015 attack, after the recent attack, stated that they felt a bit of remorse because some individuals do not seem to learn from terrorist attacks and mass shootings ongoing both “in United States and around the world.”

A San Bernardino County prosecutor said, “For some reason men — and it always seems to be men — can’t let go of a woman that says, ‘No,’” he said. “Sounds like she made the right choice to leave this guy.”

Malala Yousafzai Becomes Youngest UN Messenger of Peace

April 13, 2017

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

Nobel Peace Prize winner Malala Yousafzai has become the youngest “Messenger of Peace.” She is 19-years-old.

Her fellow United Nations messengers of peace include Leonardo DiCaprio and Charlize Theron. Each has been the youngest to win the award before her.

Hailing the Pakistani teenager as ‘the most famous student in the world’ and the symbol of the cause of education for all, Secretary-General Antonio Guterres appointed her on Monday as the “Messenger of Peace for girls’ education.”

In 2012, the Taliban attacked Malala in the Swat Valley of Pakistan because of her campaigning to promote education for women.

“People drawn from the arts, entertainment, sports, science and public service are appointed Messengers of Peace, each with special missions,” the Khaleej Times said.

She defied the edict that had banned the education of girls in addition to the restriction of their right to go to school.

“You have been going to the most difficult places, where education has more problems in becoming a reality,” said Guterres, who was the UN High Commissioner for Refugees from 2005-2015, as he recalled her work in refugee camps and the two schools her foundation has set up in Lebanon’s Beka’a Valley.

Malala, now living in the UK, had her injuries treated in Birmingham.

Other awards for Yousafzai include the Nobel Peace Prize with “Kailash Satyarti, the Indian children’s rights activist,” in 2014.

Yousafzai said, “I have a second life for the purpose of education and I’ll continue working,” as well as, “It wasn’t that I was very intelligent or very clever or I had some special kind of training or something. All I had was a father and a family who said, ‘Yes, you can speak out, it’s your choice’.”

Other awardees include: “Actor Michael Douglas, naturalist Jane Goodall, and Princess Haya bint Al Hussein, wife of His Highness Shaikh Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum, Vice-President and Prime Minister of the UAE and Ruler of Dubai, and Chairperson of the International Humanitarian City (IHC).”

An Interview with Robert Ray, President of the Humanists of North Puget Sound

April 13, 2017

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

How did you become a Humanist?

I honestly believe that Humanism is the default human position. We have an ingrained sense of empathy, which I feel is the core of Humanism.

That is not to say, I always knew I was a Humanist. I realised the label fit me best after looking for my place in the world and others who felt the same way I did.

I found a Humanist community near me and instantly knew I had found my “label.” Nearly all the tenets matched my world view, so I started to identify as a Humanist from that point on.

What seems like the main reason for people becoming humanists, in your experience, e.g. arguments, evidence, experience, or disenchantment with traditional religious structures?

I think people find that they are already Humanists when they find out what it is. There isn’t a main reason. As I stated earlier, it seems to be the default human position on morality and ethics.

You don’t even have to be an atheist to be a Humanist. There are many religious forms of humanism. In fact, when you see a religious person doing good despite the doctrine of their stated religion, they are expressing that innate humanism.

I identify as a Secular Humanist, meaning that I have no religious dogma or theistic belief tied to my Humanism. I am in fact an Atheistic Humanist, to put it bluntly.

What makes Humanism seem more natural to you than other sentiments, or ethical and philosophical worldviews?

We have evolved to be social creatures and have some genetic traits that make existing in this type of structure possible.

Empathy, reason, and the ability to learn from experiences are all necessary to work with others.

Religious dogma, on the other hand, was created to control others. It seems to work against our natural inclinations to help others by creating the idea of “others.” Humanism tries to eschew the concept of “others” and look past those walls that separate us.

What is the best argument for Humanism you have ever come across?

That is a little more difficult to pin down. I don’t think one argument can cover it.

But I do think one of my favourite quotes from my favourite orators of all time can cover my sentiment on this.

*Justice is the only worship.
Love is the only priest.
Ignorance is the only slavery.
Happiness is the only good.
The time to be happy is now,
The place to be happy is here,
The way to be happy is to make others so.
Wisdom is the science of happiness.
Robert Green Ingersoll, "The Gods" (1876)*

You are the president of Humanists of North Puget Sound. What tasks and responsibilities come with the position?

My job is not that much different from any other leader of a non-profit. I set the agendas, the tone, run the meetings, etc.

I am the official spokesperson for the group and I attend a lot of events in the Seattle area representing the group. I love that part. I get to hang out with all the friends I've made over the years.

These are the only times I get to see many of them. The Puget Sound is rather long geographically and travelling it can take some time. Our main meeting location for the HNPS is just over an hour outside of Seattle so there isn't much overlap in our demographics even though we are tied into the same greater metro area.

What have been some of its major bumps and setbacks, and successes, in its foundation and development?

The HNPS has been around since 1991, so quite a bit before my time. But some of the original founders were still attending when I became president, so I learned a bit.

One of the biggest hurdles was location. It seems for a couple of years they rotated meetings in living rooms of the members. It wasn't until the mid 90's that they started settling on more regular meeting locations.

Recently, we have had some major set backs in membership. One is related to the age of the members. As I said, we still had founding members in our group as far as 2015. In fact, many members up to that point had been with the group for over a decade. This was great from a legacy standpoint, but posed as a major obstacle when it came to the future longevity of the group.

To put it bluntly, many of the long-term, regular members were just getting too old to keep returning. Some we lost, some had health issues that kept them from showing up. It became an

issue when new members were not taking their place, which leads me to our second major hurdle. Obama.

The win of President Obama gave people hope for the future and many felt that an activist group wasn't something they needed any more, so they weren't all that involved. When people aren't involved, less show up and it becomes a self-repeating cycle.

But we kept a small core of members and have persevered. Recently, we have seen some growth and anticipate quite a bit more with the attack on religious freedom from members of the Trump administration.

What are some of the demographics of the organisation? How many members are in it? Who is most likely to join the organisation?

We are relatively a diverse group. We range from folks in their teens to members well into their 80's. Ethnically, not so much, but a lot of that is due to the demographics of our area.

Currently, we have 15 regular members with about 10 more that are kind of random attendees. Since we are a Secular Humanist group, we tend to attract the more progressive and politically liberal atheists.

Has the group taken up any activist causes? What were they?

We do have a history of activism, from fighting against Nuclear power in the 90's to standing up for transgender rights today. We advocated and helped promote a local Camp Quest. We stepped up to lobby for same-sex marriage when it was on the ballot.

What were their outcomes?

One of our greatest recent success was our role in getting Camp Quest Northwest rolling. We offered a challenge grant in 2011 to the group to see if they could raise \$10,000 by the end of the year. The next February, I presented them with a check for \$10,000. It gave them a huge jump in starting the camp. It was even covered by the Friendly Atheist.

<http://www.patheos.com/blogs/friendlyatheist/2012/02/06/atheists-donate-10000-to-camp-quest-northwest/>

What is the general status of Humanism in Puget Sound based on public perception?

For the most part, the Puget Sound is inclusive. We generally don't get a lot of push back from the religious here. I was even allowed to give the opening Invocation to the State House of representatives in 2015.

What are the main impediments to the practice and advocacy of Humanism in the local Puget Sound area?

Membership. We are still small and don't have a lot of influence here. Our voice is not as big as some other groups, so it harder to be activists.

Who/what are the main threats to Humanism as a movement in general?

Again, size matters. Being big enough to stand as our own movement is difficult at times. We just don't have the numbers.

Another issue is identification. While as much as 25% of the population will identify as none/non-religious, a very small percentage of them identify as Humanist. Many don't even know what Humanism is or its tenets.

What is The Original Motto project?

The Original Motto Project is a grassroots organisation that is dedicated to restoring E Pluribus Unum as our motto and opposes the use of "In God We Trust" on any government property. We do most of our activism on online forums, such as Facebook and Twitter, but did hold a rally last year in Olympia opposite Franklin Grahams "Decision America Tour."

<http://originalmotto.us/>
<https://www.facebook.com/TheOriginalMotto/>

What do you yak about on the Secular Yakking podcast?

Secular Yakking is a weekly show where my wife, Amy, and I take a look at news that isn't always mainstream and our opinions on it from a Secular Humanist perspective. We focus more on politics, separation of church and state, and social justice issues but sprinkle in science and entertainment as we go along.

[Secular Yakking](#)

What is the future of Humanism – 5, 10, 25 years from now? (Broad question, I know.)

I do see hope though, the millennials identify as non-religious in ever-increasing numbers and many of them are socially progressive. They are already expressing Humanist Ideals; they need only to find out that they are doing it.

How can people get involved with Humanists of North Puget Sound?

The best way is to contact us via email info@humanistnps.org or go to our webpage <http://humanistnps.org>.

Thank you for your time, Robert.

Trade Raises Mean Incomes and Reduces Global Inequality

April 13, 2017

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

The last decade has saw an increase in international trade, which many countries have deemed a boon and benefit because it has raised incomes and cut inequality.

However, the consistent debate about the benefits of trade tied to the integration of the global marketplace at times, the world economic forum states, fails to realise that incomes across the globe have been raised by the reduction of poverty and global inequality dramatically.

Some countries have experienced a rise in inequality, but this is not the result of global trade but rather the result of the need for “stronger safety nets and better social and labour programs, not trade protection.”

“The 2001, US-Vietnam free trade agreement reduced poverty in Vietnam by increasing wage premiums in export sectors, spurring job reallocation from agriculture, forestry and fishing into manufacturing, and stimulating enterprise job growth.”

In the current global market, with countries feeling the need to turn inward, it has been predicted that many countries would turn outward and increase trade and reduce the obstacles to trade for the decrease in global inequality for the reduction of poverty and the general rise of mean incomes around the world.

“A study of 27 industrial and 13 developing countries finds that shutting off trade would deprive the richest 10 percent of 28 percent of their purchasing power,” the WEF said, but the poorest 10 percent would lose 63 percent because they buy relatively more imported goods.”

The share of world GDP based on merchandise trade grew about 30% to 50% from the periods of 1988 to 2013. This has been known as a “period of rapid globalisation, average income grew by 24% globally.” At the same time, the global poverty headcount ratio went down from 35% to 10.7%.

As well, the income of the lowest 40% of the world went up by as much as 50%. In addition, the growth in export is associated or positively correlated with greater gender equality; if a country has lower exports or a reduction in the growth of exports, then, by application, there will be greater gender inequality or a greater gender divide in developing countries.

For example, abandoning existing agreements in the Americas would have particularly large negative welfare effects in countries like Mexico (4 to 9 percent), El Salvador (2 to 5 percent), and Honduras (2 to 5 percent), according to early research at the World Bank.

Of the gains that have been gotten for women, reduction in global integration would reduce the gains seen in developing countries for greater gender equality. With trade and globalisation, there will be winners and losers in terms of the most economic gains.

However, there will be a net increase in the amount of money and funding that the average citizen will have in a country that is more integrated into the global marketplace. The World Economic Forum reports that there has been countries in Latin and South America that have shown wage distribution equalisation, such as Brazil or the reverse such as Mexico.

In India, poverty decreases in the more rural areas of the country when they have greater trade liberalisation. Between the periods of 1990 and 2010, which is noted as earlier as a rapid era of globalisation, the Gini index measuring inequality in the United States went from 43 to 47, and in Denmark from 31 to 26.

“Consider why. US workers concentrated in communities which face high volumes of Chinese imports have experienced fewer jobs and **falling wages**,” the World Economic Forum said, “And yet, the US Trade Adjustment Assistance (TAA) program falls short of the challenge of helping people get back on their feet.”

With the national economies that “created losers,” the redistribution policies might be “needed” in addition to various policies to better equip workers to benefit from the opportunities offered by trade.

These include more better social protection and safety-net programs and non-trade protectionist policies.

North Korea Pays Homage to Late Leaders and Current Leader

April 14, 2017

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

Yonhap News has reported that the North Korean army is to hold a ceremony to pledge loyalty to the North Korean leader, Kim Jong-un, ahead of this week's 105th birthday of the late state founder, Kim Il-sung. This is one of the major anniversaries in North Korea.

North Korea's official Korean Central news agency stated that the army, air and anti-air force, and the navy of North Korea's Korean People's Army, has paid tribute to the current and late leaders. These are the late or deceased grandfather and father of the current leader, Kim Jong-un.

Participants at the ceremony included military chief Hwang Pyong-so, widely viewed as the No. 2 man in North Korea and director of the general political bureau of the KPA; Ri Myong-su, the military's chief of general staff; and Pak Yong-sik, minister of the armed forces.

The Korean People's Army of North Korea has pledged their allegiance to both the late father, grandfather, and the current leader. The anniversary is known "as the 'Day of the Sun.'"

Reportedly, North Korea is preparing to launch an intercontinental ballistic missile in addition to carrying out its 6th nuclear test.

In a speech broadcast live by the North's Korean Central TV, Hwang said the North will "mount a preemptive nuclear attack on South Korea and the United States and wipe them out without traces if they attempt to launch a war of aggression".

The prior intercontinental ballistic missiles fired into the sea from the east coast. During the Day of the Sun ceremony, the band of the military paid homage to the two late leaders, the father and the grandfather of the current leader, with a 21-gun salute, which took place in front of two statues of the father and grandfather.

All North Korean soldiers and cadets from all levels of military academies took part in the celebration or anniversary.

NASA Sent a Twin into Space for Research

April 14, 2017

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

The highly-anticipated recent **NASA mission** that saw two astronauts sent into space featured something unprecedented: one of the astronauts happens to have a twin brother.

NASA astronaut Scott Kelly spent a year in space while Mark Kelly – the non-NASA brother – stayed on Earth. The mission by NASA was part of an attempt to see the affects of space on Earth for the improvement of healthcare interventions.

“While the data are still being studied carefully, NASA recently released some intriguing **preliminary findings**. Kelly **launched aboard the Russian Soyuz Rocket on March 27 2015**,” The WEF said, “along with Russian cosmonauts **Genaldy Padalka** and **Mikhail Kornienko** (joining Kelly on the one year mission).”

Scott Kelly spent 340 days on the International Space Station. Both Mark and Scott provided large numbers of biological samples for the research prior to the launch of the 340-day mission.

With an examination of the molecular alterations, NASA is hoping to understand how certain proteins and bacteria in the body are influenced by nature or nurture by taking advantage of the extreme environmental differences between living on Earth or in space.

Many space agencies have expressed a “**shared goal of taking people to Mars**.” This will require a about 3 years away from Earth, and then taking about six months travelling to Mars in microgravity, followed by more than a year on the Martian surface.

Mars has about 1/3 the gravity of Earth. The travellers will need to prepare accordingly because there are effects on the body from the space travel because of the extreme conditions of space environments.

The WEF noted that microgravity has considerable effects on the human body. These include posture, muscle wasting, bone density loss, and reduction in the blood in the body. As well, the heart gets smaller.

One of the findings from the research through the twin study was that Scott’s – the one that went into space – telomeres appeared to shorten, which protect the DNA and become shorter as we age and increases damage to DNA as we age.

One speculation by the WEF author was that the research could increase the human lifespan.

Crispr-Cas9 – Group Wants to Overturn Patent for Gene-Editing Technology

April 14, 2017

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

The Washington Post reported on the recent controversy surrounding the Crispr-Cas9 technology. One group is aiming to overturn a patent on the gene-editing technology. The dispute is between the Broad Institute and a California group, who developed similar but separate technologies around Crispr-Cas9.

“A group including University of California, the University of Vienna and researcher Emmanuelle Charpentier said on Wednesday that it seeks to overturn a patent decision related to the best-known Crispr system, Crispr-cas9.”

Two research groups noted that it would make gene-editing like “cutting and pasting text on a computer.” The tensions are rising based on the dispute between the two groups.

“That decision by the Patent Trial and Appeal Board protected Crispr-cas9 patents issued to the Broad Institute, Harvard University and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology against a challenge by the California group.”

This technology, of course, can be used to edit the genomes of plants, animals, including people. Many of the same scientists involved in this “dispute” invented similar technologies, where the two technologies use two different enzymes.

“Adding further legal uncertainty to the mix, Vilnius University in Lithuania received notice on Wednesday that the U.S. patent office plans to issue it a broad Crispr-related patent in the U.S. that could draw challenges from the California group and the Broad.”

One technology is the Crispr-Cas9. The other is the similar Crispr-cas13a. With the transformative technology that comes from this methodology, or these methodologies, the legal disputes focused on Crispr-Cas9.

“The patent judges ruled that the Broad Institute’s use of Crispr-cas9 in the cells of plants, animals and humans, differed from the California group’s claims to Crispr-cas9 as a gene editor regardless of location.”

The gene-editing technology under dispute has had investments in the hundreds of millions of dollars. The technologies could be used for gene therapies and even cures for diseases that have a basis in genetics.

The legal battles over the technology continue.

(Video) Cassini Mission Finds Ingredients Necessary for Life on Moons

April 14, 2017

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

NASA has reported that its Cassini spacecraft mission discovered interesting scientific results about some of the ice and ocean on moons of both Saturn and Jupiter, which have been the sources of increased scientific research.

This might have applications for knowledge about satellites in orbit among other gas giants or planets in other solar systems. One form of chemical energy has been noted as being able to feed life, which appears to exist on Saturn's moon called Enceladus.

Associate administrator for NASA's Science Mission Directorate, Thomas Zurbuchen, said, "This is the closest we've come, so far, to identifying a place with some of the ingredients needed for a habitable environment."

Cassini mission researchers looked into the results from images taken, which found plumes. They found that plumes were bursting or were erupting from Europa, which is a moon of Jupiter.

The research is published a paper in the journal Science and it is noted that hydrogen gas is a potential "chemical energy source for life" and has been found present in the plumes. There is a presence of the hydrogen gas in the oceans of Enceladus.

The energy can be obtained from the combination of hydrogen and carbon dioxide dissolved in water. "This chemical reaction, known as 'methanogenesis' because it produces methane as a byproduct, is at the root of the tree of life on Earth, and could even have been critical to the origin of life on our planet."

If or since hydrogen was found in the oceans of the moon, in the oceans, then this could be a potential source of chemical energy for life that might be found there – if any exists there.

"Life as we know it requires three primary ingredients: liquid water; a source of energy for metabolism; and the right chemical ingredients, primarily carbon, hydrogen, nitrogen, oxygen, phosphorus and sulphur." NASA reported.

It turns out that Enceladus has every single of those ingredients necessary for the creation and maintenance and evolution of life. 90% of the gas found from the plumes observed by the Cassini mission, the Cassini spacecraft mission, is water as well as 1% hydrogen with a mix of other elements such as ammonia, carbon dioxide, and methane.

The Cassini project scientist, Linda Spilker, said, "Confirmation that the chemical energy for life exists within the ocean of a small moon of Saturn is an important milestone in our search for habitable worlds beyond Earth."

Malala (Also) Becomes Youngest Honorary Citizen of Canada

April 14, 2017

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

CNN reports that Malala Yousafzai, the international icon and advocate for girls' education, has become the youngest honorary Canadian in the country's history at age 19.

Among the numerous awards and accolades that she has received, she is now also an honorary citizen of Canada. This occurred in an official swearing-in ceremony in Ottawa on Wednesday April 12.

Yousafzai said, "I'm humbled to accept honorary citizenship of your country... While I will always be a proud Pashtun and a proud citizen of Pakistan, I'm grateful to be an honorary member of your nation of heroes."

The Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau was present to give her a certificate, in addition to a flag to signify both formally and informally, respectively, her Canadian citizenship. She provided a speech at the House of Commons in Ottawa, Canada.

"Thank you, Malala, for your inspiring words. It was an honour to host you in our House — which I hope you'll now consider your House, too," Prime Minister Trudeau said in a tweet post-ceremony.

She received a parliamentary standing ovation, where all the parliamentarians stood and clapped for her. Yousafzai came to fame for advocating girls' education in Pakistan. While there, she was shot in the head and neck by the terrorist group known as the Taliban.

Recently, she was the recipient of the highest honour provided by United Nations, entitled the "Messenger of Peace".

In her award speech for the UN Messenger of Peace honour, Yousafzai said, "I stood here on this stage almost three and a half years ago... and I told the world that education is the basic human right of every girl... Once you educate girls, you change the whole community, you change the whole society."

UN chief, Antonio Guterres, said, "It is an enormous pleasure to have you as our Messenger of Peace."

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