

# Conatus News: Volume VI

Scott Douglas Jacobsen



## IN-SIGHT PUBLISHING

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

[in-sightjournal.com](http://in-sightjournal.com)

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

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

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### *Cataloguing-in-Publication Data*

No official catalogue record for this book.

Jacobsen, Scott Douglas, Author

Conatus News: Volume VI/Scott Douglas Jacobsen

pages cm

Includes bibliographic references, footnotes, and reference style listing.

In-Sight Publishing, Langley, British Columbia, Canada

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

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

*Designed by Scott Douglas Jacobsen*

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## Acknowledgements

I express gratitude to Benjamin David, Benedict Nicholson, Kevin Jenco, Dominic Lauren, and the editing team at Conatus News, and Nicola Young Jackson, Pat O'Brien, Reba Boyd Wooden, Eric Adriaans, Rebecca Newberger Goldstein, Roslyn Mould, Stephanie Guttormson, Alejandro Borgo, Tara Abhasakun, Kate Smurthwaite, James Underdown, Maryam Namazie, Tehmina Kazi, Rebecca Hale, Dana L. Morganroth, Angelos Sofocleous, Emile Yusupoff, Terry Murray, Pamela Machado, Nicola Young Jackson, Tara Abhasakun, Terry Sanderson, Anthony Grayling, Stephen Law, Nicole Orr, Jim Al-Khalili, Ali Raza, Linda LaScola, Bob Churchill, Jennifer C. Gutierrez, Vic Wang, Marieke Prien, Caleb W. Lack, Dr. Saladdin Ahmed, Sikivu Hutchinson, Haras Rafiq, Scott Blair, Andrew Copson, Matthew Rothschild, Nicole Orr, Adalet Garmiany, Roy Speckhardt, Anders Stjernholm, Tyler Owen, René Hartmann, Shari Allwood, Margaret Mitchell, Mikey Weinstein, Emmanuel Donate, Rob Boston, David Niose, and Marieme Helie Lucas, and Alida Thomas, Danielle Erika Hill, Ashton P. Woods, Waleed Al-Husseini, Ariel Pontes, James Croft, John Perkins, Jason Frye, Kim Gibson, Dr. Alexander Douglas, Amanda Poppei, Wade Kaardal, Simon Ørregaard, Marie Alena Castle, Julia Julstrom-Agoyo, Pamela Machado. It seems like a valuable initiative to me. I feel honored to contribute to, participate in, interview and write for, and see Conatus News grow with each passing week.

Scott



# **Philippine's and China's South China Sea Claims Create Tensions**

**April 14, 2017**

**Scott Douglas Jacobsen**

According to the [Straits Times](#), President Rodrigo Duterte stated that he would like to keep a consistent “geopolitical balance” within the South China Sea for the time being.

Philippine president Duterte “announced that he was planning a trip to raise the Philippine flag on the largest island in the Spratlys that the Philippines has occupied.”

He has ordered the Philippine military to “fortify the islands and reefs...in the disputed waterway.” However, he has stated to China that there are no offensive weapons that will be placed within the Philippine-occupied site.

Of course, this does raise questions. The spectre increased tensions between the two nations because of the contested nature of the South China Sea. It has been disclosed by Duterte that he wanted to “fortify” the nine islands in the South China Sea, which the Philippines are claiming.

This set off alarm bells for Beijing. The Chinese Foreign Ministry did express concerns about his plans because of the intense and rising geopolitical tensions in the area.

“I ordered the occupation of the... islands that are just near our shores because there’s a heightening of the geopolitical issues and eventually maybe a violent low-intensity war over here,” President Duterte said. “China can relax. We are friends. We will not go to war with you. We’re just trying to maintain the balance of the geopolitical situation there.”

President Duterte stated that if there was ever a fight between the United States and China, then the Philippines would be caught in the middle of conflict. With regards to the territorial claims of China, it “claims most of the South China Sea.”

However, “Brunei, Malaysia, the Philippines, Taiwan and Vietnam also” have claims in the waterway.

# North Korea Responds to Provocations from Trump Administration

April 15, 2017

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

[People's Daily Online](#) reports that the North Korea has promised retaliation if the United States takes military action against them.

Xinhua News Agency reported that the foreign minister for North Korea made an official statement that North Korea would attack with nuclear force based on further United States aggression in the region. The United States has been a source of provocation to North Korea, which is prepared – according to the public statement – to act on provocation with nuclear aggression.

“The spokesperson for North Korea’s Institute for Disarmament and Peace issued a statement condemning the [United States] for launching military attacks on a sovereign state while ‘crying out for peace by strength.’”

Pyongyang in North Korea is preparing to move forward with its 6th nuclear test. It is of concern to many for the possibility of a thermonuclear war or thermonuclear weapons in the peninsula. This could have implications for both security and world peace. China has expressed concern.

China is pushing to stop the “irreversible stage” for North Korea, according to [Reuters](#). China states that this irreversible stage is an unmanageable stage. The preventatives from reaching that point are crucial for the maintenance of eased tensions and continuance of peace. Threats between North Korea and the United States create a dangerous environment for the rest of the world.

The US Navy launched 59 Tomahawk missiles on Syria based on deadly gas attacks. The US is pushing back by warning that the policy of “strategic patience” is at its end for America. The US Vice President Mike Pence will be travelling to Asia – including South Korea – for a 10-day trip starting on Sunday.

Additionally, North Korea is preparing tests for ballistic missile use that can fire upwards of 800 km, which could reach South Korea. For North Korea, this could become a strategic asset with South Korea in range of the ballistic missile.

# **An Interview with Alida Tomas – Founding Producer, Eighty Wings Productions**

April 15, 2017

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

Alida Tomas founded Eighty Wings Productions. She is a comedian, commentator, and producer. Here she talks to Conatus News about some of her work.

**Alida, you earned professional qualifications in theatre, film, and television. Why did you choose those specialities for undergraduate training?**

Specialties? Choose? No, no, film & tv chose *me*. Jokes aside, no one makes a logical, well-reasoned decision to go into the film industry. It's very much instinct, and unabashed passion, and a sprinkle of stupidity. The odds are stacked against you, and your mental health. Dropping out of law school and into the void would have given my poor parents a heart attack, so instead I impressed them by getting into UCLA and left Australia (never to be seen again).

**You are the founding producer for Eighty Wings Productions. What was the inspiration for the title and founding it?**

Control freak. That's the other other name for Producer (after asshole). I wanted to create and drive my own projects, so founded my own company. As for my production company name, it's horribly convoluted, but basically my name, Alida, means *Small winged one* (that's the 'Wings'), and 'Eighty' includes both my favorite number, eight, and is also a homophone of my initials 'A.T'. I told you, horribly convoluted. Also, I want to work on 80 shows before I die. No big.

**What is its emphasis for productions?**

Comedy comedy comedy. Black comedy. Satirical comedy. Action comedy. Dramedy. Get outa here with your depressing masterpiece. I can't cope.

**When was the moment of ethical, political awakening for becoming a social commentator through comedy and video, e.g. Hipster Jesus? Also, what inspired Hipster Jesus for you?**

I've always connected with layered comedy. It started with the South Park series and movies, then Team America, and now Book of Mormon. Trey Parker and Matt Stone are geniuses. The Colbert Report too.

There's no one moment though. I've always kept my eyes and ears open to the world around me, so formed engaged opinions I guess. But I always felt uncomfortable shoving my unsolicited opinion down people's throats, so I suppose I hid it inside a joke. Now, I hide it inside comedy. Only it's not hidden at all. But the jokes will always be more important to me than the commentary. I'd rather make you laugh than make a deep political statement. Because laughter brings joy, and connects people, and relieves stress. It's important. But so is exposing injustice. You need both. That's satire.



As for Hipster Jesus... Well, Jesus-as-hipster is just a vehicle really. Hipster Jesus is a meme that's been floating around in the ether for a while. Building a show around this character comes from a kind of equation in my mind... It's basically Religious Figure + Contemporary Subculture = fodder for great social commentary and hopefully a good laugh. Also, I failed math.

**What is the creative process that goes into the creation of a comedy cartoon such as Hipster Jesus? The planning process and simply getting the physical work done to create the final product.**

Well, it generally starts with making my collaborators laugh. Or I'll start with a topic that makes me kind of angry, and if I can't "find the funny," then those ideas go in the trash. If I *can* "find the funny" in a topic that riles me up, I'll start writing a script. Sometimes, I'll co-write, if my writing buddy connects with a particular idea. For Hipster Jesus, I put together an art portfolio of how I wanted each character to look, walk, sit, stand, and I took that to a professional illustrator and animator to help me bring it to life. The voice actors were recorded separately in LA and NYC, so later, in Melbourne, I sat with my sound designer and we picked the best line reads and smooshed them together. Movie magic.

**What are some in-progress initiatives?**

I'm about to go into pre-production on another satirical, but non-animated, comedy. No aging millennial religious icons in this one. It's a more broad socio-political satire called Elite Kulture Kommandos – about four cultural crime fighters fighting a war against popular entertainment and political faux-populism. They're deeply flawed but lovable characters socially impeded by the weight of their own cultural elitism, but they're well-meaning nonetheless. I'm also developing a mental institution-set comedy with a magical realism twist, as well as a dramedy about two highly ambitious best friends struggling with autoimmune disease (it's a real hoot).

**Thank you for your time, Alida.**

Thanks, Scott. Was lots of fun.

## **April 22 2017 is Earth Day**

**April 15, 2017**

**Phoebe Davies-Owen and Scott Douglas Jacobsen**

In 1970, Earth Day was started by the Wisconsin politician named Gaylord Nelson. It led to the Clean Air Act, Clean Water Act, and the Endangered Species Act. Apparently, the foundation of Earth was a “rare political alignment” with support from “Republicans and Democrats, rich and poor, city slickers and farmers, tycoons and labor leaders.”

Into the current celebration, the environmental movement continues to garner international support through the annual reminder of the need to protect the Earth’s – and our – life support systems. In 1990, the celebration – on its 20th anniversary – was important for the improvement in recycling.

As well, these were foundational for the 1992 Rio de Janeiro United Nations Earth Summit. In 1995, Senator Gaylord Nelson earned the honour of the Presidential medal of Freedom from the then United States president Bill Clinton, which is known as the highest civilian honour in America.

This year’s celebration will feature support from over 200 million people from 141 countries working to protect the environment this Earth Day. As with 2010 onward, arguably before that time, we face challenges with the denial of the reality of climate change or global warming based on the best statistical models and the consensus of the experts in the relevant disciplines.

As well, this includes “well-funded oil lobbyists, reticent politicians, a disinterested public, and a divided environmental community all contributed to the narrative—cynicism versus activism.” So the reminder for the year – indeed, the imperative – seems to be the need to change the narrative from the general negative apathy seen in cynicism and to change that into proactive engagement.

In what ways are we able to make a difference? Some things include turning off light-bulbs when the room is not in use, and any other electrical appliances and/or heating. We can recycle food waste and try NOT to waste so much food that we buy for the home. What might help in this regard, a solution which also benefits the environment is eating less meat.

According to the Earth Day website, the meat industry is responsible for 20% of the world’s greenhouse gas emissions. With global meat consumption tripling over the last four decades, the meat industry now emits over 36 billion tons of greenhouse gases annually and is showing no signs of slowing down, Earth Day introduced a ‘Meatless Mondays’ petition in order to encourage more people to eat less meat.

300 million tons of plastic is produced each year to make bags, bottles and packages.

Another option is to pledge not to use disposable plastic. Earth Day has another petition for this issue and consider it a priority. At present, 300 million tons of plastic is produced each year to make bags, bottles, packages, and other commodities for people all over the world. But! Only

about 10% of this plastic is properly recycled and reused. The rest ends up as waste in landfills or as litter in our natural environment, where it leaches dangerous chemicals into the nearby soil and water, endangering humans and wildlife alike.

One last option is to donate to Earth Day's 'Canopy project,' which aims to work with organisations worldwide that strengthen communities through tree planting. Using sapling and seed distribution, urban forestry, agroforestry, and tree care training, we have empowered rural and urban people alike to conserve, repair, and restore tree cover to their lands.

The goal of Earth Day is to strive, not just for “an environment of clean air and water and scenic beauty,” but to reach “an environment of decency, quality and mutual respect for all other human beings and all other living creatures.”

# **Dementia and Alzheimer's Patients Ask for Physician-Assisted Suicide**

**April 16, 2017**

**Scott Douglas Jacobsen**

**CTV News** reported on the dementia and Alzheimer's sufferers that are asking for "the right to consent to doctor-assisted suicide" or physician-assisted suicide.

The concern is the development of the diseases as they eventually destroy "their ability to walk, talk and think." Currently, in Canada, it is against the law for a physician-assisted suicide. Of the provinces and territories to consider making this practice legal of this, Quebec is the first to "consider this controversy or proposal."

"One of its supporters is Quebec politician Francois Bonnardel, who watches helplessly as Alzheimer's slowly destroys the mind and body of his mother, Yolande Tremblay." Bonnardel is seen as a "frontman" for the push by Quebec to advance this controversial cause of physician-assisted suicide or "doctor-assisted suicide."

According to the CEO of Dying with Dignity Canada, Shanaaz Gokool, "There is a provincial government that is willing to address this critical issue that so many Canadians, 80 per cent, support advance consent for a diagnosis like dementia."

One woman's family, Jocelyne Lizotte's family, wants the option. She had Alzheimer's, but was "denied a medically assisted death. She made a request to the husband: to kill her. Now, Michel Cadotte, who is 55-years-old, has "been charged with second-degree murder."

Although, some organisations and individuals support the idea. Others do not support doctor-assisted suicide. The Canadian Alzheimer's Society is against the idea. One representative, Line Vincelli, reports and believes that offering assisted death can put "the vulnerable at great risk."

There was a study, which prompted the Quebec to study the issue of advance consent and whether it "should be allowed."

Some dementia and Alzheimer's sufferers say they would like the right to consent to doctor-assisted suicide before the disease destroys their ability to live and exercise a holistic lifestyle. Vincelli said, "We should fight to help give them a good life before trying to end their life."

# North Korean Missile Launch Failure and Explosion

April 18, 2017

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

What many are deeming an increase in political instability within the country, Sunday morning saw a **North Korean ballistic missile fired** but exploding almost immediately after launching, U.S. military officials said, less than a day after leader Kim Jong Un **paraded a never-before-seen long-range ballistic missile** through the streets of Pyongyang.

The launch was at 5:51am in Sinpo on the east coast of North Korea. The missile was not an intercontinental ballistic missile according to a United States official reporting to The Wall Street Journal.

“Cmdr. Benham said the type of missile that was fired Sunday was still being assessed. The South Korean Joint Chiefs of Staff, who confirmed the failed launch, also said they were working on analysing the type of missile.”

The North Korean director of national security, Kim Kwan-jin, organised a special meeting for the security situation. North Korea is seen to be moving forward with its new weapons program based on the launch.

Even with the launch, it is seen as a show of resolve. “U.S. President Donald Trump warned Pyongyang against any bellicose behaviour, and **the U.S. sent an aircraft carrier group** into the waters around the Korean Peninsula.”

Jim Mattis, secretary of defence said, “The president and his military team are aware of North Korea’s most recent unsuccessful missile launch...The president has no further comment.” The foreign ministry of South Korea warned against further launches or escalations from North Korea because these would be met with “strong punitive measures.”

Xinhua News Agency reported that the top Chinese diplomat, Yang Jiechi, who is a state councillor, was in discussions with the U.S. secretary of state Rex Tillerson. They talked on the phone about the situation in the Korean Peninsula.

“Japan on Sunday lodged a protest with North Korea over the launch via its embassy in Beijing, while Foreign Minister Fumio Kishida called on China to make further efforts to rein in its volatile neighbour, according to public broadcaster NHK.”

Vice president for the U.S., Mike Pence, landed in Seoul after the failed test launch. He will be travelling through Australia, Indonesia, and Japan. “Recent satellite imagery suggests North Korea may be preparing a sixth nuclear test at Punggye-ri, where the recorded blasts have escalated in strength since the first one in 2006.”

“North Korea’s failed launch on Sunday was its eighth missile to be tested this year. North Korea’s first launch in 2017, in February, came as Mr. Trump was meeting in Florida with

Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe and was the country's first attempt at a solid-fueled missile, which can be fired with little advance warning.”



## Chart: The EU27 and Brexit negotiations

April 18, 2017

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

**The Economist** noted that the European Union (EU) member states fall into three categories. This is based on reportage on the EU27 and Brexit negotiations.

Of those opinions categorised for the EU member states, these fall into three categories: “hard-core, hard and soft.” The main thrust of the EU negotiation and the results of the new index reported by The Economist Intelligence Unit (EIU) is the variables in discussion.

It gauges the views of EU states on the four core negotiating issues: the amount of money Britain will have to pay to leave; the four EU freedoms (movement of goods, services, workers and capital); trade arrangements and tariff barriers; and defence ties.

Based on the examination of EIU analysts, the ranks given to member states of the EU were out of 40. At the top of the rank, France earned the top spot. It is at 32.5 out of 40. Different nations have different concerns.

“This cluster mixes the traditional Anglophobes, Belgium and France, with the poorest member states, Bulgaria and Romania, who are concerned about both free movement and the budget. It also includes Germany, which sees itself as the custodian of the EU’s future cohesion.”

For the hard slot, 12 EU member states fall into it, which is significant if only 27 in the “EU27” and 3 categories. Hard-core scores were about 30 out of 40. Hard scores were 25-30. Soft scores were below 25.

“The final eight EU members, with scores below 25, make up the “soft” category. They include some which share Britain’s liberal position on trade and EU regulation—such as Sweden and Denmark. It also includes Ireland, with whom Britain has close historical and trade ties.”

Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, and Poland placed a “premium” on Britain’s contributions. Contributions of defence and security for the continent.

“Nonetheless, even the countries most sympathetic to Britain have limits on how generous they will allow the terms of Brexit to be. If nothing else, the importance of maintaining warm relations with the remaining EU members will dissuade them from undermining the group’s overall negotiating position.”

The full report by the EIU can be read [here](#).

# The Changing Landscape of Religion

April 18, 2017

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

According to a new **Pew study**, that the world's Christian population currently lies at 31% of the global 7.3 billion population, or 2.3 billion people – making it the world's biggest religion, with Islam and Hinduism standing as the second and third biggest religion respectively. This is based on a new Pew Research Center analysis of the demographics around religion.

However, in continental Europe, Christianity is declining. Christians had both the most deaths and the most births of any extant religion.

“Between 2010 and 2015, an estimated 223 million babies were born to Christian mothers and roughly 107 million Christians died – a natural increase of 116 million.”

Those are global numbers. For Europe, deaths outnumber births by about 6 million in one brief period. In Germany alone, there were an estimated 1.4 million more Christian deaths than births from 2010 to 2015.

Europe's ageing and dying Christian population was unique compared to the rest of the world. The Muslim and unaffiliated population increased in Europe. There are 1.8 billion Muslims in the world of various denominations at 24% of the world population.

This is “followed by religious “nones” (16%), Hindus (15%) and Buddhists (7%). Adherents of folk religions, Jews and members of other religions make up smaller shares of the world's people.”

Of the greatest organic increase in the numbers of adherents, Islam was the fastest growing. All religious/unaffiliated groups had more births than deaths.

Some countries, such as the United States, have a culture in which children growing up in one religion are more ably leave that religion. However, this trend is dwarfed by the differences associated with “fertility and mortality.”

Fertility differences between religious groups are one of the key factors behind current population trends and will be important for future growth. Globally, Muslims have the highest fertility rate of any religious group – an average of 2.9 children per woman, well above replacement level (2.1), the minimum typically needed to maintain a stable population.

The differences in the median ages of the religious demographics are important too. The differences can be seen in an older Christian global population. The median age for Christians is 30. For Muslims, it is 24. It is the youngest grouping.

Fertile years are more abundant – so to speak – for the world's Muslim population than for the world's Christian population or Hindu population – median age of 27.

# **Interview with Ashton P. Woods on Activism and Black Lives Matter**

**April 19, 2017**

**Scott Douglas Jacobsen**

Ashton P. Woods is a social and political activist in the Black Lives Matter movement as well as the co-chair of the Black Humanist Alliance. In this wide-ranging interview, we discussed the first moment of political and activist awakening for Ashton. We also looked into the tasks and responsibilities of being a co-chair and increasing the public knowledge of the black humanist community. Ashton is HIV-positive and an HIV activist. We discussed how he found out about his own HIV, the feelings that arose, and the difficulties associated with it. Also covered, were ways of coming to atheism in addition to his own experience of growing up 'religion-less.' Ashton explains his role as the founder and lead organiser of Black Lives Matter Houston.

Finally, we close on the main initiatives and projects coming on the horizon, even into the long-term future with some references to the Sandra Bland Act.

**Scott Douglas Jacobsen: So you've been an activist for a long time. I am curious to start things off with a little groundwork. What was your first moment of political and activist awakening?**

**Ashton P. Woods:** My very first moment? It happened when I was 15. I co-founded the first gay-straight alliance at my high school in New Orleans. I got tired of seeing people being bullied for being different, not just LGBT, but different – period. That was my first action that burst me down the path I am on now.

**SJ: Now, you're the co-chair of the Black Humanist Alliance. What tasks and responsibilities come along with being the co-chair?**

**AW:** As far as being the co-chair for me, we are not just organising black people as a monolith, but organising with the knowledge that black people come from different walks of life with some who happen to identify as a humanist or an atheist in the secular community. Because, obviously, we are not as visible, yet. There are more of us out there than people perceive there to be. One of the things that I do as a co-chair is I focus on social justice.

My work, in and of itself, fulfills the duties as the co-chair.

**SJ: You were noting some of the difficulties. That is, not really being noticed in the public eye in terms of the black humanist community. What are some ways that are being pursued to overcome that barrier of public perception?**

**AW:** To be honest with you; first, it is about being visible. The more people see you out there doing the work and identifying like they do, then they have a stake in the game. They have something to relate to. I have worked in activism. And it, in general, requires a certain level of

relatability. That way, people are more inclined to be part of a movement or part of a project, and are willing to listen.

Because, “Hey, this isn’t churchy. This isn’t steeped in religion, and I see a place for myself here.” The conundrum is that in trying to be visible, make it so that we are visible within the atheist community as well. Because I went to the Nashville Nones! Convention in Nashville, Tennessee. And I could only count up to 10, maybe 15, black folks. What came of that, first of all, is it wasn’t on a weekend, so most people were at school or work. There’s also financial barriers.

So signing up and being part of those particular events, as well as my social justice work, and emphasising that there’s a place for the secular community in the Black Lives Matter movement, and feminism, and HIV activism. It can be tedious when it’s needed. For some reason, I never found it hard to do. I just do it, if that makes sense.

**SJ: Yes, thank you for that. Also, you mentioned HIV activism. I do know that you’re HIV positive. When did you find out, what were the feelings that came up, and what have been some of the difficulties?**

**AW:** Well, I was 21-years-old when I found out I was HIV positive. That would put it 2008. And I had never been educated a lot about HIV because I’ve been on my own since I was 16-years-old. Unfortunately, due to the fact that I founded the gay-straight alliance at my high school, things were very different back then. It was 1999. I was 17. Even though people are bigoted now, they were way more bigoted back then.

They were just more visible with it. Because of that, I was an LGBT youth. Deliberately, I went to community centres that were part of the LGBT community, and in the black community as well, and learned what I could learn because I had friends that died from it. So when I found out that I had HIV – of course, you can’t die from HIV, but you die from complications with AIDS, which should be noted – I found the biggest reaction was that I broke out in hives.

I didn’t want to be around people. I remember the conversations with friends, who are no longer here, that it is not a death sentence. Then it came about destigmatising HIV because HIV is safe. The black community, it is so disproportionate. It is hard to quantify, but I feel like it is not even quantifiable the amount of affect that it has. Even in 2017, or in 2008, people lack the common knowledge of how HIV works, and what it does to the body.

Also, the difference between HIV the virus and AIDS the syndrome. I feel like in doing this work we are going to talk about Black Lives Matter or any other types of black activism. We need to make sure we are including people who are living with this virus, and know that health is a main issue that should be discussed. So when we talk about, for example, Black Lives Matter, we say, “Black lives matter. Black health matters. Black women matter. Black LGBT people matter.”

You know? Things like that. As far as LGBT is concerned, it is not necessarily a blip in my life, but I came out in 2015 publicly and by the beginning of 2016 I was on the cover of an industry

magazine that covers HIV issues, which was a very rapid rise in that context. But it is about knowing what is affecting your body. It is about knowing how it affects everybody else. Because it does not just affect the people that have it, it affects everybody around them as well.

And we need to come to a common place, where the stigma isn't there anymore because there is a thing about it being nasty, about promiscuity. It is about these things that some people with HIV did not take part in. Some people with HIV were raped. There's a lot. There's a lot [Laughing] that needs to be unpackaged there with HIV. So that's one of the things that I work on.

**SJ: Also within the humanist community, there are many titles, which imply different forms of looking at the world.**

**AW:** Right.

**SJ: However, many humanists – or secular humanists with respect to the AHA – are atheists. You are an atheist. Generally, what I notice are two trends to becoming an atheist, one is a single moment. It is dramatic in some way. It is an argument that they come across. Or it is a disillusionment with traditional religious structures.**

**The second is a slow trend over time. Where, for instance, they may start off as a theist, become a deist, become an agnostic, maybe even a pantheist, and then end up as an atheist. For you, what was that development like for you, if indeed there was one away from a traditional belief system into atheism?**

**AW:** Well, the irony is I don't fit into either one of those boxes.

**SJ: Oh [Laughing]!**

**AW:** I, actually, grew up religion-less. It was around me. Others practiced it, but I was never forced to go to a church or forced to try to learn. I was offered, but it was never forced. I was left to make the choice on my own. I never really believed. By the time I was 10- or 11-years-old, I was like, "This isn't real to me. I don't believe in this." As an adult, I did try to join a church to try to understand. I feel like I did what Anne Rice did, loosely.

I joined a church just to see what it was like, and to see if I could deal with it, and to see if I could believe in it. But no—it was, no. It just didn't work. It's not that I didn't have any respect for the people because there are some good people there. But this is not who I am; it's not who I am. I never experience agnosticism. There was just never any God for me.

**SJ: As a last question while being mindful of time, you are the co-founder and lead organiser of Black Lives Matter Houston.**

**AW:** That's correct.

**SJ: What are some of its main initiatives at the moment? What are you hoping to achieve in the next 1- to 10-year horizon – kind of big projects?**

**AW:** Right now, I am not looking at 10 years. There is a long-range plan. The long-range plan is legal, and policy. What we decided to do, or what I've decided to do, as my part in the Black Lives Matter movement is to affect policy. One of that things that I have been good at is working with elected officials to change laws and policies. So I've been at the Texas legislature helping to look at language in bills.

I am helping to support bills by testifying on panels and meeting with elected officials to convince them to vote for particular bills. For example, there are bills that on the floor right now. I am actually on a committee in the Texas legislature. These bills, basically, abolish the ability for police to arrest you on misdemeanor charges if it's not like a [Laughing] crime when someone is drawing blood – if you know what I mean.

There's also victimless crime. You get a citation and then go. I've also been involved with the Sandra Bland Act. I was very involved in protests, planning protests, around Sandra Bland, even being a part of planning the protests in Phoenix at the Netroots Nation. It was with Sanders and Governor O'Malley. So it is part protest and part policy in the context, you know. I go and walk the halls of city hall or walk the halls of the state legislature, even taking part in being a political consultant on an individual level by working for some candidates that I think will be best on those positions.

Let's just say, I haven't lost a race yet [Laughing].

**SJ: [Laughing].**

**AW:** Yea, it's about policy. Working on the Sandra Bland Act, which is 55 pages long, I'm not going to go into it. But it, basically, makes it so that the officer has to prove probable cause. That's what these bills are for. It is one thing to protest in the streets; it is another thing to expand that protest to incorporating the piece where you're actually engaging in the political process.

While we would love to dismantle this system of pain, we are still in it. It will take some time.

So you have to change some things. It doesn't require you assimilating what is in the system that you don't like, but it does mean that you work with some folks. As the old mentor that I have will say, "It's about policy, and it's also about one of the other things we should be doing, health." It is interesting that you brought up the question around HIV.

Because we are going to be doing some health education around HIV and some other issues, and health in the black community as well.

**SJ: Thank you very much for your time.**



# Artificial Intelligence Learns Human Sentiment

April 19, 2017

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

According to **OpenAI**, artificial intelligence (AI) has learned sentiment. However, it cannot express it. Nevertheless, it can read it.

The system has been termed an “unsupervised sentiment neuron.” It develops a good representation of sentiment through only prediction of the next character in a text of Amazon reviews.

“A **linear model** using this representation achieves state-of-the-art sentiment analysis accuracy on a small but extensively-studied dataset, the Stanford Sentiment Treebank (we get 91.8% accuracy versus the previous best of 90.2%), and can match the performance of previous supervised systems using 30-100x fewer labelled examples.”

There appears to be a sentiment neuron within the system with containment of most of the signals relevant to sentiment. It is reported as a derivation from large neural networks. A property emerging as a result of the structure and nature of neural networks.

“We first trained a **multiplicative LSTM** with 4,096 units on a corpus of 82 million Amazon reviews to predict the next character in a chunk of text. Training took one month across four NVIDIA Pascal GPUs, with our model processing 12,500 characters per second.”

These were used as the foundation for the creation of a sentiment classifier: different types of sentiment. Each were weighted in linear combinations. Weighting is giving more or less value to something: X was more weighted than Y; Y was less weighted than X.

“While training the linear model with L1 regularisation, we noticed it used surprisingly few of the learned units. Digging in, we realised there actually existed a single “sentiment neuron” that’s highly predictive of the sentiment value.”

Sentiment became predictable from one value, mostly. This neuron can classify reviews as positive or negative based on the Amazon review system. It was dynamic, adaptable, and adjustable “on a character-by-character basis.”

The sentiment neuron within their model can classify reviews as negative or positive, even though the model is trained only to predict the next character in the text. (Image: [blog.openai.com](http://blog.openai.com))

Typically, computers, algorithms, and AIs need big data to sift for self-learning. Unsupervised learning is different. This AI can do it. It can learn a good representation of a dataset, which can then be used to “solve tasks using only a few labelled examples.”

According to the researchers, the findings “implies that simply training large unsupervised next-step-prediction models on large amounts of data may be a good approach to use when creating systems with good representation learning capabilities.”

The researchers concluded that outside of the specific unsupervised learning, the capacity for “general unsupervised representation learning” could become a reality.

“Our results suggest that there exist settings where very large next-step-prediction models learn excellent unsupervised representations. Training a large neural network to predict the next frame in a large collection of videos may result in unsupervised representations for object, scene, and action classifiers.”

# North Korea Special Operation Forces on Show for the First Time

April 19, 2017

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

**Yonhap News Agency** recently reported that North Korea has formed a new unit and has put them on display in a parade in an apparent show of military power.

The display was amid ongoing tensions with the United States concerning North Korea's missile and nuclear programs.

The Korean People's Army were present in a military parade for the 105<sup>th</sup> anniversary for the deceased founder of North Korea, Kim Il-Sung.

North Korea has media run by the state. Their media mentioned the navy, the air force, and the special operation forces in the parade.

"Military officers belonging to the special forces marched in formation while wearing black camouflage cream on their faces and black sunglasses, according to footage by the country's state TV station."

The special operation forces carried a novel form of grenade launchers in addition to night-vision goggles.

One announcer on television, in reference to the highest peak in the Korean Peninsula, said, "Once Supreme Commander Kim Jong-un issues an order, they will charge with resolve to thrust a sword through the enemy's heart like lighting over Mt. Paektu,"

The current leader of North Korea, Kim Jong-un, watched from a Pyongyang plaza. There has been speculation as to a "sixth nuclear test." Recently, there was a **failed missile launch** from North Korea.

The new forces are aimed at countering both the United States and South Korea with the "beheading operation" or launch of an intercontinental ballistic missile around its key anniversaries in April.

Seoul and Washington's forces, including the U.S. Navy SEAL team that killed Osama bin Laden, joined this year's annual joint military drills for the first time apparently to practice removing the North Korean leadership in case of war.

As this is the first presentation of the special operation forces ever, other militarised groups have been formed by North Korea for new purposes and then put on show during a parade.

North Korean Col. Gen. Kim Yong-bok, a former military leader of the KPA Unit 11, is presumed to be leading the special forces as a new commander, given that his name was mentioned by the country's media at the parade.

# Sweden Tops the Charts in Everything

April 19, 2017

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

The **World Economic Forum** (WEF) reports that Sweden succeeds in a number of areas important for the health and well-being of the nation and the wellness of its citizenry.

Firstly, Sweden is the best nation to do business with and in. It ranks number one in terms of the best countries for business. The powerhouse of economy of the United States is in 23rd place on that ranking. Only a decade ago, Sweden ranked 17th in that listing. With conscious effort and initiatives, it went straight to the top. Sweden continues to be a globally competitive nation based on the Global Competitiveness Index provided by the WEF.

The growth of the country has been good and the deficit has been decreased. Sweden has a high rate of employment in addition to a high level of women citizens participating in the workforce.

It is also strong on gender equality, ranking fourth on the Global Gender Gap Index circa 2016.

Sweden closed about 81% of the overall gender gap for the nation. There has been a significant increase in “female legislators, senior officials and managers, and [Sweden] has reached parity in the number of women in ministerial positions.”

In another ranking, the Corruptions Perceptions Index, Sweden is ranked 4th out of a total of 186 countries, placing it near the top of the charts in terms of being a transparent and anti-corrupt country.

According to an index known as the European Commission’s European Innovation Scoreboard 2016, Sweden is also an innovative country, which reflects upon the economic development of the country as well. Some of these factors might be associated with one another in a higher factorial analysis. Sweden is known as an “innovation leader” and takes top place alongside other economic and innovative powerhouses such as “Denmark, Finland, Germany, and the Netherlands.”

Sweden also has the second most powerful passport in the world according to Henley and Partners, a citizenship and planning firm, allowing Swedes to visit 175 countries without a visa.

For people who want a good place to grow old in, Sweden is one of the best places in the world because life quality is very high for all the people according to the Global AgeWatch Index 2015. Swedes have “above average level employment levels” and “levels of educational attainment.”

The language skills of the Swedes are high with regards to English. English is the *lingua franca* of the international world. Therefore, it is an important aspect of being part of international community, whether in be in business or in diplomatic relations. In addition, it has a good reputation for being a “great place for families” and a “safe country for women.”

As previously noted, these indices are likely to work in association with each other and, together, mark Sweden as a high-ranking country for health and wellbeing of society and individuals.



# **“The Handmaid’s Tale,” Margaret Atwood, and the Modern World**

**April 19, 2017**

**Scott Douglas Jacobsen**

**Reuters Canada** recently reported on the modern world and “The Handmaid’s Tale” including an interview with acclaimed Canadian author Margaret Atwood.

Atwood said she did not have much “creative control over the latest adaptation of her dystopian novel, but she was “clear what she didn’t want.” This was that “That they not make a sort of soft porn film called ‘Maidens in Leather’ or something, which has always been a temptation to certain kinds of filmmakers.” Her novel was a near-future dystopia with the premise of a totalitarian state. In an additional premise, the fertile women are made sexual servants for the repopulation of the world. Women have no money, no literacy, and are forced to wear “modest” clothing with pervasive spying on every citizen, by other citizens too.

The novel was published in 1985 with subsequent republications. On April 26, Hulu will be premiering a television miniseries of it. Atwood is now 77. Her novel is not purely speculative fiction but based on real events in slices of human history, “...from Puritan society to environmental pollution, infertility, the fight for women’s rights, the Cold War, book burnings and slavery.”

“The Handmaid’s Tale” seemed remarkable and even “preposterous” at the time to Atwood. However, she said, “When politically inclined people say they want to do such and such, I always believe them, so why be surprised? Then the 2016 U.S. election happened and all this became much more immediate.”

Atwood is known as one of the foremost feminist authors in the world today. She considers women’s rights and civil rights “inextricably linked.” She sees women in the current era – the last 20 years – as complacent.

“People have forgotten that civil rights themselves had to be hard-fought for and have to be fought to maintain because someone is going to take them away from you if they get the chance... I think whole generations came along who didn’t have to fight for those things, and weren’t too worried,” she said.

When asked about society in the next 20 years and its possible ailments, she said, “That’s going to be your problem, because I’m going to be dead.”

# Artificial Intelligence Self-Taught Heart Diagnosis Outperforms Doctors

April 19, 2017

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

According to **Science** (AAAS), artificial intelligence taught itself how to diagnosis heart attacks and performs better than doctors. Doctors have tools. Now, they may have another.

The human body is complex. Heart attacks are a problem. Computers and doctors working together perform better than doctors alone. It has been reported that “scientists have shown that computers capable of teaching themselves can perform even better than standard medical guidelines, significantly increasing prediction rates.”

The novel method might save 1,000 to 1,000,000 of lives per annum. A vascular surgeon at Stanford University, Elsie Ross, said, “I can’t stress enough how important it is...and how much I really hope that doctors start to embrace the use of artificial intelligence to assist us in care of patients.”

More than 20,000,000 people die from cardiovascular disease every year, specifically, “heart attacks, strokes, blocked arteries, and other circulatory system malfunctions.” The issue is prediction. Doctors need better extrapolation from diagnostics to know the probabilities of heart attacks.

The American College of Cardiology/American Heart Association (ACC/AHA) describes the 8 main factors or variables in the risk of heart attacks including, “age, cholesterol level, and blood pressure—that physicians effectively add up.”

Biology is complex, as is the human body. The human body can prevent cardiovascular problems with fat at times and it depends. An epidemiologist from the University of Nottingham in the UK, Stephen Weng, said, “What computer science allows us to do is to explore those associations.”

The recent research by Wend used the ACC/AHA guidelines. They were put through the rigours. The rigours of 4 machine-learning algorithms. Each analysed human amounts of data: 378,256 patient profiles in the UK.

“First, the artificial intelligence (AI) algorithms had to train themselves. They used about 78% of the data—some 295,267 records—to search for patterns and build their own internal ‘guidelines.’”

The AI tested themselves on the records left out of the 295,267 taken out of the 378,256. “...They predicted which patients would have their first cardiovascular event over the next 10 years, and checked the guesses against the 2015 records.”

The machine-learning methods took 22 points of data to make the extrapolation such as kidney disease or ethnicity.

“The best [machine-learning algorithm]—neural networks—correctly predicted 7.6% more events than the ACC/AHA method, and it raised 1.6% fewer false alarms. In the test sample of about 83,000 records, **that amounts to 355 additional patients whose lives could have been saved.**” *Science* said.

A data scientist from the University of Manchester, Evangelos Kontopantelis, considered the work important with the possibility of leading to greater gains. “Going forward, Weng hopes to include other lifestyle and genetic factors in computer algorithms to further improve their accuracy.”

# Spherical Encoding of Information Between Earth and Mars

April 19, 2017

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

**Quanta Magazine** reported on the use of a sphere to be able to communicate with Mars. It is difficult to send messages to and from Mars.

There is the rover on Mars called Curiosity, or the Curiosity rover. When it finds something of interest to astro people, it sends a message to NASA. There's a catch. The binary message beamed to Earth has to do just that.

"The situation from Mars is an exaggerated version of what happens whenever a message is communicated through any noisy channel — be it from a flash drive to your computer or an air traffic control tower to an airplane."

It has to travel to Earth. The trip from Mars to Earth, or vice versa, is not easy. It is far. It can scramble the transmission. So the communication clarity can take time and the message can be worse by the time it gets from the source — on Earth — to the receiver — on Mars.

Once it comes to Earth, "...it's a game of telephone, as NASA engineers make their best guess about what Curiosity was trying to tell them. In each case, the receiver has to estimate what the sender meant to say."

The question arises about the feasibility of other means of communication. The Quanta Magazine article author posits a solution: "spherical code."

Information, rather than in binary, is encoded in a high-dimensional sphere. Spheres are not by necessity 3-dimensional. They have volume and 3-dimensionality in regular conceptualisations. Everyone went through school using area and its inherent 2-dimensionality to learn about spheres and their properties.

Spheres can exist, as with many higher-dimensional mathematical objects, in a large number of possible valuations while keeping basic formulations or axioms of their existence consistent. So spheres "can exist in any number of dimensions."

"Imagine, for example, that you'd like to transmit the word 'Mars.' To do this, you'd need to find some way of relating each letter to a coordinate on the sphere. While the mathematics behind spherical codes is more complicated than this, you could imagine, for example, that the word "Mars" maps to the point (13, 1, 18, 19) on a sphere in four-dimensional space."

Each letter, of course, corresponding to the linear countable numbers of those letters — a as 1, b as 2, o as 15, t as 20, and so on. Akin to 3-dimensionality with left-right, up-down, forward-backward, each has coordinates on the x, y, and z axes to provide indications as to the information about various points in the volume or on the surface of the sphere.

“The key, however, is to use only a limited number of points for encoding messages. As long as those points are spaced far enough apart, it’s unlikely that one point will end up being mistaken for another.”

So the received point will be more akin to the intended point which corresponds to the correct message. Communication becomes easier. Spherical higher-numeric dimensional encoding provides a means for improve communication methodologies between Earth and Mars, and vice versa.

# Making Perovskite Solar Cells Less Degradable and More Stable

April 20, 2017

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

A **Nature** article described the viability of a new form of solar cell. They are called perovskite solar cells.

There is an increase in the size and efficiency of the perovskite solar cells. 90% of the photovoltaic devices in use utilise crystalline silicon. It converts light into electricity from semiconductors.

However, these forms of photovoltaics are expensive. Also, the by-products from the technology are toxic. So the search for cheap and safe solar technology is onward.

“Perovskites could be a game-changer. These materials have crystal structures that are based on pyramid-like tetrahedral arrangements of atoms or molecules,” *Nature* said. “Long explored as potential semiconductors, superconductors and for their optical and magnetic properties, perovskites are also efficient at absorbing light and transporting charges — ideal properties for capturing solar power.”

They are both cheap and easy to assemble in addition to their efficiency in absorbing light. They are a major candidate in a crystalline silicon dominated marketplace. “Typically they combine common inorganic and organic components, often methylammonium or formamidinium, both compounds of carbon, hydrogen and nitrogen.”

The research into the perovskite solar cells has boomed in the last few years based on their viability to meet the increasing demands of energy and safer solar technologies than the current crystalline photovoltaic forms. In solution, they can be printed on glass or film over several square centimetres.

“In 2006, the first perovskite photovoltaic converted 2.2% of photons into electrons<sup>1</sup>; by 2016, that figure was 22.1%. Silicon rooftop panels have an efficiency of 16–20%; perovskite cells could in theory reach 31%. And even higher efficiencies might be achieved by combining silicon and perovskite devices.”

Perovskite has become a viable contender in that sense. In that, the conversion of photons into electrons is higher than the standard silicon rooftop panels, which are about 1/3 lower than the theoretical heights of perovskite solar cells.

Perovskite has problems, though. “The main one is stability: the cells currently only last for months outdoors, whereas silicon solar panels are usually guaranteed to work for at least 25 years.”



The weather and the extremes of it can deteriorate or degrade the perovskite solar cells more rapidly than the crystalline silicon ones with moisture as a major problem. The lifespans of the perovskite solar cells went from a few minutes to about a half of a year, recently.

So the authors of the article used this as the main point. That is, there needs to be more research into the potential for longevity of the perovskite solar cells to compete more fully with crystalline solar cells in durability, efficiency, ease of setup, and price-performance in general.

“Finding new stable materials requires interdisciplinary research and more funding. Theoretical physicists and materials scientists need to calculate and predict material properties; chemists and materials scientists to synthesise and study their properties; and engineers to develop devices.”

# **An Interview with Waleed Al-Husseini – Founder of Council of Ex-Muslims of France**

**April 20, 2017**

**Scott Douglas Jacobsen**

Waleed Al-Husseini founded the Council of Ex-Muslims of France. He escaped the Palestinian Authority after torture and imprisonment in Palestine to Jordan and then France. He is an ex-Muslim and atheist. Here is his story.

**Scott Jacobsen:** You were born in Palestine and live in France. There's a story about the transition in geography and ideas, and beliefs. You were a Palestinian Muslim. Now, you're an atheist and ex-Muslim living in France. You have a book coming out May 16, 2017 entitled, *The Blasphemer: The Price I Paid for Rejecting Islam*. Before getting to that point, what is your family religious background?

**Waleed Al-Husseini:** My family is Muslim Sunnah, like most Palestinian families, but they were normal, not fundamentalist, more humanistic than religious.

**SJ:** You are from Qalqilyah on the West Bank. What were the first moments of doubt in Allah?

**WA:** It started in my secondary school. I was thinking about free will in Islam because in the school we had to study Islam and Quran. I asked about my doubt to the teacher, but didn't get answers. I tried with some imam in Qalqilyah, but the response was that it was from Satan. They told me that I should go home and pray because these questions were from Satan. So I started reading by myself and from the library. All of the Islamic books. I started to discover a lot of things, which shocked me.

**SJ:** What seems like the best argument for atheism and against Islam to you?

**WA:** In Islam, there are a lot of things that make it one of the most weak religions. Since there are mistakes in the Quran, there are also things against human rights in the Quran, and for sure the situation of women in Islam. All these are arguments for atheism against Islam.

**SJ:** You wrote at the Qalqilyah Internet café. You were reported to the authorities for making Muslim citizens mad. Did your family and friends disown you? What were the most hurtful comments? How did you cope?

**WA:** My family knew that I was an atheist before I got arrested. They were thinking that I'm just young and I will become a Muslim once I grow up again. My friends stopped the friendship with me. When they found out I was an atheist, I had problems in university too. So I had to change the university to save my life. The most hurtful for me was when they insulted me by my mother and the family. My family has Muslims in it. They insulted them, but most comments as usual were insulting and mixing with threats for killing and death.

**SJ: Is this a common series of reactions for those that leave the faith in mind and heart, and then in deed?**

**WA:** Yes, for them, when you speak about Islam and atheism, they think you are paid from someone. That's why they threaten and insult. For them, it is not a personal choice to leave Islam.

**SJ: Why is the reaction so seemingly disproportionate against even a son, a brother, or a friend such as yourself?**

**WA:** Because this is always in the culture, this hurts me more than what they think, which, as I explained before, they think it's not a personal choice, and that you are being paid by others to destroy Islam. It is impossible to leave Islam by yourself because what we learn is that Islam is perfect. Even others envy us for this religion, this one of the biggest problems in teaching children. They brainwash children.

**SJ: You were a computer science student and a barber assistant – for your father. You wrote on the personal blog Noor al-Aqel or “Enlightenment of Reason.” What were the general topics? Why write there, and on those topics?**

**WA:** In my blog, in the beginning, my articles talked about my doubts because I was writing at that time to look for the truth. That's what I kept saying during all my articles, then I tried to put rocks in the calm water and speak about the taboo and that's what I did.

**SJ: You were arrested by the Palestinian Authority in October, 2010. The charge: (alleged) blasphemy against Islam in online writing – blog posts and Facebook. The arrest was an international note. What was the personal reaction 6/7 years ago for you?**

**WA:** I was arrested on the 2<sup>nd</sup> of November in 2010. My reaction in the beginning was like, “I don't understand why I'm arrested because I thought that Palestine is a secular state as it is openly declared.” I was wrong. I went through the military court.

**SJ: In imprisonment by the Palestinian Authority, there does not seem to have been a justification for it. You were in solitary confinement. This imprisonment went on for 11 months. You were tortured. For free expression, this happened to you. Foreign government and international attention placed pressure on the Palestinian Authority. You were paroled, then fled to Jordan first. Why Jordan?**

**WA:** Because Jordan is the only country I can be without visa, and in West Bank, there is no embassy for a European country. So I have to go to Jordan if I want ask for a visa, so I escaped to Jordan to acquire the visa.

**SJ: Next, you went to France. Why France from Jordan? What was the appeal of France?**

**WA:** I chose France in the beginning because they know my story well. The French government spoke about my story. I didn't want to lose time waiting for the visa and then have to prove my story. So it was really fast to have the French visa.

**SJ:** You founded the Council of Ex-Muslims of France on July 4, 2013. The date has significance. It “marked the torture and murder of young Frenchman Jean-François Lefevre de la Barre in 1766 for refusing to remove his hat while a religious procession passed by and was a reminder of the countless la Barres facing threats, torture, imprisonment and death for apostasy, blasphemy, heresy, atheism and refusing to comply with Islamist norms.”

**There were a number of prominent speakers there.[i] The speakers list and its foundation was an attempt to establish an “important step,” a prominent first step, in provision of a challenge to Islamism – the desire to impose political Islam over society – and apostasy laws as well as a defense for “free expression, freedom of belief and atheism and secularism.” What has been the organisation’s trials and tribulations in foundation, development, maintenance, and growth since that time?**

**WA:** Exactly, and we chose that date to show that we are similar like ex-Muslims, we are now more than 100 members who live in France. Most of us can't speak and be in public, even they live here in France, for the same reasons if they live in Islamic country.

**SJ:** What seem like the best means to combat far-Right ideologies such as white nationalism and Islamism?

**WA:** For me, the far-Right do not mean only European far-Right. What they call “Islamism” are far-Right too. For me, they are all the same, some far-Rights fight Islamism just for their own racists goals, but we fight Islamism for our human rights. That's why we are also against far-Right ideologies, even if they are use our speeches and words for their own goals.

**SJ:** Now, you advocate free speech and criticise Islam – as beliefs, purported divine revelatory scripture, and suggested practices for adherents. What makes free speech worth fighting for, even in the light of your previous imprisonment and torture?

**WA:** It's worth it to help our people live in peace, to let the different people like me not have to leave their own country, to make friends accept them and doesn't matter there beliefs, to try make the society for everyone, for secularism and respect.

**SJ:** What does France and Western Europe take for granted with respect to free speech?

**WA:** That you can say whatever you want about religion, criticise it, and speak openly.

**SJ:** Who is a favourite philosopher and writer in history, alive or dead?

**WA:** I like Voltaire.

**SJ: You wrote on the conspiratorial perspective of some Muslims. That is, individuals leaving Islam can be seen as an agent of a Western or Jewish State. What seems like the source of this conspiracy view?**

**WA:** Yes, because we are like spies to them, this comes from the Quran itself.

**SJ: What are the upcoming and ongoing initiatives for the Council of Ex-Muslims of France?**

**WA:** We have a conference in July in London for all ex-Muslims.

**SJ: Any feelings or thoughts in conclusion based on the discussion today?**

**WA:** Thank you.

**SJ: Thank you for your time, Waleed.**

**[i]** *Successful launch of Council of Ex-Muslims of France* (2013) said:

*Speakers at the packed event included founding members of the Council of Ex-Muslims of France Waleed Al-Husseini; Atica Samrah; Mehdi Lamrani; Elias Ben Amer and Soad Baba Aïssa of Association pour la mixité, l'égalité et la laïcité en Algérie. Other speakers included Council of Ex-Muslims of Britain's Maryam Namazie, Tunisian film-maker Nadia El-Fani; Secularist Caroline Fourest; Safia Lebdi of Insoumises; activist Fatou Sou; Mimouna Hadham; and Marieme Helie Lucas of Secularism is a Woman's Issue.*

Council of Ex-Muslims of Britain. (n.d.). Successful launch of Council of Ex-Muslims of France. Retrieved from <http://ex-muslim.org.uk/2013/07/successful-launch-of-council-of-ex-muslims-of-france/>.

# An Interview with Ariel Pontes—Chair of Americas Working Group

April 21, 2017

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

[Previously published in Humanist Voices]

Scott Jacobsen interviews Ariel Pontes who is the chair of the Americas Working Group (AmWG). In this interview, Scott and Ariel discuss humanism, Ariel's involvement in the humanist movement, his work with AmWG, working with IHEYO and the main threats and allies to humanism in Romania, the US and Latin America.

## **Tell us about your family background—to give some groundwork.**

My mom is a singer/actress, my father is a music graduate who became a tax officer when I was born. Everyone in my family is nominally Catholic and I was also baptised, but my family never went to church except for special occasions (wedding, baptism, etc.). Brazilian Catholicism, however, is very syncretic, and in the southeast of the country it is deeply influenced by **“Kardecist Spiritism”** (especially in my family), which is very popular but not a very organised new-age/christian-universalist religion. Everything I learned about spirituality was within a spiritist framework.

## **What is your preferred definition of humanism?**

“A movement that promotes secular ethics as a means to achieve peaceful coexistence between people of different social backgrounds in an increasingly diverse society.”

## **How did you find out about and become involved with the humanist movement?**

I have always been very interested in spirituality, the meaning of life and deep questions of this sort. In my teenage years, I talked a lot to my grandfather about the afterlife and communicating with the spiritual world, went to the meetings of his cult and watched all documentaries about the supernatural that aired on Discovery Channel (or similar channels). I quickly became obsessed with having first-hand supernatural experiences. I could never, however, experience anything more than sleep paralysis and semi-lucid dreaming, so I started wondering if the people who claimed to communicate with the spiritual world really weren't just fooling themselves and if the skeptics in the documentaries were right after all. I started challenging them, with the best of intentions, and proposing experiments to check if their experiences really were real, and I was met with excuses and antagonism. I eventually became an atheist and was very frustrated at religion. Years later I got tired of hearing arguments based on superstition when discussing ethics and politics and I started looking for groups that promoted secularism. I joined LiHS in Brazil but never got very involved. When I migrated to Romania, I went to atheist meet ups to meet locals and eventually joined ASUR and AUR (local Humanist NGOs). In a few months, I attended the Humanist Eastern European Conference and discovered Europe had a thriving Humanist movement incomparable with anything in Brazil. Since then, I became determined to

promote Humanism in developing countries such as Romania, Brazil and Latin America in general.

**What have been the main benefits of being a part of IHEYO?**

Being in contact with members of much more developed organisations and learning from them. I've learned a lot in a short period about what volunteers on the ground can do to promote Humanism and about the politics and bureaucratic aspects of growing as a member and exerting influence in a big organisation. The main benefit though is probably the sense of accomplishment of working towards something that I believe in and being able to see the fruits of my efforts.

**Now, you're the chair of the Americas Working Group (AmWG). What tasks and responsibilities come, or will come, with this position? What is the purpose of the AmWG?**

The purpose of the AmWG is to promote Humanism in the Americas, especially among youth.

The means by which we try to accomplish this are up to us to define. Our main strategy at the moment is to collect data about Humanism in the Americas and do knowledge transfer. We've created an **online form** where Humanists throughout the Americas can provide their contact info.

We then contact them and schedule video calls where we learn about their activities, structure, etc. and teach them about the successes and failures of more mature organisations, making suggestions when we think it's appropriate. Another long-term aim is to promote more international collaboration among organisations in the Americas, in particular Latin America.

We hope to eventually be able to organise a Pan American conference somewhere in Latin America. In the present, the AmWG administration is still disproportionately U.S. based.

**What are the main threats to the practice of humanism in Romania and in the Americas?**

The religious right and populist politics are a constant obstacle probably everywhere in the world. In Latin America, Catholic ethics and the anti-abortion narrative are very powerful. The rise of right-wing Evangelical Christianity, partly influenced by movements in the United States, is also a big problem in Brazil and has resulted in tensions with local African religions which are accused of witchcraft. Endemic criminality also contributes to scepticism towards human rights and the rule of law, which is extremely dangerous. In Romania, on the other hand, most problems seem to stem from a rural, traditional mentality. Difference and strong individuality is usually seen with skepticism and antagonism. Here, as opposed to Latin America, anti-LGBT discourse is a bigger problem than anti-abortion discourse, for example. The public funding of religion is another problem Romania faces. Humanists are divided when it comes to the solution to this problem. Some think we should fight to be recognised as a religion and get funds as equals, as is the case in Norway for example, but others think we should just fight to stop financing of religions altogether. I personally find the latter more unrealistically ambitious (though both are unrealistically ambitious).

**Who have been the most unexpected allies for the humanist movement in Americas?**

When I became active in the Humanist movement, I quickly realised it was an extremely Eurocentric movement. It is, of course, only natural for historical reasons, and this is not accusation, but I was a bit disappointed. Fortunately, however, I very quickly realised that the mostly Western European leadership was very aware of this and fighting to change it. Every time I meet Humanists in international events, I quickly feel they are allies. In the AmWG needless to say I am learning a lot from the U.S. Americans and I am grateful about how committed they are to helping Latin America. Unexpected is a strong word though, after all, I can't say I had pessimistic expectations. But I am positively surprised with how much focus the U.S. and Western Europe put in reaching out to the developing world.

**Thank you for your time, Ariel.**



# **An Interview with James Croft – Leader of The Ethical Society of St. Louis**

**April 21, 2017**

**Scott Douglas Jacobsen**

[Previously published in **Humanist Voices**]

Scott Jacobsen interviews James Croft about humanism, his involvement in The Ethical Society of St. Louis and his opinions on the main threats and allies to humanism in St. Louis and the US.

## [Was there a family background in humanism?](#)

I grew up in a nonreligious home, and although neither of my parents identified explicitly as humanists, humanist values were very much a part of how I was raised. Both my parents are extremely nonjudgmental and supportive of the fair and equal treatment of all people. They raised me to be open-minded, to love learning, to question authority, and to respect the humanity in everyone. We frequently enjoyed culture as a family, spending a lot of time in the theatre, art galleries, etc., and we traveled often. This instilled in me a love of world culture and a sense of cosmopolitanism which I believe to be central to the humanist worldview. They encouraged political participation and a sense of civic duty. In its own way, it was a very humanist upbringing.

## [What is your preferred definition of humanism?](#)

Humanism seeks to recognise and uphold the dignity of every person. It is a life-stance which asserts the ability of human beings to work together for the improvement of humanity, without the need for divine intervention. Humanists promote the values of reason, compassion, and hope: the ability of human beings to use our own intellect to make sense of the world; the equal dignity and worth of every person; and the ability of people to improve the world on our own.

## [How did you find and become involved with The Ethical Society of St. Louis?](#)

I began training as an Ethical Culture Leader (that's our word for the professional clergy who lead Ethical Societies) after visiting the New York Society for Ethical Culture while I was on the Humanist Institute's leadership training program. I was studying for my doctorate at the time, and travelling within the US, giving presentations on humanism, and I wanted to find a way to make humanist leadership into a career. When I discovered there are humanist congregations which bring people together to deepen their understanding of and commitment to humanism, I knew that's what I wanted to do with my life. I began my training with the American Ethical Union, and part of the training includes an apprenticeship at an Ethical Society. I moved to St. Louis to complete that apprenticeship, and then was hired as their Leader with responsibility for outreach. I feel very lucky: I'm one of very few people who are clergy for a truly humanist congregation.

## [What are your tasks and responsibilities as the leader of The Ethical Society of St. Louis?](#)

I am one of two Leaders—the other is Kate Lovelady, who has been leading the Society for more than ten years now. I play many of the roles of a clergy person in a religious congregation: I provide pastoral care for members, speak on Sundays, organise events for the community, lead educational workshops and discussion groups. I have particular responsibility for outreach, meaning I represent the Society and humanism in general in public events. I speak on panels, make presentations about humanism, visit college campuses etc. I am the professional public face of our community.

### [What are the main threats to the practice of humanism in St. Louis and the US now?](#)

I don't think there are major threats to the practice of humanism, in the sense that people can believe what they want and practice that as they wish. There are, however, major threats to the success of humanist values in culture. The US (and many European nations) is facing a very powerful populist right-wing movement currently which threatens to overwhelm political institutions and make the country more nationalistic, xenophobic, and closed-minded. Trump—and the political forces which swept him to the presidency—represents a grave threat to the humanist ideals of international cooperation, respect for science, equal treatment of people, and religious freedom. All across the wealthy west, people's baser natures are reaching for the controls. People are afraid of their economic condition and tired of a political system which doesn't serve them, and are looking to strongmen who promise a return to national glory. The parallels with the pre-war era are extremely worrying. The humanist movement must work extremely hard to help people resist these trends.

### [Who have been the most unexpected allies for ethical societies and the humanist movement in North America?](#)

My strongest allies have been liberal religious clergy who understand the importance of crafting and presenting a powerful moral vision of society. Although we disagree over theology, these clergy understand the humanist project as an essentially cultural one, and since we share many of the same values, we are often together at rallies and events trying to promote a hopeful vision of society. I've been amazed by how principled and hardworking many liberal clergy are: I count them among my closest allies.

# The Female Medical Pioneers of 1885

April 21, 2017

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

**Danny Dutch Photography** published a report with an image of the first women doctors from Syria, India, and Japan.

These women were medical pioneers and the photo is from the Women's Medical College of Pennsylvania (WMCP) in 1885. These are medical students. They are wearing the "traditional clothes from their home countries."

The original image can be found in the Drexel University archives. The archivist Matt Herbison found out more about the women medical pioneers. Each graduated and was the first for each of the countries. The Indian woman, Anandibai Joshi, was a high-caste Brahmin woman and married at age 9 to a man aged 29.

The 29-year-old husband was a progressive given the era. He encouraged the Indian woman's education, or his wife's – Joshi's – education. Joshi was determined to become a doctor based on the death of a 10-day old baby. Joshi was only 14 at the time of having the baby.

There were obstacles to get to America including "caste and tradition, and a lack of money and connections." Some think that she might be the first Hindu to set foot on American soil. Unfortunately, the Indian woman, Joshi contracted, tuberculosis and died at age 21. She is considered a hero among Indian feminists as well.

The WMCP was attractive to foreign students that wanted to study medicine who could not within their own national territory.

The Japanese, Keiko Okami, went against the traditional expectations of women in the society and traveled independently to the US. Okami found out how to pay for both board and tuition while in the US.

For the era, America was seen as an exceptional 19th-century country by the author of the article. Okami went back to Tokyo and was appointed head of gynecology at one of the main hospitals in Japan.

However, the Emperor refused to receive her during a visit to the hospital. She resigned a few years later. She went to a private practice following this. She died at the age of 81.

Sabat Islambouli, from Syria, went back to Damascus to complete her degree. In 1919, she was on the alumnae list for the college, however, the college had lost touch with her. It is unknown as to what happened to Islambouli.

The WMCP was able to produce this image of the first Indian, Japanese, and Syrian women medical pioneers.

“Besides the international students, it also produced the nation’s first Native American woman doctor, Susan LeFlesche, while African-Americans were often students as well. Some of whom, like Eliza Grier, were former slaves.”

# Atheists and Highly Religious People Fear Death the Least

April 21, 2017

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

According to a **new study**, those least likely to fear the end of life are atheists and the hyper-religious, or fundamentalists. Fundamentalists interpret scripture as literal, without metaphor, while atheists view an afterlife as less-than-plausible, usually.

So those without a fear of dying are similar on this factor, but different in other fundamental ways. The least and most religious, or the atheists and fundamentalists, were the least afraid of dying. The fear of dying has been termed “death anxiety.”

Researchers examined the issue with non-believers and believers – of various creeds. Based on the research, those that believed in a formal faith for the “social and emotional benefits” turned out to be the most afraid of death.

Death anxiety, as the “persistent fear of one’s own demise,” is associated with high religiosity and irreligiosity.

While those with motivation from “true belief” were the least fearful of dying, the atheists of the research grouping appeared to find a certain “comfort in death” and were not scared of it. Those unafraid of death did not seek religion.

Death anxiety, as the “persistent fear of one’s own demise,” is associated with high religiosity and irreligiosity. The higher levels of death anxiety were found in those who look for the “pragmatic conditions.”

“‘Meta-analyses are statistical procedures used to extract and combine the findings of multiple studies,’ explained Dr Jonathan Jong, a research associate at the Institute of Cognitive and Evolutionary Anthropology and Research Fellow at Coventry University.”

18% of self-identified religious individuals were afraid of the end of life. Experts from the University of Oxford researched the issue. It was in collaboration with a number of other universities such as Oxford, Coventry, Royal Holloway, Gordon College, Melbourne University and Otago University.

18% of self-identified religious individuals were afraid of the end of life.

“The meta-analysis showed that while people who were intrinsically religious enjoyed lower levels of death anxiety, those who were extrinsically religious revealed higher levels of death anxiety.”

To reach their results, Jong and his team used 100 relevant articles that were published between 1961 and 2014 with information about 26,000 people worldwide.

The effects on death anxiety were found in similar things such as “belief in God, and an afterlife, or religious behaviour like going to church, and praying.” There are other studies that made a distinction between intrinsic and extrinsic religiosity.

“Extrinsic religiosity is when religious behaviour is motivated by pragmatic considerations such as the social or emotional benefits of following a religion, whereas intrinsic religiosity refers to religious behaviour driven by ‘true belief’.”

One controversial **study** claimed that atheism might be on its death throes, or “on the verge of dying out.” Half of the research found that fear of death and religiosity had no link. Now, the relationship between death anxiety and level of religiosity was found to be a non-fixed or a dynamic quantity. Different from context to context.

Malaysian and United States researchers found religious groups have a tendency to preach against contraceptive use. In turn, atheists have fewer children than the religious.

In Malaysia, Muslim families had an average of 5.89 children and 4.29 in the US. The second most fertile parents in Malaysia were Hindus with 4.01 children – but this was a small sample of only five students.” Malaysian atheists had 3.67 children.

There appears to be a mixed picture for the association between religiosity and death anxiety. The studies were conducted throughout the world. So the finding of the patterns from religion to religion or culture to culture is hard.

Rather than assuming that religiosity is either positively or negatively related to death anxiety, some researchers have posited that the relationship is like an upside-down U shape, with religious believers and disbelievers showing less death anxiety than people in between.

The University of Helsinki study found that religious people have a poorer understanding of the world. People who believe in God are more likely to think inanimate objects such as metal and oil can think and feel.

“Researchers say that the findings suggest people’s lack of understanding about the physical world means they apply their own rules, ‘resulting in belief in demons, gods, and other supernatural phenomena’.”

The research participants were asked about their belief in an “an all-powerful, all-knowing, loving God,” ghosts, and psychic powers. They were then tested on their comprehension of basic biology and on their intuitive physics.

Religious people act on instinct rather than analytic skills the tests found out, more often than not. “Out of the 100 studies, the team only found 11 studies that were robust enough to test this idea; however, of these, almost all (10) formed this pattern.”

## Politics News in Brief – April 22nd, 2017

April 22, 2017

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

### **British government ‘realises mistake of Brexit’**

**The Irish Times** stated that the British government is beginning to realise the harm it will do to itself from leaving the EU. That Brexit is “an act of great self-harm,” where the upcoming negotiations seek for damage control now, according to a top Brexit official.

The official, John Callinan, said on Thursday, “I see signs in the contacts that we’re having, both at EU level and with the UK, of a gradual realisation that Brexit in many ways is an act of great self-harm, and that the focus now is on minimising that self-harm.”

Second secretary-general of the department of the Taoiseach, stated this at a Brexit seminar put together by Siptu and Impact. Both are trade unions.

### **Rowing champion speaks on virtues of Cuba and North Korea**

According to **The Washington Times**, an Olympic rowing champion made favourable comments on Cuba and North Korea. James Cracknell, the Olympian and budding U.K. politician, said that they have good control over the overweight problems in each country.

He wants to become a Conservative Party MP in 2020. He seemed positive around the fact that those countries can affect real behavioural change in their respective citizenry. This was stated during an interview with Sky News.

“If you think of the two countries that have a handle on obesity, what do you think they are?” he asked. “North Korea and Cuba...They’re quite controlling on behavioral trend...It’ll have to be worked and you’ll have to get people to buy into it,” he rhetorically replied.

### **The Safe Passage initiative and the transfer of children**

**The Mirror** said, “Charities and MPs have called on the government to rescue children with links to the UK from the Dunkirk refugee camp, which was destroyed by fire last night. The French camp was ravaged by a blaze overnight, leaving hundreds of people homeless.”

80 children with relatives in the UK were identified by the Safe Passage initiative in Britain. The children do have a legal right to transfer into another country. The Safe Passage project is run by British citizens. It urged the Ministers to speed up their transfer.

“Labour MP Yvette Cooper said: ‘France and Britain need to work together to get these children to safety immediately. Bring back the fast track system now. If they have family in the UK they should be brought here straight away – that’s the rules.’”

## Science News in Brief – April 22nd, 2017

April 22, 2017

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

### **Asteroid hits Earth 11,000BC**

**The Telegraph** has reported on the news that experts at the University of Edinburgh analysed mysterious symbols carved into stone pillars at **Gobekli Tepe** in southern Turkey, to find out if they could be linked to constellations.

The old stone carvings, based on the researchers, confirm a comet striking the Earth at about ~11,000BC. The asteroid is hypothesised to have wiped out the woolly mammoths. Civilisations rose shortly thereafter.

The engravings appear to align with not only the asteroid impact, but also when the mini-ice age took place, which is reported to have changed the “course of human history.”

### **Physicists experiment and observe “negative mass”**

**BBC News** has reported on the story that scientists have created a fluid with the property of “negative mass.” It accelerates towards the force pushing against it rather than away from the force.

In the everyday world, when an object is pushed, it accelerates in the same direction as the force applied to it; this relationship is described by Isaac Newton’s Second Law of Motion. But in theory, matter can have negative mass in the same sense that an electric charge can be positive or negative.

A professor at Washington State University, Peter Engels, and others reduced the temperature to rubidium to slightly above absolute zero, which is about -273C, and created a Bose-Einstein condensate.

### **Gates: ‘terrorists could kill 30 million people’**

**The Telegraph** reports that Bill Gates commented on the possibility of current or future terrorism based on engineered deadly biology such as deadly pathogens with the ability to kill as many as 30 million people.

He spoke at the Royal United Services Institute in London (RUSI). The respiratory bioterrorism could be more lethal than a nuclear attack. So the speech was a call for prevention of a potential global tragedy and or monitoring diseases.

“Bioterrorism is a much larger risk than a pandemic,” he said. “All these advances in biology have made it far easier for a terrorist to recreate smallpox, which is a highly fatal pathogen, where there is essentially no immunity remaining at this point.”



## Religion News in Brief – April 22nd, 2017

April 22, 2017

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

### Get the old-time religion out of politics

The **Courier Journal**'s Linda Allewalt argues that we don't need any old-time religion, and stated, "Obama felt that Democrats needed to stop being shy about witnessing their religious beliefs. He changed his approach to religious expression in the political arena."

Previous American president Barack Obama gradually expressed less personal religious perspectives through church and state separation. Indeed, "his ideas have influenced many Democrats."

There began to be faith outreach staff for the Democrats in campaigns. Chaplains would start political rallies with their prayers. He spoke in more churches. He even appeared on the stage with Rev. Rick Warren.

Allewalt noted, "The efforts to convince voters that the Democrats represent a more "true" interpretation of what being Christian entails has been fruitless and has worked to weaken the Establishment Clause. So too has the attempt to tie ethical and moral ideas solely to religion, which Fitzsimmons does as well. It enforces stereotypes of non-religious people as having no foundation for morality, which in turn encourages discrimination against them."

### Religion's recession in the young

**MarketWatch** states that numerous studies, and research in general, are showing young people losing their religion in much larger numbers than their elders or parents. Religion has been losing its grip with each subsequent generation.

"In the 2015 **Pew Research Center report on religion** and public life, 36% of 21- to 27-year-olds are classified as unaffiliated, a far higher proportion than among their parents' (17%) or grandparents' (11%) generations. "

The majority of emerging adults feel as though the mere acceptance of their parents' religious belief is not an acceptable thing. Youth will modify, reject, or possibly confirm their faith claims in their individuated search.

### Religion and science viewed as one to many Native Americans

According to the **Religion News Service**, Native Americans do not have an explicit separation in perspective, in general, between religion and science. Science and religion are seen as compatible.

The relationship between Native Americans and formal scientists has been a "contentious one" in the past because the face value is that religion is more important to Native Americans than science. This is not necessarily true.

"For many Native Americans, like my grandmother, myth and medicine, religion and science, are not viewed as separate, but are interwoven into the fabric of our lives."

# **An Interview with John Perkins, Secular Party of Australia**

**April 24, 2017**

**Scott Douglas Jacobsen**

*John Perkins is the President of the Secular Party of Australia. The party is intended to promote secular humanist ethical principles in Australia as well as advocate for the separation of church and state.*

## **What's your own story? How did you get involved in secularism?**

My father was not religious, but my mother took us to church. It was not because she was devout, but because it was considered a social duty.

## **Was there much of a family background?**

My sisters were married in churches, but after that our family gave up religion. I think the doctrines seemed contrived and lacked credibility.

## **How did you first get interested in politics? What was the moment of political awakening for you?**

I first began to have an interest in politics about the age of 16 when I began to feel I had a different view of politics to that of my parents. However, it was not until the events of September 11, 2001 that I became resolved to try to counter what I perceived as the egregiously negative effects that religions could have on society.

## **You are the president of the Secular Party of Australia. What are some core initiatives, campaigns, and policies of the Secular Party of Australia? Those that should be noted for those outside of the Secular Party of Australia, within the international secularist community, to support the Secular Party of Australia.**

The Secular Party in Australia is the only party that stands not only for a true separation of religion from the institutions of state, but also to defend human rights, particularly the rights of children, against all forms of religious interference. To this end, the Secular Party has a policy to end all state funding to religious schools, and further, to prohibit any form of religious indoctrination in schools. Children should be free to make up their own minds about religion, and they should be able to do this in the knowledge that the founding claims of all religions are contradicted by scientific and historical evidence.

## **In the media, some aspects of political life are 'attack ads' or targeted, aggressive advertisement campaigns with the purpose of demonization of a party candidate—or a party as a whole. Have you been subjected to these at all? Has the Secular Party of Australia?**

Of course our policies are criticised from those with a religious perspective. Surprisingly however, the most aggressive attacks against us come from those of a liberal view who regard any criticism of the religion of Islam as objectionable. Our policies apply equally to all religion. However, some religions do pose more of a threat to the secular ideal than others. Ideologically, Islam is anti-secular, as it perceives the state and all else to be subservient to the religion. Naturally we have cause on occasion to mention such contradictions. However, any critique of religion, however worded, is seen by some as being an attack on believers, and therefore as malicious, bigoted, racist and in similar pejorative terms. Such bigotry, no doubt does exist. Hence, we have difficulty in explaining that our motives are unbiased and humanitarian.

**Being an out-and-out nonbeliever, or just secularist, in the public forum within political life can threaten one's professional reputation in some countries, is this an issue in Australia? How many closet atheists, agnostics, and freethinkers do you think are currently in public office?**

Being known as an atheist or agnostic is not, in itself, a political liability in Australia. Several of our Prime Ministers have professed agnosticism and this has not been seen as an issue. However, none of them have had the inclination or the courage to act on their agnosticism in any way to reduce the power and influence, and the financial largesse, that religions are afforded. There is probably a representative number of freethinkers in public office, but the political influence of the religious appears to be increasing. This is a paradox, because apart from certain groups, religiosity in the population is declining.

**Who have been political heroes in Australia for you?**

I have had particular Prime Ministers who at the time I regarded as heroes, but later came to realise that there were serious flaws in some of their policies, so I no longer regard any as heroes.

**Who has advocated for secular values the most within Australian public life?**

There is no politician that has ever advocated secular values in a coherent and substantial manner. It is left to the freethought groups to provide secular advocacy.

**How can people get involved with the Secular Party of Australia, even donate to them?**

People can become involved with the Secular Party via our web site, which includes a donations page, and which also has links to our facebook page.

<https://www.secular.org.au/secular-party-donations/>

**Any closing thoughts or feelings based on the discussion today?**

In times of increased religious conflict and division, the need for secularism has never been greater. When “fake news” proliferates, and a “post truth” and “post fact” world is proclaimed, the need for the truth to be carefully evaluated and respected has never been greater. In this regard, the widely held but often counter-factual beliefs of religions also need to be addressed. Religions are the original and the most institutionalised form of “post fact” beliefs.

**Thank you for your time, John.**

## **An Interview with Jason Frye – Chief Executive Officer, Secular Policy Institute**

**April 24, 2017**

**Scott Douglas Jacobsen**

**So, tell us briefly about your background, in terms of how you first found secularism. Not necessarily as a tacit thing, but as an explicit thing, where separation of church and state is important as a fundamental value.**

I was born in Lincoln, Nebraska. My experience was heavily influenced by growing up gay in Nebraska in the 1980's and 90's. The 80s were not so easy for LGBT+ people in the Midwest at that time. They are getting better, but are still not that great. The peculiar thing I noticed growing up is how orthodox, Evangelical, conservative, authoritarian, religious structures have such a pernicious effect on the experience of gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender people.

They're so rigid. They are very repressive for the most part. They are very, very intolerant towards people who don't exactly fit the mould, keeping in mind that not all religious institutions and individuals that even overlap with the broader context of what I am referring to necessarily apply in that manner, but, in general, when you're growing up gay in Nebraska in the 1980's and before then, you have a lot of resistance from church doctrine and religious people.

The narrative at the time was that being gay was considered a major aberration. Although, things have changed wildly and rapidly in the last several years, and when you grow up white, working class or middle class, there's a narrative that you're fed: that if you follow certain rules, life will be good for you. And you are placed with some substantial obstacles where just being who you are is considered deviant. And part of your natural characteristics are seen to make you ineligible from experiencing the benefits of what you were promised.

And in a state that is relatively homogeneous, and at the time was even more so, you have the privilege of noticing the fundamental disconnect compared to other people with more obvious connections to being part of a mainstream group. I think that coupled with the fact that I think I grew up nominally Christian. I think that not having a firm, strong, blatant religious experience that I was confronted with every single day.

That connected with the fundamental disconnect. I think that opened my eyes, not just in my own experience, but the experience of others as well. On top of that, growing up gay in high school, I was part of a mostly African-American gospel music-centred chorus in my high school. We were heavily involved with the NAACP. And I bet I am just rambling at this point. [Laughing]

**It's okay [Laughing].**

This gave me a major perspective shift, and so, I got involved with LGBT rights early on as a teenager. I remember also that there was a protest outside the state capital. I grew up in Lincoln, Nebraska. There was a protest outside the state capital, and it was on a change in the state

constitution that was going to change marriage eligibility for same-sex couples. My picture was the prominent picture of the main section of the local paper.

My grandmother saw it and got a little mad at me. She said, “I think our friends will see that.” I said, “I hope they do.” So I got involved in LGBT politics. Part of that intersection, I met someone that was active in the local humanist group when I moved to San Diego. He was active in the local gay community. He was an early, early on gay activist, from the 70’s forward. He invited me to a humanist meeting. I started getting involved, and from LGBT rights movement to getting involved with the local humanist group. I shifting my focus from gay rights specific to more atheism.

This was kind of on the leading edge of the New Atheist movement. It was brewing in the 2000’s. I became heavily active with atheism and secular humanist activism. With that, I became the president of the Humanist Association of San Diego. I became terribly active in my community. I became the only person to deliver humanist invocations to the San Diego city council. We participated with a lot of marches and activism against Proposition 8.

I was active in both. I became Mr. Gay Pride 2005. I got involved with the American Humanist Association and became the first coordinator of the LGBT Humanist Council. Later, they upgraded that to a new position. In this process, what lead me to secularism, and a different perspective than atheism or secular humanism, I was the first person in my family to go to college. In that process, I decided to do political science.

And I had some extra time on my hands. I picked up a second major, which was religious studies. In religious studies, I became heavily interested in the sociological perspectives on religion and secularism. Not just to try to take on and destroy religion, or try to convert people to atheism, but to deeply understand why people come up with religious perspectives and the various intersects with political opinion concerning the separation of church and state, the perspective on minorities, the people formerly in out groups, etc.

In that process, I had incredible professors. One is an expert on secularism. I have developed, I think, a more broad and inclusive of secularism for myself to look at the world through because when you study religion you study religion, philosophy, history, and political science etc.

Through my experience growing up, through my experience in activism with LGBT and humanism and atheism, and going the academic route, this is what lead me.

It was a messy, messy, windy road, but I guess I went from activist to academic. That’s how I got where I am now.

**Also, you’re a humanist celebrant.**

I am a humanist celebrant!

**That makes me think of the descriptions you’ve provided of various aspects of fundamentalist religious upbringings and doctrine, and how people can be excluded. In**

**very intimate settings, in ceremonies, what denominations or sects appear to have the greatest amount of inclusion for those that, historically, have been marginalised and demonised groups, or individuals that would attach themselves to groups?**

This is a wonderful question! I love this question. So I guess the biggest thing I can say is it depends, and the majority of world religions. In Islam, there is an increasing edge of inclusion in a lot of circles at the same time with this current rise of nationalist populism. There's a major rise in conservative orthodoxy. Same with Christianity. Same with Judaism. What I mention about my academic background, the thing that I learned was that religious institutions have to respond to the changing world. Otherwise, they die.

If we look at Christianity, we can say there are groups that are heavily inclusive and there are others that are not heavily inclusive. From my perspective on this, the ones that are the most inclusive of LGBT people are the Unitarians. The Unitarians are very inclusive. Humanists and ethical culture tend to be very inclusive. That's what we pride ourselves on. A lot of these things that divide us are from older ideas, if they are from a larger religious group.

If they are from a smaller religious group, there is this protective aspect of keeping the group from being wiped out. The Druze, for example, they don't even let outsiders know about the deeper aspects of their particular religious experience, but the groups that tend to be more inclusive, Like I said Unitarians and humanists. These are groups that have a particular worldview from ethical culture. The motto is "deed not creed."

I think Unitarians, humanists, and increasingly more Liberal sects of the different major religions are more and more going for that because they have to correspond in response to the people in the here-and-now. I think that this is one of my aspects in my own conceptions of secularism that are exhibited by looking at this particular situation. It is the fact that you have these Liberal-progressive groups that completely bypass what the text says.

You have particular values, particular values that are indicative of the human condition. When these come in conflict with the doctrines, usually, the doctrines get put to the side. We can look at Christianity, for example, with all of the prohibitions against witchcraft. We no longer burn witches for the most part. Certain places and certain sects do, but we change because we're people.

**You are the chief executive officer for the Secular Policy Institute. What is it? What do you do, and what fulfilment comes from undertaking this position?**

I am the CEO. What the Secular Policy Institute has two main aims, we are a policy advocacy organisation and we're a think tank. We're more heavily geared towards our policy advocacy focus. We look at situations around the world, whether human rights violations or where there are instances of policy articulation, development, implementations, and legislation that involves a separation between religion and government.

We create advocacy letters and sign onto them. We are a coalition of 300 groups around the planet who agree that there needs to be a separation between church and state and agree with the



principles in the UN Declaration of Human Rights. After we develop our advocacy letters, we will solicit our coalition members for their signatures, and then we connect with decision-makers, ambassadors, legislators, heads of state to promote necessary policy shifts or to contribute to the dialogue.

We also meet with different coalitions, government agencies, to add that particular secular perspective. From our think tank, we are increasing with that. We are increasing our work in writing policy briefs and white papers. We have around 30 distinguished fellows who are the leaders in their particular fields, e.g. linguistics, climate change, philosophy, biology, etc, etc. Once per year, we produce a World Futures Guide to look towards a better future from the minds of think tank.

What fulfilment comes from the Secular Policy Institute is the change that we actually make, and to give voice for more vulnerable people, for example, we saved the lives of 9 people in Nigeria last year. One of our current projects is we're also helping the bloggers in Dhaka and Bangladesh who are under fire. This has been a major problem. *The New York Times*, the *Wall Street Journal*, the BBC have covered this issue. We are active in helping these people re-locate who are under immediate threat, and just making a difference, and not just for myself, but facilitating that channel so that just the average, ordinary person who feels like they can't be involved and effectuate positive change.

It is helping them so they can accomplish good things. For example, we have one person in San Diego who contacted us for some assistance in some direct lobbying that she wanted to do. She is a school teacher. She is a former school administrator. She is a scientist. She is also a concerned mother. She wants to alter the education code to make the Pledge of Allegiance not a necessarily a mandatory exercise because you have a policy requiring a daily patriotic exercise because the term that was added to the Pledge of Alliance of the United States in 1954, "One Nation Under God," that can be rather divisive at the same time.

What has been said in court cases many, many times is that when the government engages in the business of combining church and state, it sends a message to believers that they are political insiders and nonbelievers that they are political outsiders. We helped the teacher and mother who is going into kindergarten and starting the process in the public school. We helped her with the policy brief.

She met with three state assembly people, just yesterday. Just helping people in their everyday lives advocate and make connections, and lobby the government directly to change things, it is the key core element in the democratic process, which makes the democratic process thrive. Helping contribute to democracy, helping people get involved, and being that catalyst to facilitate deeper involvement, I think that is probably the most rewarding aspect of being the CEO of an organisation like the Secular Policy Institute because it is so vital.

**What the single best way people can get involved with the Secular Policy Institute?**

**Email us!**



**Thank you for your time, Jason.**

Thank you so much!

# **An Interview with Kim Gibson – President of Mississippi Humanist Association**

**April 24, 2017**

**Scott Douglas Jacobsen**

**What makes a good humanist?**

A good human! In all seriousness, I believe a good humanist is someone that cares for and helps people, and seeks to better the world we live in as a whole.

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

I am not sure of what the “mainstream” definition of humanism is, so I am not sure if I line up with it or not. I do subscribe to the American Humanist Association’s “official” definition of Humanism – “Humanism is a progressive philosophy of life that, without theism and other supernatural beliefs, affirms our ability and responsibility to lead ethical lives of personal fulfilment that aspire to the greater good of humanity.” Doing good is its own reward. I believe I align pretty closely to the activist goals of the American Humanist Association, as well.

**What was your experience of becoming, of living, as a humanist?**

Looking back, I have always attempted to live a “humanist” type life, seeking to do no harm and assist others with no thought of any supernatural deity, reward or punishment. However, I really did not become aware of actual “humanism”, per se, until just a few years ago.

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

I hesitate to speak or generalise for others. However, Mississippi is a very religious state, and some people, upon leaving their religion, may find humanism appealing. It encourages a positive outlook towards oneself and others, and seeks to do good for others just as a matter of course, not because of any supernatural threat or promise.

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

For myself, the fact that humanism is geared toward a positive view of humans building a better life together, and the fact that humanism is rooted in tangible fact, evidence and experience, not in faith, is the best reason for humanism.

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

I do believe the “younger” population in America is more open to and accepting of humanism/humanists. I certainly hope so, as that acceptance by the young is the future of humanism.

**You are the president of Mississippi Humanist Association, becoming president on February 12, 2017. What are your hopes for the organisation?**

My hopes for the Mississippi Humanist Association (MHA) include sustained membership growth, and the development of a strong secular community here in Mississippi, so we may support one another and help others in our communities. I also hope that we can educate the general public about humanism, as humanism is generally unknown or misunderstood in Mississippi.

**What are the expected tasks and responsibilities that will come, and simply come, with being the president?**

At this early stage, I can only really say what I believe to be my responsibilities are with regard to the position of President. I believe a primary responsibility of the President to visible, advocating for the organisation and our values. I believe it is my responsibility to represent the members of this organisation in a way that they feel is appropriate and reflects positively upon us as an organisation, as well as work with my fellow board members to continue and improve our current activities and serve our members and community.

**Before becoming president, you were part of the board of directors (communications & vice president) since 2015. Given that you’re moving into your third official year, you are, in essence, one of the founding members. How did those roles prepare you to be president?**

I am a charter member of the Mississippi Humanist Association. In 2014, we started laying the foundation for the official organisation, by developing bylaws, incorporating as a charity and becoming a chapter of the American Humanist Association. In serving in the roles of Board Member, Vice-President and Communications since the beginning, I believe those roles helped me to understand how important clear and consistent communication is to our organisation’s continued growth and success. Communication with our current members, prospective members, and with the general public is a large part of our activity and drives any continued support we may enjoy.

**What have been the major developments and transitions for the organisation?**

Well, at this early stage, our continued existence and growth in Mississippi is a major development! I believe we are still “finding our footing” as an organisation, and we hope to continue to transition into a solid statewide secular group in Mississippi, by building a strong secular community, educating the public about humanism and contributing to the common good.

**What are the popular community activities provided by Mississippi Humanist Association?**

As stated before, Mississippi is a VERY religious place, and we believe it is important to offer humanists in Mississippi opportunities to get together and socialise. Humanists in Mississippi are at a great disadvantage when it comes to meeting other humanists, as humanists don't have a church on every corner. We sponsor a brunch and a happy hour monthly in the Jackson, MS area, so our members and prospective new members can get together and enjoy some like-minded secular company. Many humanists in Mississippi unfortunately still feel it is necessary to keep their humanist/atheist beliefs secret or "closeted", because of the very real fear of retaliation on the job, or some possible backlash from their friends and/or family members. Because of this, we also sponsor a "secret" local Meetup group for atheists and humanists so they may get together and discuss topics important to them without fear of any judgement or retaliation. The MHA also holds food drives, book drives and school supply drives for charities in our community. We hope to expand these activities state wide eventually.

**What are some of the demographics of Mississippi Humanist Association? Who is most likely to join Mississippi Humanist Association? (Age, sex, sexual orientation, and so on.)**

I believe our oldest member is 75 years old, we have college age members, and all ages in between. We have some members from other countries, however, we demographically skew to the somewhat more "older, whiter" side, and we hope to do more effective outreach to other demographic groups here in Mississippi.

**What have been the largest activist and educational initiatives provided by Mississippi Humanist Association? Out of these, what have been honest failures and successes?**

So far, our activist and educational opportunities have been limited, we still have a bit of learning to do on that front. We are working on finding appropriate opportunities and taking advantage of them. One could say that just our existence here in Mississippi is an activist initiative, given the extremely conservative political and religious climates here. We have had a table at a local monthly public festival where we would introduce the general public to humanism, as humanism is usually unknown or misunderstood in Mississippi, and it went well. We are bringing a fairly well known atheist speaker to the area in May, so we are looking forward to that.

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

I believe human nature is the greatest threat to whatever humanist "movement" there may be. Overcoming, or at least policing some of our human traits that lead to political infighting, tribalism, fear of the humanist as "other" – these are challenges to be acknowledged and addressed.

**How can people get involved with Mississippi Humanist Association, even donate to it?**

If you are in the Jackson, MS area, join us at one of our monthly events. The best way to support our efforts is to become a member, or donate online. For more information, please visit us at our **website**, where you can join or donate. Also, check us out on **Facebook**, **Twitter**, and **Meetup** for more information. All donations are greatly appreciated and are always used to

further the cause of humanism in Mississippi, and to help us to build a strong secular community throughout Mississippi.

**Thank you for your time, Kim.**

Scott, thank you for your time and interest!

# Q&A on the Philosophy of Economics with Dr. Alexander Douglas – Session 1

April 24, 2017

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

Dr. Alexander Douglas specialises in the history of philosophy and the philosophy of economics. He is a faculty member at the University of St. Andrews in the School of Philosophical, Anthropological and Film Studies. In this series, we will discuss the philosophy of economics.

**Scott Jacobsen:** In correspondence with Dr. Stephen Law, completion of an interview, and then completion of the first Q&A on Philosophy with him, I reached out to him for a recommendation. He recommended you. Your specialty is the philosophy of economics, as noted in correspondence. This might seem confusing, as if an expertise in economics, as I thought – wrongly. So what is the philosophy of economics?

**Dr. Alexander Douglas:** I don't have expertise in building economic models, collecting economic data, or any of the things economists specialise in doing. I'm not a good person to ask about the economic effects of Brexit, or of raising the minimum wage, or of changing the tax code, or anything like that.

I'm interested in tracing out the meanings of economic concepts. Words like "money," "capital," "debt," "wealth," and so on are used to great effect in public discourse. But when we look closely, they are often used in equivocal, confused, and contradictory ways.

I also look at the logical coherence of economic models. Economists often claim to have tested their theories against the data, thus discouraging criticism from non-economists who don't know the data as well. But the job of the philosopher is always to ask: *what* have you tested against the data? Some theories suffer from logical inconsistencies that make it unclear regarding what it even means to say that they have been empirically tested. If I propose that all tall men are short, it's hardly reassuring to know that I have tested my theory against the data. How would that work?

**SJ:** How did this interest in the philosophy of economics originate for you?

**AD:** I've always been interested in economics, but I began writing on it around 2011. I was becoming increasingly annoyed at the way, as I saw it, politicians and the media were using the concept of debt in an unreflective and illogical way to manipulate the public. I wrote my book, *The Philosophy of Debt*, in an attempt to clarify the concept and reduce its undeserved rhetorical power.

My main specialisation is in the history of philosophy, recently with an emphasis on the history of logic. But in a way, the history of economics is part of the history of logic. Many of the founders of modern economics were logicians – Stanley Jevons, for example, and John Maynard Keynes in a way. Even Adam Smith began as a professor of logic. To a certain extent, economics

can be seen as a branch of logic: the logic of human decision-making, or what Aristotle might have called, the art of practical syllogism.

**SJ: Who seem like some of the foundational names in the field?**

**AD:** Daniel Hausman should probably get credit for founding the modern university sub-discipline known as “philosophy of economics.” Alexander Rosenberg was another pioneer, though he switched to philosophy of biology, as he tells it, upon discovering that economists have no interest in what philosophers have to say! Nancy Cartwright has done important work on the methodology and ontology of economics, as has the economist, Tony Lawson. Amartya Sen is both an economist and a philosopher and often brings the two disciplines together into a unity.

For the sort of philosophy of economics that interests me, the work of Joan Robinson is very important. Robinson published a book in 1962, *Economic Philosophy*, that still has relevance in the probing questions it asks about the conceptual foundations of the discipline. Other departures into philosophy by economists – John Hicks’s, *Causality in Economics*, for example – seem comparatively shallow to me.

**SJ: What core concepts and sub-fields define the philosophy of economics?**

**AD:** The dominant strand of philosophy of economics examines the methodologies employed by economists to see how they can be justified as ‘good’ science. For example: are economists justified in using abstract mathematical models, often based on unrealistic assumptions about human capacities, to explain observable economic phenomena? If models are successful at making predictions, does it matter if they contain unrealistic assumptions? Is Rational Choice Theory, which forms the basis of much economics, empirically unfalsifiable? Is it therefore unscientific? Etc.

Another strand looks at the ethical aspects of economics. Political economy and welfare economics involve ethical questions. Some philosophers of economics look at the moral foundations of welfare economics (is preference-maximisation a good measure of welfare?), explore what political philosophy has to say about economic policy (is economic efficiency relevant to justice?), and related enquiries.

A final strand – the one that most interests me – questions the logical coherence of economic theories. For instance, economic models often define a timeless equilibrium, in which the values of many interdependent variables are solved simultaneously, even while the models are meant to represent causal sequences; in which, what happens at an earlier time determines what happens at a later time. This can lead to terrific logical conundrums. Older models face a different logical problem: they describe sequential exchanges of one homogenous good, measurable in a standard unit, while proposing to represent exchanges of incommensurable goods that can’t be counted by a single standard unit. The way in which economists use seemingly innocent terms like “preference,” “expectation,” “capital,” “labour,” etc. often open out to these deep conceptual puzzles.

## Education News in Brief – April 24th, 2017

April 24, 2017

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

### **Selective schooling creates a negative impact on children in the UK**

According to the **Independent**, educational experts, on examination of the selective schooling system in the UK, find “negative impacts.” This is based on comparative research of 34 countries, which indicate greater odds of bullying for British children.

“Almost a quarter of pupils surveyed in the UK said they were bullied at least ‘a few times a month’...Selective school systems such as **grammar streams** lower children’s expectations and impact negatively on the wider education system, world experts have said.”

There are moves by the government for the creation of free schools. Pupils in the selective schools are more likely to experience lower self-esteem and anxiety, based on a report by the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD).

### **India-UK education-research programme partnerships**

**The Hindu** reported that there are efforts underway for the increased interconnection between British and Indian education. This includes research too. It is called UKIERI as a joint education-research programme funded by the governments of India and the UK.

There are about 57 partnerships working with about 1.6 million British pounds. The education-research programme partnerships include “social sciences, engineering, human health, climate research and data science.”

“Over the last ten years, new joint UK-India research and academic exchanges have brought joint investments worth over 200 million pounds and UKIERI has been an important part of that success. Over 1,000 UK-India partnerships have been created, leading to 25,000 exchanges of academics and researchers,” Clark said.

### **GCSE grading system changes in the UK**

**BBC News** reported, “Reforms to the GCSE grading system in England has created ‘huge uncertainty’ for schools, the NASUWT union says. The union says the new 9-1 GCSE grades will increase the pressure on pupils and narrow the range of educational opportunities for young people.”

The updated system for grading the students will be implemented in the summer with English, Maths, and “grades 9-1 replacing grades A\*-G.” The standards are expected to be ‘driven up’ or become higher.

In Manchester, at the NASUWT annual conference, there was purportedly “unnecessary confusion” from the new grading system. It is creating new “negative consequences” for both teachers and their pupils.



## Religion of Love' on the 'Religion of Peace'

April 24, 2017

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

Francis Phillips, writer for The Catholic Herald, reviews “Letters to a Young Muslim”, a new book about Islam by Omar Saif Ghobash. The **Catholic Herald** reports that the idea of Islam as a “religion of peace” is more complicated than the first examination. Catholicism, as a sect of Christianity, is often referred to as the ‘religion of love.’ Islam is often considered the ‘religion of peace.’

“I never know quite what to make of this, partly because the media tends to focus on “Islamism” with its terrorist implications, and partly because one rarely hears a strong, public voice from the side of the peace-loving Islam.” Here, Phillips points out that with the public discourse around Islam in Britain, there appears to be only two discussions. One is on the form of fundamentalism geared towards part political imposition upon society. The other is based on a set of principles and practices for a faith among many others within a pluralistic democracy.

The difference is that “Islamism” is the desire to impose a political form of Islam onto society. The latter is simply the set of hypothetical statements about history and asserted principles for living in addition to the suggested practices that follow from them, which is simply termed “Islam”.

Phillips states, “Reading **Letters to a Young Muslim (UK, US)** by Omar Saif Ghobash does not clear up this problem – though it is good to read the reflections of a cultured, educated and cosmopolitan Muslim who also takes his faith with great seriousness.”

The author notes that the former, Islamism, is typically considered bad while Islam is considered good, especially by comparison to Islamism. One common association with Islamism is terrorism.

“Of mixed parentage himself – [Ghobash’s] mother is Russian and his father, killed by terrorists in 1977 when the author was aged four, was from the United Arab Emirates – he was educated at Oxford and the University of London and is currently the UAE ambassador to Russia.”

As noted by Phillips, there are some that see Islam as warmongering, and inherently so, and others see Islam as another faith among many, also the second most populous religion in the world outside of Christianity writ large.

“His book is written for his two sons, aged 12 and 16, in an attempt to help them to “understand how to be faithful to their inherited religion of Islam and its deepest values” and at the same time to recognise ‘through observation and thought that there need be no conflict between Islam and the rest of the world’.”

The book by Ghobash is seen as something notable for parents “anxious” for their children. Phillips describes the concern of some religious parents over the “temptations of the West, especially Freedom.”

Other threats to parents' children can be the attempts to draw the children into "the limited fantasies of deeply unhappy people" – *i.e.*, terrorism." Ghobash emphasises the peaceful nature of Islam, according to Phillips. However, he remains sceptical about Ghobash's intentions: "the book does raise unresolved questions for a sympathetic but critical Westerner or Christian: for instance, Ghobash describes the Prophet Mohammed as 'the finest role model we have'."

Ghobash even enrolls his sons into Islamic schools, which the author believes creates problems. The sons have been taught to hate infidels. "He acknowledges that there is a conflict within Islam when its proponents speak of suicide being wrong but suicide bombing being acceptable."

The Catholic Herald notes Ghobash emphasises the persecution of the global community of Muslims, the *Ummah*, while simultaneously ignoring the massive persecution of Christians in Muslim-majority countries.

Phillips, representing the "religion of love", concludes his piece on Ghobash by asking: "with what authority does the author write here? How numerous are those Muslims who agree with him? What influence do they have on the mullahs and imams? ... Can the conflict between the hard-line fundamentalists and other members of the Muslim community, ably represented by this thoughtful and reflective writer, ever be resolved? Such questions deserve to be answered."

## **An Interview with Amanda Poppei**

**April 24, 2017**

**Scott Douglas Jacobsen**

**Minister Amanda Poppei is a Senior Leader and Unitarian Universalist Minister at the Washington Ethical Society (Ethical Culture and Unitarian Universalist). She grew up in upstate New York. Here is her story.**

**Let's delve into your own family background. What were your family's geography, culture, language, and religious/irreligious beliefs, principles and values?**

I was raised in upstate New York, in a white family grounded in academia—my mother was a college professor, and my father had been studying for his PhD in Biology before leaving to make furniture. He worked out of a barn in our backyard, crafting beautiful pieces—really an artist. In my earliest years I didn't attend any congregation, but in 4th grade I went on a sleepover to a friend's house and attended church with her the next day. I came home and promptly announced that I wanted to go to that church! My mother was a little worried—we were a humanist family—but quickly relieved to discover it was Unitarian Universalist congregation.

She had actually been raised UU, just hadn't gotten around to taking me to Sunday School. I attended religiously (ha!) through middle and high school, participating in their Coming of Age program in 8th grade. It was during that year that I first articulated a desire to become clergy myself one day.

My family raised me with a strong sense of social justice; my mother in particular followed in her own mother's footsteps, building her life around making the world a better place. I knew I was raised with a lot of privilege (white, formally educated) and that part of the rent I needed to pay in the world was making sure that others had similar opportunities. My mother took me to Washington, DC for my first national march when I was in 3rd grade, supporting the Equal Rights Amendment. For his part, my father instilled a curiosity about how the world works, from the planets to the atoms, and a love of the outdoors. Both my parents raised me to challenge racism, misogyny, and homophobia. I feel incredibly lucky to have been raised with those values and to have the opportunity now to live them out in my work and home life.

**You have many qualifications. Some selected ones include senior leader of the Washington Ethical Society since 2008, a Masters of Divinity from Wesley Theological Seminary in Washington, District of Columbia and a Bachelor of Arts in Religious Studies from Yale University.**

**Most citizens in the US probably don't know what ethical culture and Unitarian Universalists are. So what might be a good educational campaign for ethical culture adherents and Unitarian Universalists to pursue in the US?**

I'm sure that's true! Ethical Culture is a very small movement—just 24 congregations across the country—and although Unitarian Universalism is much larger—over 1,000 congregations—that's still small in the overall American religious landscape. In many ways, I think the justice work we

do is the best advertisement for both movements. We have always had an influence in the world that's larger than our size, as we have fought for equal rights, fairness, kindness, and mercy. UUs and Ethical Culturists show up at rallies, marches, organising meetings, and town halls all across the country. Although we may have different beliefs (Unitarian Universalist is a pluralistic religious movement, and Ethical Culture welcomes people of all beliefs), we share a strong commitment to justice and a belief that every single person is worthy.

I think we also have a special appeal to families. More and more parents are choosing to raise their children outside of traditional religion—but they are still seeking a grounding in values, and a community to support their family. Both UU congregations and Ethical Societies offer that. Our education for children is based on encouraging questions and exploration, and creating a safe and nurturing space for children to spread their wings. We incorporate study of world religions, comprehensive sexuality education, and ethics education into almost every age group.

And we mark the passages of the year, through celebrations like Winter Festival and Spring Festival, and the passages of life, through baby naming, weddings, and memorial services.

### **When did ministerial/chaplaincy/pastoral work become a 'calling' for you?**

8th grade! I was on a Coming of Age trip to Boston with my Unitarian Universalist congregation, and had been visiting some of the sites around the city where famous Unitarians and Universalists had lived and wrote and worked. We went to visit the headquarters of the Unitarian Universalist Association, and as I stood in the bookstore and looked around at the titles I suddenly thought: I want to spend my life thinking about these things!

As time went on, I continued to think about ministry. In high school, I would have said that congregations seemed like the best way to organise people to do good in the world (and I still think that). In college, I was a Religious Studies major and began to learn more about the role of religion in American life. And then of course in seminary—which I entered a few years after graduating college—I deepened my understanding of the values, theology, and philosophy that ground my life's work.

### **What is the best argument for ethical culture or for Unitarian Universalism that you have ever come across?**

We are not alone in the world—we are connected to each other. We need to practice what it means to be human together, to be in relationship as a way of supporting our own growth and as a way of working for justice in the world. Both Unitarian Universalism and Ethical Culture remind us of these core truths, and give us a place to practice, learn, and transform.

### **What seems like the main reason for individuals becoming a member of the ethical culture and Unitarian Universalist community? For example, arguments from logic and philosophy, evidence from mainstream science, or experience within traditional religious structures?**

I think it's a bit of all of those things. Most people that come to the Washington Ethical Society—the congregation I serve—have done a lot of thinking about what they believe. Whether they were raised in a traditional religion or raised secular, they've been thoughtful about their beliefs and worldview. Almost all of them share an essentially naturalistic worldview, and a sense that they want to be grounded in the here-and-now. What they're looking for when they come to us is a community in which they can live out those values, where they can have the benefits of a congregation but without dogma that no longer works for them. They are looking for a place to support their family, or to care for them if they have a crisis, or just to provide a set aside time each week to be thoughtful and introspective. They often choose our community because they like our commitment to justice work. Ultimately, I think they are searching for a sense of belonging and a chance to make a difference in the world.

### **What tasks and responsibilities come with the senior leadership position?**

I am responsible for our Sunday morning gatherings—I speak 2-3 times a month, and support guest speakers for the other Sundays. I provide pastoral care, visiting people in the hospital and offering counselling as needed (and I also work with a great group of members who do that work too). I serve as head of staff, and am responsible for managing the day to day operations of the congregation, everything from creating and tracking the budget to overseeing programming—although in all of that work I collaborate with a wonderful staff. And I work with the Board and the entire membership on setting vision and strategy for the congregation. Finally, I work out in the world, outside the walls of the congregation, fighting for what is right. That's very often done in coalition, with interfaith groups or with secular groups.

### **What are some of the demographics of the Washington Ethical Society? (Age, sex, political affiliation, and so on)**

We are a majority white, yet generationally diverse membership. We have slightly more women than men. Most WES members are progressive, ranging from pretty liberal to quite radical! We have Millennials, Gen X-ers, Boomers, and Silent Generation, plus of course children and teens who are the newest generational cohort. The number of people of colour in our community is small but growing. Most (but not all) WES members have a college degree, and many have a Masters or other advanced degree. They work in many different fields, but the helping professions (teaching, social work, etc) and public service and nonprofit work are highly represented.

### **What is pastoral care within an ethical culture/Unitarian Universalist framework?**

It looks pretty similar to in any community. I work with a team of lay Pastoral Care Associates, members who are specially trained to offer care in times of crisis. We support members in practical ways—like bringing meals and giving rides to the doctor—and we also just visit with people and try to be present to them when they are struggling. I offer pastoral counselling as well, to people who are struggling with hard choices or just having a hard time in life.

### **How does it differ from traditional definitions, theory and practice? Are there major differences?**

Of course we don't believe that the things that happen to people are part of God's plan, so there's a difference perhaps in the overall conceptual framework. But the practice of caring for people is really the same no matter what your ideas behind it are—it's about showing up for people when times are hard and celebrating with them when times are good.

**You earned the National Capital Area Big Sister (2007) award from Hermanos y Hermanas Mayores/Big Brothers Big Sisters and the Anti-Racism Sermon Award (2006) from the Joseph Priestly District of the Unitarian Universalist Association for *The Tip of the Iceberg*. What was the background for the awards? What was the content and purpose of *The Tip of the Iceberg*?**

That was a long time ago! I was talking about the differences between overt racism—like using racist slurs—and systemic racism, which is sometimes harder to spot but still incredibly damaging to individuals and to society as a whole.

**How fulfilling is this recognition?**

It was great to be recognised, especially at that time when I was still a seminarian, still training for the ministry.

**What extra responsibility to the public comes with the recognition?**

None. But certainly work on issues of racism continues to be a vital part of my work.

**What is the importance of connecting youths to an ethical culture and Unitarian Universalist base for the sense of shared community?**

Adolescence is a time of incredible transition. Having the support of a community bigger than one's family can be so important—knowing adults beside your parents who care about you and want to see you thrive. Our LGBTQ teens know that they are supported and welcome in this community, as well. And in general our teens get to connect with others who support their values, who want to make a difference in the world. I am always blown away by their thoughtfulness and passion; we learn a great deal from them.

**What do you consider the main threat to ethical culture and Unitarian Universalism in America? What have been perennial threats to them?**

I'm not sure I think in terms of threats in this way. Injustice and bigotry are threats to all people, and we work against that. Not sure what this question might mean.

**What are the common problems of community found at Washington Ethical Society?**

Like any community, we have conflict—that comes from people being in relationship with each other! We are a diverse community, with many backgrounds and beliefs represented, which

means we don't always like the same music or styles of speaking. But that also is part of the richness in our community, and most folks really love the opportunity to learn from each other.

**How can people become involved with or donate to the American Ethical Union or the Washington Ethical Society?**

They can check out our website at [www.ethicalsociety.org](http://www.ethicalsociety.org) and click on the “give” button on the top right to donate...or explore the rest of our website to learn about our activities. To find other Ethical Societies, check out <http://aeu.org/who-we-are/member-societies/> and to find other Unitarian Universalist congregations, try <http://www.uua.org/directory/congregations>.

**Thank you for your time, Minister Poppei.**



# Women's Rights in the Philippines – An Overview

April 25, 2017

Danielle Erika Hill and Scott Douglas Jacobsen

Humanism, as an ethical and philosophical worldview, provides the basis for proper action in the world with an emphasis on this world, the natural world. There is a phrase, “deed before creed,” that speaks volumes to the emphasis of humanism. Principles are nice; rights and privileges are good. But how do these affect the world? Answer: through action.

Human rights are a good example. Women's rights are a better example. There are stipulations in international documents such as the UN Charter speaking to the equal rights of women. It needs action. It's the same everywhere on that basic need to translate abstract ethics into practical morals.

Take, for example, the situation in the Philippines. Some things are good; other things are bad. But these are loose statements, and can differ from the enactment of women's rights, including advocacy and empowerment in the country. So what is the current state of women's rights in the Philippines? What's good and bad, and how can things improve?

The United Nations Office of the High Commissioner says, “Women's sexual and reproductive health is related to multiple human rights, including the right to life, the right to be free from torture, the right to health, the right to privacy, the right to education, and the prohibition of discrimination.”

As Olivia H. Tripon instructs from the Philippines Human Rights Reporting Project in 2008, women have fought for a very long time to be considered human beings deserving of human rights. Filipino women earned the right to vote only as recently as 1937. Rural and Indigenous women are even more vulnerable.

The Philippines ranks 7th in the World Economic Forum (WEF) Gender Gap Report (2016). Even with a relatively low mark in labour participation, women continue to be encouraged to excel in school and in the workplace. Women in business or positions of leadership are not an uncommon sight in the Philippines.

Filipino women enjoy a high literacy rate. The Philippines consistently earns high marks in terms of equal opportunity in education and employment, where a new law was passed in the Senate extending paid maternity leave to 120 days. And for LGBT women, an Anti-Discrimination Bill had been languishing in the Senate for the past 17 years, but is being debated now.

The initiative is spearheaded by Congresswoman, **Geraldine Roman**, the first openly trans woman to be elected to Congress in the Philippines. There are many positive signs within the country, but there are still plenty of negatives.

The Philippines continues to lag significantly behind in some aspects. Filipino women are empowered, development studies say. However, matters of the heart and the vagina do not seem to be included in this empowerment. Even with anti-Violence Against Women (VAW)



campaigns by the government, Filipinas are still affected by gender-based violence, which is not limited to socioeconomic or educational status. This includes, but is not limited to, sex trafficking, forced prostitution, and sexual harassment in schools, the workplace, and on the street. Instances of this last one can be seen in *Catcalled in the Philippines*, a Facebook page where people can anonymously submit personal accounts of harassment.

Great challenges in implementing reproductive health laws and pursuing solutions to sexual health-related issues also exist. Abortion remains illegal and punishable by law (except when necessary to save the mother's life), even as Human Rights Watch calls equitable access to abortion "first and foremost a human right," and even access to birth control remains a testy subject, with the Supreme Court having issued a TRO on the sale of female contraceptives.

The Philippines also remains the only country with **no divorce laws**; there are provisions in the Family Code for legal separation and annulment, but the sheer expense of the process limits these options only the rich.

Neither does a culture of having serious conversations about sexual health in public exist in the Philippines. Organisations, however, that would rather see the education around it (e.g. the proper use of condoms) not taught in the schools, do. Such groups would like to see the education left to the parents, but in a culture where it is taboo to talk about sex, how does this encourage healthy education around the use of condoms at home? The answer: it does not.

The two "acceptable" methods advocated by the Catholic Church are abstinence and the rhythm method. Of course, both fail to deliver on their purported ends, and contribute to a high rate of teenage pregnancy. Added to this, is a stigma against unwed mothers (if pregnant, the man whodunit is expected to marry her) and the nonexistence of divorce, leaves a woman nominally empowered and oppressed by a deeply patriarchal society where even the notion of childlessness is seen as questionable. The expectation being that women naturally gravitate towards the desire to have biological children in their future, and furthermore have a duty to further the family line.

The taboos around sex do not help Filipino women, or society and culture in the Philippines. A proper sexual education curriculum (which includes safe sex practices, consent, and the variety of contraceptives on offer for men and women) would improve the situation for women in the Philippines. Universal access to evidence-based sexual and reproductive health education for children would be a great first step in this direction.

Another solution is the implementation, or the enforcement, of the stipulation in international documents relevant to women. For example, the UN Charter discusses the rights for women in the Preamble:

*Whereas the peoples of the United Nations have in the Charter reaffirmed their faith in fundamental human rights, in the dignity and worth of the human person and in the equal rights of men and women and have determined to promote social progress and better standards of life in larger freedom...*

And Article 16:

*Article 16.*

*(1) Men and women of full age, without any limitation due to race, nationality or religion, have the right to marry and to found a family. They are entitled to equal rights as to marriage, during marriage and **at its dissolution**.*

These and other acts protect women and girls' rights. Through the Philippine Commission on Women, there is the Republic Act 9710, which is the "Magna Carta for Women." In it, the Philippine government is devoted to the "Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women's (CEDAW) Committee." CEDAW was ratified in 1981 in the Philippines.

Some stipulations in Republic Act 9710 include the increase of women in third level government positions for a 50-50 balance, leave benefits with full pay, non-discrimination in the military, police, or associated services, equal access and discrimination elimination in the domains of "education, scholarships, and training," and portrayal of women in mass media.

Given the situation for women in the Philippines, the improvement in their livelihoods, especially rural and Indigenous women's livelihoods, can be overturned fast. This makes the fight for women's rights in the Philippines a battle that never really ends, and requires continual vigilance in the fight for equality and its requisite protection – however fragile the wins may be.

# Philosophy News in Brief – April 25th, 2017

April 25, 2017

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

## **The “Trump Doctrine” still has no consistent philosophy**

The **National Post** reports that President Donald Trump has been increasingly ‘fed up’ with Kim Jong-Un. The North Korean dictator has been “poised” for another nuclear missile test in the earlier parts of April.

In the midst of the test, a false alarm was set out through sending the USS Carl Vinson to the Korean Peninsula near North Korea. Later reports showed this was a false alarm and the U.S. carrier was going in the opposite direction for a “pre-arranged exercise with the Australian navy.”

“...some saw it as a reflection of the new president’s foreign policy generally. Despite no-nonsense assertions on the campaign trail, his international forays so far have included surprises, flip-flops and contradictions. If at this early stage in the administration there is such thing as a Trump Doctrine, it has been difficult to make out.”

## **Silicon Valley hires philosophers to teach them**

**Quartz** states that happiness is an obsession for Silicon Valley and its professionals. There is purportedly a pursuit of a “mythical good life,” which is fulfilment connected to achievement in Silicon Valley.

There is an attempt, and indeed a movement, devoted to the quantified self in the “quantified self movement.” Some aspects of this include polyphonic sleep and various “off-label pharmaceuticals.”

“**Andrew Taggart** thinks most of this is nonsense. With a PhD in philosophy, Taggart practices the art of gadfly-for-hire. He disabuses founders, executives, and others in Silicon Valley of the notion that life is a problem to be solved, and happiness awaits those who do it. Indeed, Taggart argues that optimising one’s life and business is actually a formula for misery.”

## **Tech bros and Ancient Greek parallels**

According to **Quartz**, the Silicon Valley mystique is definitely male. At the same time, this is not seen as a new phenomenon. This, and other current “tech bro” cultures could well be seen as being preceded by the Ancient Greek philosophers.

The “toga-clad men in Athens devising philosophical theories to shift our understanding of reality.” It was a cult devoted to the genius, and might be “toxic, even providing “excuses [for] bad behavior and allows prejudices to be cloaked in subjective assessments of intelligence and value.” Sound familiar?

One of the main problems in the tech world is the “white male homogeneity, rampant sexual harassment, and focus on catering to the concerns of the most privileged in society...Arianna...**promised to wipe out** ‘brilliant jerks.’”

# **An Interview with Wade Kaardal, Chairperson of the Asian Working Group for IHEYO**

April 25, 2017

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

[Previously published in **Humanist Voices**]

## **Was there a family background in humanism and scepticism?**

To be honest, no. My family, being ethnically Norwegian, has strong ties to the Lutheran church, going back generations. My great grandfather was a missionary in Africa. Of course, he was an older kind of missionary, meaning his mission was in part to better the physical situation of those around him. While I personally reject some of his ideas and the motivation for what he was doing, the value of being in service to others was carried forward by my relatives and I do feel that some of the values that I learned from those around me are not now in conflict with my current humanist values.

My family also placed a strong emphasis on education, which gave me a solid knowledge base. However, it took time for me to learn how to be a critical and sceptical thinker.

## **What is your preferred definition of humanism and scepticism?**

My preferred definition of scepticism is the one used on the Media Guide to Scepticism on the Doubtful News website “Scepticism is an approach to evaluating claims that emphasises evidence and applies tools of science.” The organised Sceptical movement works to promote this approach in people’s lives and society as a whole. I know many people see scepticism as an intellectual exercise or an attempt to debunk wild claims, but really it is a great tool for individuals to save time and money, as well as maintaining their health, by avoiding scams and frauds.

Humanism is not easily defined. Some of the biggest organisations around the world have tried and have only been able to narrow it down to page long manifestos and declarations. If I were to try to give you an elevator pitch of humanism, it would be, humanism is a worldview that appreciates both individual differences and the right for individual development, and tries to create a society that will not limit your ability to flourish based upon those individual differences. Furthermore, humanism should be informed by evidence, but it should also make room for inspiration from other fields such as the arts. I am a secular humanist, but I don’t think one needs to be an atheist to be a humanist. Humanism is anti-dogma, not anti-religion, and if our values line up, I’m happy to work towards progress with anyone.

## **Are there many legitimate cases of proper scepticism turned into cynicism, or cynicism masquerading as scepticism?**

I believe there are some cases, and I imagine some of my fellow travellers are more cynical than sceptical. Scepticism is a process based on certain fundamental ideas. It is not a set of beliefs.

Yet, for some this is the case. They hold certain ideas to be true, ghosts aren't real for example, and will never change their minds on the matter. Cynicism is not far behind this kind of mindset. If you are not willing to examine the evidence and revise your beliefs based on it, then you are not being sceptical. There are several examples of people who merely set out to debunk things and later gave up on the endeavour entirely. Sceptical investigator, Joe Nickel, has avoided this because he is driven by curiosity to find out what is actually going on, not to merely prove that certain claims are false.

For myself, I am happiest when the sceptical process leads me to a nuanced position on a situation. It would be nice to have simple answers, but reality is not always kind to us in this regard. I think it is this enjoyment of nuance that keeps me from becoming a cynic.

### **How did you find and become involved with IHEYO?**

I first became involved with humanism and scepticism in Taiwan when I started two groups there. From that I got some notice in the region and connected with others who were doing similar things. Later, I found that another group, PATAS, was holding a conference in the Philippines so I decided to attend. It was there that I met some people from IHEYO. It was through the contacts I met there, as well as some others in Singapore, that I became involved with IHEYO directly. When the chairperson position opened up, I volunteered and having been facilitating the working group for a little over a year now.

Wherever you are, I suggest that you start a humanist or sceptical group, even if it is just at a local or community level. We need more advocates for good ideas, and a group is a great way to connect with like minded individuals. Who knows, it could be the first step to become an international leader in the humanist movement.

### **What are your tasks and responsibilities as the chairperson of the Asian Working Group for IHEYO?**

There are two main responsibilities that I have as chairperson. The first is to facilitate communication between groups in the region. Asia is a very big region with every sub-region and even country having problems of their own and issue the groups there would like to focus on. It would be a fool's errand and counterproductive of me or IHEYO to try and tell them what to do. Instead, I help the group stay in contact with each other and know what everyone is doing. In this way, they can share ideas and expertise and hopefully all the groups will benefit from each other's experience.

My other responsibility is to find ways for IHEYO and the working group to support the member organisations. Again, each group has its own needs. Using the resources, I have available, be it contacts with organisations or individuals, volunteers, time, or money, I try to support the local groups to make what they are doing more effective. One thing we have done for example was organise translation efforts, so groups could have humanist materials in their native languages and are better equipped to engage with people in their countries.

In general, I view my position as being in service to those I lead. They know best what their organisations need. I want to do what I can to help make them better.

**What are the main threats to the practice of humanism in the Asian region now?**

This is of course a large question and it's hard to point to all of Asia and say there is just one issue. If I were to try to point to one issue that many countries are facing, it would be a rise in authoritarianism and nationalism in Asia. Obviously, illiberal and totalitarian governments like China and North Korea, have been long standing presences in the region. Theocracies of many stripes also continue to limit the spread of humanistic values. Lastly, strong men and nationalists, like those currently in power in the Philippines and India, have chilled free speech and limited human flourishing in the region.

I do hope that humanists in continue to promote our values and fight hard against authoritarian dogmas as they are one of the greatest threats both human life and human progress in the Asia.

**Who have been the most unexpected allies for the humanist and sceptical movements in Asia?**

For me, on the ground in Taiwan, the LGBTQ rights movement has been our biggest and most unexpected ally. When the issue of marriage equality came up in Taiwan, many were surprised how quickly people organised against it. As it turned out, the main opposition was organised through Christian churches with help from abroad. In response, seemingly overnight, many anti-dogmatic religion groups sprouted up on social media translating videos and memes from the west. Not only has this increased, the overall dankness of our memes, it has also meant that we can reach more Taiwanese with our ideas, if only in sound bite form, and we can support a movement that many of us already agree with.

# **An Interview with Simon Ørregaard – Chairman, Eftertro**

**April 25, 2017**

**Scott Douglas Jacobsen**

Simon Ørregaard is the Chairman of Eftertro. It is a small Danish organization devoted to helping people who are in an existential crisis based on being “post-faith,” which is the translation of Eftertro.

## **How did you first become involved in the faithless community?**

My first contact was via YouTube as shy and vulnerable as I was at the time. I found Christopher Hitchens and Richard Dawkins and others in all these great debates, which was a breath of fresh air to listen to. I spent countless hours at nights being encouraged in my own process of leaving faith, being assured that I was on the right way, and that I was not alone. Then I reached out to several people on Facebook and got together with Anders Stjernholm from the Danish Atheistic Society. Since then, there has been no turning back.

## **Who are the most likely to leave religion? (Age, sex, sexual orientation, ethnicity, nationality, and so on)**

That is a big and complicated question. Homosexuals are obviously likely to leave. But then again some live in restraint denying their own nature. I guess that everyone’s story is very individual. For me personally, it is a tale of 30 years of doubt, fear and insecurity. I do think that the younger you are, the easier it is to break out. That sounds obvious, but I did not succeed in getting out before I wasted the main part of my life in a sect. What I am referring to here is all the existential questions you have to deal with. On top of that, you have the social control and the sanctions that go with it. So it is crucial which background you are dealing with. For example, it is often a direct physical danger to break out of Islam. In my case, which was about escaping from Jehovah’s Witnesses, the shunning is worse than almost anything else. There are actually a lot of similarities between JW and Islam in that way.

## **So, for those who do not know, what is Eftertro?**

Eftertro (or post-faith) is a small but still growing network of people who are in trouble because of doubt, fear, loneliness, or existential crisis in leaving or dealing with a religious background. We welcome people from all kinds of faiths. We have Muslims, JW’s, Mormons, Scientologists, New Age, various Pentecostal churches etc – even a Buddhist. All exes of course, even though we are not an atheistic organisation. What we do is to provide a safe place where people can meet and exchange their feelings and experiences, in order to help them in making the right decision for themselves. It is a very powerful thing to listen to all these fates and to realise that we all have the same universal problems regardless of our backgrounds.

## **As the Eftertro chairman, what roles and responsibilities come with this position?**



My main purpose is to ensure everyone that the individual is the single most important. To make people comfortable in a difficult situation. To ensure everyone in that any feeling is legal. To be open, to listen and to share my own experience. I am fortunate to have a whole team to back this movement up. We have meetings in various places in Denmark. The big task now is how to make Eftertro more visible in the public because we see a large potential. That needs funding and we have not come across that yet. So I have a big task in front of me, but luckily I also have some great people who have become some of my best friends to work with.

**What derivative, unexpected, tasks come with it, too?**

Well, there is the whole issue of how to dissect a certain problem. Sometimes the problem lies elsewhere, and needs attending by professionals or the authorities. If a person is a minor, what do we do? If a person is in danger, where goes the line between our responsibility as citizens and activists? We have a social worker connected as well as a few psychologists. We do attempt to be very aware; that we do not cross any legal or ethical lines.

**As a network of volunteers with the knowledge and experience relevant to doubt, faith, and social control, what is the importance of coffee meetings for everyone, and for those Eftertro's volunteer staff help out?**

First and foremost, it is a mutual process of getting out. Some people only come to one meeting, some stick around. For those of us who are working on this project the meetings are also very powerful. In that way, we heal ourselves trying to heal others. It is a community, which is often exactly what people like us miss the most.

**What are the psychological processes, the internal dialogues, that surround doubt about religion or faith for people?**

You can write books about that, but the core thing here is cognitive dissonance. It is a struggle of trying to push doubt aside, while at the same time being in doubt. You are, in a way, fighting for survival on two levels. That is a very troublesome and indeed lonesome process. Not least because you don't know what lies ahead. What is out there? I believe that lots of people lose that battle before they even get started. When I talked to my family and friends, I got the notion that they knew they believed in something wrong or at least that they understood me. But that recognition is very difficult, because in that moment you lose everything you have believed in. It is basically based in fear of the unknown. The fear of death.

**What are the methods of social control of the faith leaders on their followers?**

From my own experience, and from others, it is a faith system that makes you feel sinful, guilty, in order to make you want to do good. And when the scale you compare yourself to is "perfection", you will always have a bad conscience, which will make you try even harder. In that way you feel guilty and afraid before you even get to consider whether your belief is right or wrong (which is a sin in it self!). Then you get to the sanctions and punishment. I can hardly think of a task more difficult than going against that.



**What are some of the more horrifying stories that you have come across, even witnessed?**

Some are too afraid and vulnerable even to go to a coffee meeting. It is heartbreaking every time. In the Muslim field, it is very hard to witness young, intelligent, powerful, women, who can not move away from their home because of the religion/culture. Even though, their family are not practicing Islam it is dangerous for them to live their own lives. My own family is totally separated now, as if I was dead, which is very hard for my children (and me).

**What have been some of the more heartwarming stories of people leaving personally deleterious religious faith?**

To see people, connect and find a mutual understanding, in some cases, they go public and into the debate in the media. On the long term, Eftertro can make a difference. Very many of these people experience a vast loneliness, and through Eftertro, they can find some kind of peace.

**What are the most common activist activities, educational initiatives, and political engagement movements through Eftertro, or in coordination with other groups?**

Thus far we have concentrated on coffee meetings and counselling and also talking with students from both high schools and universities. From now on we will focus on more campaigning and lectures. But it is a big task for a small organisation like ours without any funding. But I sincerely believe that Eftertro has great potential, so we will do our best still.

**Who are the biggest allies for Eftertro – and even unexpected allies in its efforts of helping out those that lost faith?**

Well as far as unexpected allies, we had a priest from the Danish National Church at a certain point. But we agreed that it would interfere too much with the meetings if we had a Christian priest sitting there. But we do get a lot of recognition of our purpose. As far as allies go, the Atheist Society helped this project to get off the ground. In fact, it was their chairman, Anders Stjernholm who got the idea in the first place. He was never religious though, so he was clear on the fact that he would never participate in any meetings. He is still a very important part of the project, and a member of the board. Politically, I am also engaged in a newly started party, The Progressive which works for a secular society based on knowledge and cleansed of all religious bias.

**What are their ways of helping out?**

As of now by good spirit and support alongside working on some of the same goals. Again I must stress that Eftertro is neither a political or atheistic organisation. We help people in trouble because of faith related issues.

**How can others help out, even donate? How can they become involved in Eftertro?**

Helping hands are always welcome. Sometimes we struggle to find a location to hold a meeting. You can become a member or even donator via our website [eftertro.dk](http://eftertro.dk). We do not have an English version yet, but we are working on it.

**Any closing thoughts or feelings based on the discussion today?**

I just want to say, "Thank You!", for your interest, and if there is anyone in UK who can relate to us, we will always be interested in working together or exchange knowledge and experience. These problems are international so let us gather all good powers in helping the victims of religious dogma.

**Thank you for your time, Simon.**

# An Interview with Marie Alena Castle – Communications Director, Atheists for Human Rights

April 28, 2017

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

Marie Alena Castle is the communications director for Atheists for Human Rights. She was raised Roman Catholic, but became an atheist. She has been important to atheism, Minnesota Atheists, *The Moral Atheist*, National Organization of Women, and wrote *Culture Wars: The Threat to Your Family and Your Freedom* (2013).

**Was there a familial background in atheism? Were friends an influence on explicit atheist views?**

Raised Catholic. Didn't know any atheists. Religion was accepted as an expected normal part of life.

**What were the moments, and the possible big awakening, for lack of belief in gods or God?**

Pope's position on birth control became more and more unrealistic but I accepted it because I was told the pope was infallible. Finally, "saw the light" when church authorities could not answer my logical questions about the morality (or not) of birth control. It became very clear that the pope was not infallible and if wrong on that how did I know he was right about existences of God. Gave that some thought and saw zero evidence for a god and I was out of there. I realized I was an atheist and it felt SO good to have my mind feel so clear at last.

**You are an atheist activist/activist atheist. How does one be an activist for atheism? It seems counterintuitive. That is, why be an activist for the lack of belief in something, in gods and God? A humanist activist seems more intuitive because it affirms beliefs, traditionally speaking, more than atheism.**

Atheism is not a belief, it's a conclusion. I became an activist when I realized all the harm irrational religious beliefs caused. It's like realizing how harmful slavery is and becoming an abolitionist to put a stop to that harm. Being an activist atheist is like scraping the barnacles off of the boat – get rid of them and the boat (humanity) sails along much better. Being a humanist just means dropping religious beliefs based on irrational doctrines. Liberal religionists who want to be moral do it by abandoning traditional religious beliefs so they can be moral and allow their basic human decency to come through. I get along fine with liberal religionists. They do good because they think it's what their god wants. Fair enough. I do good because it needs to be done.

**What have been the lesser known misconceptions about atheism?**

Far as I can tell, all the misconceptions about atheism focus on our supposed lack of a moral compass. One of my old Catholic books says the only reason a person would become an atheist is "to be free to live a depraved life." But what kind of morality it is that needs directions from an imaginary god? I prefer my atheist morality because it's based on simple human decency and

compassion. I don't give a rat's patoot what some imaginary god wants. Most gods seem to want us to harm those who prefer other or no gods. I just want to stop that.

**You went back to school in your 30s at the same time raising 5 kids. What inspired going back to school in your 30s?**

I always wanted to learn things. I envied those who could afford to go to university. I read a lot and thought a lot and finally decided to get a college degree. My education background was pretty sparse. The Univ. of Minn. thought I would have a problem but let me enrol anyway. I was working 40 hours a week in a factory, managing a family of 5 kids, dealing with a husband who couldn't understand why a woman would want an education – and being politically active at the same time. I did it piecemeal, partly correspondence, mostly summer sessions, some night classes, some day classes. Took 8 years. Graduated with a B.A. in journalism and a B+ average. Mission accomplished and it felt good.

**What were the main values that came from it?**

It broadened my view of the world, gave me new ideas to think about. Didn't teach me much about writing (straight A's there) because I was born knowing how to write. It was intellectually and emotionally satisfying being part of the wider world and learning more about how to understand it. And of course it deepened my atheism. Thinking will do that to you.

**Why did you choose to earn a degree in journalism/mass communications from the University of Minnesota over other degrees, and how did you persist and succeed with the tremendous responsibility of raising 5 kids while doing it?**

I already knew how to write. It was something that came to me naturally. I wrote a news item based on random info for a class assignment. The instructor posted it on the board as the best example he had ever seen. He said I must have had some experience. I said it was the first time in my life I'd done that. I got A's in some classes where math was involved (which I knew almost zero about) because the exams included an essay question. My turf! I could write all kinds of B.S. and make it sound intellectual. (Doesn't knowing that tell you something about how people perceive things? Reminds me of how I was so hooked on Catholicism when growing up. The Church was great at using big words and sounding oh so intellectual! Hooked me good!!) As to how I persisted, I just did, just kept plodding along. Besides, it was good for my kids to see me involved in life. I always did my best to show them as much of life and the world as I could. Never babied them or talked down to them. My oldest daughter was a straight A student all the way through from first grade to her masters' degree. She loved what I was doing and wrote little essays for grade school about how great it was to have a mother doing all that and leaving her in charge (at age 9) during short periods when neither I nor my husband were home. She just LOVED it, she said, because it made her feel so responsible! And she was. And still is. All my kids turned out to be great adults. And they are atheists!!!!

**You have been involved with the Hemlock Society. In what capacity have you been involved in the dying with dignity movement through them, what's a better argument for dying with dignity than for, say, those that harbour antithetical notions of death and ways**

**to evaluate human worth, so come to conclusions in contradistinction to the dying with dignity movement?**

I got involved because getting involved is what I do. I had a sweatshirt that said, “Stress is what happens when your gut says No but your mouth says, Yes, I’d be glad to do it.” I really hate it when people try to run other people’s lives when it’s none of their business. Everyone dies. Some want to do it on their own terms to avoid whatever assorted miseries afflict them. They should be free to take about it, get info on self-deliverance, and help in carrying it out. The government should be involved only to ensure their diagnosis of incurability is accurate, there is no coercion, the decision is obviously well thought out and rational. For people who disagree I say they should feel free to suffer all they want and hang on to life as long as possible, but not insist that others should do the same. Mother Teresa said “Suffering is the kiss of Jesus,” but that is religious B.S. Ok for those who buy into it but ONLY for those who buy into it.

**You were integral in the formation of the Minnesota Atheists, and served as the president for 10 years. What are simple principles you can impart for those that want to found an atheist community and associated organization?**

1. Try to avoid the “big tent” approach where anyone who ID’s as an atheist is encouraged to join. Too hard to get agreement on how to deal with religion. A tent doesn’t move.
2. Start with a definite stated position on what the group will do. “Support state-church separation” is meaningless. I have seen too many groups fall apart because they had no specific goal in mind. Spell out that goal in the bylaws. Atheists For Human Rights has the specific goal of supporting victims of religion based laws through our Moral High Ground project. We focus on that and our members understand and support that as well as our opposition to racist/sexist/homophobia views. When we first organized AFHR I would get calls from potential members. When a little conversation uncovered any racist/sexist/homophobia I told them they might be more comfortable joining MN Atheists and directed them there. (They have a big tent, which led to the breakup and the formation of AFHR.)

**What are the emotional, even legal, difficulties they will encounter?**

You get those difficulties with the “big tent” approach. Having no common specific purpose will do that. There is no solid attachment to atheism, just meetings and speakers and thinking of fun things to do. You basically just get a social club, which is OK and certainly better than nothing.

**Now, you’re the communications director for Atheists for Human Rights. What tasks and responsibilities come with the communications director position for Atheists for Human Rights?**

It’s pretty simple. For one thing we don’t have a hierarchal structure. People volunteer to be on the board and we operate by consensus. Everyone takes on a task they are able and willing to do.

There is no president. If we need one for signing some legal paper we just appoint one pro-tem for the purpose. I take care of all the communications stuff, edit our magazine, publish our booklets, write letters to the editor, etc. Other board members take care of the treasurer and

secretarial work, Internet functions, graphics, events, video distribution and the new position of wrangling the USPS bulk mail requirements (big headache, long story). Our signature activity is our Moral High Ground project. I send out the grants every December.

**You are an editor for *The Moral Atheist*, a magazine. How can people become involved and contribute material? What are some tips for new writers?**

People just gravitate to things. They show some interest or are asked to do something and involvement happens. Our magazine contributors come from all over the country. They offer to send stuff and we pretty much always take it. I don't have any tips for new writers. Either they can write or they can't. They just have to stick to religion/atheism related topics because we don't bother much with issues outside of those areas.

**Your atheist activism stresses the grassroots and many Left, politically and socially speaking, issues, e.g. labor unions, being against the Vietnam war and a charter for the NOW (National Organization of Women), as well as working for the Abortion Rights. All of these are highly Left, progressive social and cultural, and legal, concerns. When did you realize your implicit values were Left?**

I grew up with Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal. I know what poverty is like and what a politically left government can do about it. Churches were no help and the Republicans were of the opinion that the problem with the country was that the rich didn't have enough money and the poor had too much. Very hard to miss where the decent humane stuff was coming from and it was New Deal stuff. I saw what was going on. I lived it. Those left/right worldviews haven't changed. There is nothing in the right wing worldview that I can find appealing. Too much greed there. "If the Haves gave half of what they have to the Have-Nots, the Halves would still be the Halves but the Halve-Nots would be the Halve-Somethings."

**How did you build the resilience and courage to act on the implicit values, making them explicit, public, and proactive?**

I didn't build anything. I am what I am and pretty much what I always was. I do what I do because I really can't not do it. it makes me question whether we have free will. It's like that sweatshirt I had. Someone says we need someone to do something and my damned hand goes up. It just goes up. That doesn't happen as much any more because I'm 90 years old and running out of gas. And my arm hurts too much. But still I can't help but keep going as best I can – which is still better than those who do nothing. "Those who wait until they can do a whole lot of good all at one time never do any good at all." Right now I'm starting to write an updated version of my 2013 book, "Culture Wars." My publisher wants it ready by August so I have work to do.

**You wrote *Culture Wars: The Threat to Your Family and Your Freedom* (2013). The ideal of the constitution is separation of church and state in the US. How are laws justified within religious apparatuses to control the lives of the general population—most of whom are religious, but some of whom are irreligious—without secular justification?**

No one seems to realize those laws are religion based and have no secular justification. Death with dignity and abortion and faith healing exemptions and stem cell research restrictions are clear examples. The media refer to the restrictions as socially conservative, never as fully based on religious dogma. We have a major problem too in that when those laws are challenged they are based on things like equal treatment or free speech. FEN has never defended itself by noting the religious basis for imposing a duty to suffer on hopelessly ill people. They lost the most recent case and are appealing. We wrote an amicus, noting the very clear religious basis for the government restrictions. But the FEN lawyer can't use that in the appeal because the issue of religious doctrine was not part of the original case. All we can hope for is that a decency minded judge might read the amicus and decide to use that to rule in our favor.

**What do you consider one of the more interesting findings that came from researching for the text? For example, the religious basis for prohibitions, in law, of “both contraception and abortions, limits on reality-based sex education in schools and bans against stem-cell research...Bible readings and prayers sessions held in public schools and Creationism is taught in many places as a legitimate alternative to Evolution...[and] laws against same-sex marriage and laws actually criminalizing homosexuality.” Not to mention the banning of specific books with tax privilege/preference for organizations that happen to be religion-based. I’m just trying to target something under the surface, not really thought about, but pervasive, affecting everyone, and pernicious in its effects on the young or upcoming generations.**

What impressed me was how pervasive this religious control is, reaching from federal to state to local government, and how tied to religion it is. Further, how totally involved the Catholic bishops have been in keeping these restrictions embedded in our laws and using the Protestant fundamentalists as a front. Almost all of the Christian Coalition leaders have been Catholic and put there by the Catholic bishops, starting with Jerry Falwell. Their reach is impressive, helped by their monolithic structure. But I can say this for sure: the religious right would disappear overnight if Roe v Wade were overturned. Abortion is the bottom line litmus test driving force keeping this dystopian political populism going. I'll deal with that in my updated book.

**What has been the feedback from the readers of the book or even those claiming to have read the text—positive, negative, neutral, and other various flavours of feedback?**

Mostly they think the book is great but almost none grasp the thesis that we have major laws that are totally religion-based. They can't relate state-church separation to that – only to the trivial stuff like school prayers. Maybe this is because no lawsuits are ever filed that challenge the religious basis. (More about that in my updated book.) Otherwise, the negative comments have mainly expressed discomfort with my saying unkind things about the Catholic Church.

**Thank you for your time, Marie.**



# **Saudi Arabia Sentences Atheist to Death for Renouncing Islam**

**April 28, 2017**

**Scott Douglas Jacobsen**

The man, reportedly in his 20s, was deemed ‘insane’ by his lawyers because he was using drugs and alcohol when he committed blasphemy.

An atheist in Saudi Arabia has been sentenced to death after uploading videos renouncing Islam and the Prophet Mohammed on social media – which led to him being charged with atheism and blasphemy.

The deeply religious country’s Supreme Court ruled against the man, named locally as Ahmad Al Shamri, after being arrested in 2014.

After a lengthy appeal process, the country’s Supreme Court ruled against him this week. In the original case against Mr Shamri, his legal team said that he was under the influence of drugs and alcohol and therefore technically insane.

However, the strict laws within the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia determines that citizens who turn their back on Islam will be punished harshly, including even death.

Many other citizens in Saudi Arabia appeared to support the decision of the Supreme Court to put him to death. In 2015, the Saudi Arabian judicial system sentenced and executed 153 people mostly for drug trafficking and murder.

The kingdom has a track record of being questionable regarding human rights and women’s rights, and in this case the freedom of belief (or non-belief) in one religion or another, which has been put under the spotlight multiple times. Some of the strict Islamic legal code restrictions are on drug trafficking, and bribery, rape, and apostasy. All punishable by the death penalty. As in the case with the 20-year-old, Ahmad Al Shamri, this was shown to be true.



## **An Interview with Julia Julstrom-Agoyo—Secretary & Treasurer of Americas Working Group of IHEYO**

**April 28, 2017**

**Scott Douglas Jacobsen**

[Previously published in **Humanist Voices**]

**Let's delve a little bit into your background to provide a foundation for the conversation. Do you have a family background or only a personal background?**

A family background, my mom loves to tell the story about how she grew up in Lima, Peru and at the age of 7 she declared herself an Atheist after finding the word in the dictionary, which was unusual because the majority of Peruvians are Catholic, though her immediate family was less religious. She was a curious child and liked to challenge the existence of God in school, to the frustration of her teachers. She was very much of an outsider in that way, but she's always liked being different—being unique.

My dad, in parallel, went to a Christian church with his parents, but he grew up in a small, Republican town in Illinois. His parents were heavily involved in the church, in part through music, but at the height of the Vietnam War, some anti-war peace protests were organized in the small town and my dad and his family received significant backlash from the church community for having their names attached to them. His parents decided they couldn't be part of the church anymore, so they all left and joined the Unitarian Universalist church there, which was fine with my dad since he had independently kind of already decided he was an Atheist. That's where his humanism, atheism, kind of sprouted from. So when my dad and mom (who was studying there) met in the small town and eventually moved to Chicago—after they had a couple kids—they found the Ethical Humanist Society of Chicago.

So they started bringing us there because they wanted to have us grow up in a community atmosphere, where we could learn about all different kinds of religions and common values without the dogma. So they got to go to speakers every Sunday. Then us as kids got to grow up in a Sunday school learning how to be a good person. [Laughing]

**[Laughing]**

We got involved in volunteer projects and fundraisers, and stuff like that, and interacted with other kids who were not religious, which is really nice because most of our friends at school were religious and didn't understand what atheists were—or were taught to fear or dislike them.

We were ostracized sometimes. It was whatever kids do like saying, "You're going to hell." It is a hurtful thing to say to a child, although even at that age I knew I didn't believe in hell. [Laughing] It was about community. I owe a lot of who I am today to being brought up in that atmosphere.

**With your mom realizing that she didn't believe in God, that she was an atheist in Peru in, as far as I know, a very religious culture and, therefore, society. Did she, herself, face similar prejudice?**

Apparently, not too much. She grew up in Lima, which is the capital of Peru—and so maybe that had something to do with people being pretty open. Anyway, I know she likes being a different person in a bunch of aspects. She was fine standing out from the crowd. I think her family was okay with it because they were actually not too religious—my mom even says they were humanists without labelling themselves as such. Even many religious families in Peru don't regularly go to church—they feel they can simply pray in their homes.

**Your dad with the Unitarian Universalist form of humanism. From my sense of American culture, it is taken a lot more softly than being an atheist, where atheist, as a self-identification, would provide more means for someone to be bullied than if someone was a Unitarian Universalist. Not only because Unitarian Universalist takes longer to say...**

[Laughing]

**But also because people probably don't know what Unitarian Universalist is. For yourself now, if I may ask, where do you stand in terms of your own take on humanism—that is most comfortable to you?**

For me, I thought a lot about it the last few years. I do identify as an atheist and a humanist, but what has become most important to me in the last few years is my humanism. I see my atheism as what I don't believe in; I see my humanism as what I do believe in, which is much more important because I have a lot of religious friends. I don't think our belief or non-belief in God is too important in a way.

So what ends up bringing us together are common values, which is what humanism is all about, that's where I got my values, I think. It shifts the focus, which I think is more important these days with what's happening around the world—what brings us together, where do we have common ground, what's important, and don't focus on what's not important. God is not important to me, but I know it is important to a lot of people.

I don't want to minimize that. For me, the fact that I don't believe God exists is not the most important thing.

**Now, you're part of International Humanist and Ethical Youth Organization (IHEYO). Together, we're on the Americas Working Group for IHEYO. What other, if any, humanist organizations are you involved in? What roles and responsibilities come with them—stated and unstated?**

I am involved with 2 or 3 that are all connected. I am part of FES, which is the Future of Ethical Societies. My role in that hasn't been too prominent because I spent the last year abroad, so I was limited in the things I could do. I did join FES after high school basically, and started going to

the yearly conferences and was involved in planning in some of those conferences—not as of late, but I did have some roles.

For a year, I was the liaison to the AEU, American Ethical Union. My responsibilities in that were to call in on some of the AEU board meeting calls, which were very long. I'm not sure if I added too much to them, but it was interesting to see how they work, what kinds of things they do, and what those calls are like. I did attend the AEU conference in Chicago. I helped lead a workshop along with Emily Newman.

I was a FES representative for resolutions AEU passes on current events—like statements on what we think about climate change or gay rights. Now, I am back. Hopefully, I will get more involved in that, especially with the conference coming up. But now that I am also back in Chicago because I went to college in Iowa, I am now attending the local ethical society most Sundays. I listen to the platform.

There are actually some young people my age who are coming, which is exciting. Hopefully, we can begin to build the Chicago young group of the ethical humanists and hopefully get them involved in FES and IHEYO. So that's obviously related. Then there's IHEYO. I was involved after Xavier got us in there. He was the main person in charge of the Americas Working Group. I helped him out for a while as a secretary.

We were both working on outreach and what the Americas Working Group looks like, how we want it to look. There were leadership transitions. Now, it is looking very promising. Basically, we are looking on expanding our network. Now, we have Canada & America in North America, and South America, at the same time. [Laughing] It is for the first time, which is awesome.

Obviously, there are a lot of long-term goals, but, for now, I think expanding the network and working on things together, having calls, and planning. Helping where needed, I speak Spanish, so I can help with South American outreach too.

**In America, within the Americas, there are concerns within the public about the ability to practice and advocate for ethical humanism, humanism, even possibly secularism.**

**[Laughing] From your vantage, because you have a longer life history in humanism that I do, who or what do you see as the main impediments or threats to the practice, or advocacy, of humanism?**

If we're talking about the current political atmosphere in the U.S.—although, there's a lot to worry about with our current government, I don't think there's too much of a threat specifically against the humanist community. I think we're still going to do what we're going to do. I don't think they can do too much about us. Also, I don't think we're at the forefront of who they want to target. There are concerns about certain religious groups or people driving certain religious agendas, which I don't agree with and don't need to get into.

I don't see it as a sincere threat to the humanist community—at least in the U.S.; there are areas in Central and South America where humanists or non-believers do see more of a threat. Maybe, I am misinformed, but I don't think there is too much of a battle for us, comparatively. At least

our society, we're not supposed to proselytize, which we don't—at least I don't think we're trying to convert everyone to our side. [Laughing] We're trying to open our arms and let them know we exist because there are a lot of people that think like us and don't know that there's a wider community that they can be a part of.

That's what a lot of people are missing, especially if they belong to a church and leave the church. They miss the community. Hopefully, they can see us as somewhere to go. Also, if you look at the numbers, our numbers are growing. They don't have to physically attend an ethical society. But I think nonbelievers are on the rise as far as I know.

**You made an important note there by saying that we don't want to proselytize. In the question, I said advocacy was the concern. In traditional religious structures, it is encouraged for members to proselytize, which seems different than advocacy to me. I think humanism and ethical societies can advocate without proselytizing. Do you think that's a fair and reasonable distinction?**

Yes, I do. I think it is difficult, but I do think you're right. It is just like, "How do we go about it?" It is something I have been struggling with for a while. [Laughing]

**[Laughing] What are your hopes for humanism and ethical societies within your lifetime?**

On a global scale, I would like to see humanists, free-thinkers—or really anyone from any religious background for that matter—free from persecution. In the U.S., one thing I would like to see, at least in my society—maybe, other societies are going about it in a different way—is a re-energizing of the ethical action committee. I would like to see that expand and grow and become more effective because I think a lot of people come to these societies—and I know not all ethical humanists attend these societies, and they don't exist everywhere yet—to listen to these great lectures every week and leave with things to think about from these talks.

But there's a disconnect in actually doing things about it, especially in this day and age when we need someone—everyone—to be doing something about what's going on. Personally, in my own society, I would like to step up in the ethical action committee and have our presence at all of the protests, have our space also used for organizing. I would really like the societies to become more involved in interfaith activities, movements—reach out to all different kinds of places of worships, e.g. churches, and synagogues and mosques, and try to bring all different religions together. I think, in 2017 and going forward, we need not only to co-exist, but also co-resist.

There's a collective benefit in increasing mutual understanding and to be there in mutual solidarity, especially when we see Jewish cemeteries being destroyed and Muslim communities being gunned down in their mosques while they pray and Black churchgoers being shot while they also pray. I think it is important to reach out and tell them we're there to help and increase understanding of the different religions because I think that's a big impediment to where we're at these days. People will fear and hate what they don't know.

**Thank you for your time, Julia.**

# **Islamist Pleads Guilty to Planned Bomb Attacks in London**

**April 28, 2017**

**Scott Douglas Jacobsen**

19-year-old named Haroon Syed from Hounslow, west London, has pleaded guilty to the charge of making homemade bombs and to the plot to use them.

Syed researched the possible bombing of an Elton John concert or Buckingham Palace. He was at the Old Bailey when “researching, planning and attempting to source” the necessary tools for the bomb.

He attempted to acquire the weapons materials online. Then he looked for busy areas online. The intent was to inflict a “mass casualty attack” on the public in the area. He talked online with British Security Service officers.

The officers posed as extremists to help with the sourcing of the weapons. He pleaded guilty to a plot running from April to September 2016 to get materials for a bomb to stage attacks. The judge, Michael Topolski, stressed Syed this was “a grave offence, and he would consider if a life sentence was merited.”

The young man’s brother, Nadir, who is 24, was convicted and jailed for life based on the plotted beheading of a poppy-seller or police community support officer on Remembrance Sunday. The Elton John concert was on the 9/11 anniversary, when planes were flown into the Twin Towers in New York.

At a previous hearing, the court heard how key evidence was gathered from Syed’s communications with the fake contact, Abu Yusuf, via mobile phone and social media. Syed asked for ‘gear’ for his ‘opp’ and when asked to give details, he said he needed a machine gun and an explosive vest.

A police officer pretended to be Abu Yusuf when Syed and him met at the Costa Coffee in Slough. The conversation was taped. “Throughout August, the discussions continued about making or getting a bomb and acquiring a gun, even though Syed confessed he had never used one before.

Syed was looking for a portable device, saying, “I might put the bomb in the train and then I’m going to jump out so the bomb explodes on the train... So ask the brother if he can make that type of bomb with button.”

He had done extensive research into locations, prior terrorist incidents, and the Islamic State. On September 8, the police moved in, seized Syed’s phone, and acquired the password for the phone from him.

Syed was arrested in September 2016 and when detained by officers said 'alright'. He told an undercover officer of his desire to get bomb-making material and was inspired by Isis.

## Q&A on Life in London with Pamela Machado

April 29, 2017

Scott Douglas Jacobsen and Pamela Machado

*Pamela Machado is a contributor to Conatus News, and a journalist based in London, UK. She took some time to sit down and talk about life in London. Here are her thoughts.*

**Scott Jacobsen:** You went on a bold trip to London for a young person. The story needs some background, which we have discussed and will explore in this Q&A. The ups and downs, the pluses and minuses, and the personal triumphs and tribulations with life in London. To begin, when did London seem like the more desirable place for you?

**Pamela Machado:** Like many of the people here, I used to see London as the capital of the world, as the most exciting place to be. Being an eighteen-year-old in a small town in Southern Brazil, I had desires which couldn't be fulfilled at home. I wanted passionately to become a journalist and travel and London seemed the place to be when you want these things.

**SJ:** London is a desirable place. It has an appeal as a global hub for culture and innovation, especially youth culture and education. How did you come to the conclusion at 18 to leave to London? Was this an instant choice or a slow, incremental development?

**PM:** Leaving to London was the final result of various moments of dissatisfaction I had back home. It felt the right moment to come here because I didn't have much to lose.

**SJ:** Travel is an exciting prospect, but the stress and anxiety resulting from new travels into a new place can be both exhilarating and crippling, it's fun to see and do new things, but it's nice to have family and friends from the previous life to bolster and encourage the new life.

**PM:** For a good part of my time here I lived with the excitement. I was excited about all the different things and people I am surrounded by. It felt as if I could never get bored or get disappointed because it would always be a new place, a new person. Probably around after the first year, a new feeling started to grow. I suddenly came to realise that I was getting used to life in London and London felt as much as any other place. The normal frustrations of life hit me, along with longing from home. Coping with the high cost of life, working on pubs and cafes on weekends, leaving with strangers... all that add up to my starting to feel overwhelmed.

**SJ:** It must be stressful without someone to reach out to, being away from home without too many contacts, especially being an introvert. Also, how tenuous can friendships in London be? Is there fast turnover of friendships? Are there lasting relationships more often than not?

**PM:** As a foreigner in London, most of my interpersonal relationships are with other foreigners. It is just as enriching as it is fragile. I don't have any official numbers here, but most foreigners leave London at some point. They go back to their home country or go somewhere else, in many cases because they are tired of life in the city. Most of the friends I made are not here anymore.



We eventually keep in touch but it is not the same. A true, lasting friendship takes years to be built.

**SJ: There is an “it.” It comes and goes when in a new place and feeling as if without bearings. Have you found out what “it” is?**

**PM:** I discovered it is important to keep things under perspective, always remember myself how much I have conquered and grown by being here. However, for most of the time, I find myself stuck in a mental spin, lost in the thought of things I need to do. People walking around London are usually so busy, rushing somewhere and it is contagious. Anxiety can be a really big problem over here and it definitely is to me. Competition is tough and the pressure one puts on oneself to succeed in London can be insane. No wonder London is the city with the highest mental illness rate in the UK.

**SJ: A not common, but more frequent, phenomenon of women outpacing male peers in education and work, then hitting 25-35 and thinking, “Uh oh, what will I do from 40-80?” For many, not all, people, it becomes family – possibly children – and friends rather than work and hobbies. It can be a tough dynamic, which, reproductively and professionally speaking, can make women’s lives more complicated and difficult than men.**

**PM:** I understand your point and even though I haven’t figured out exactly what I want for my later life, I do appreciate the presence of friends and family in life. Relationships and work life shouldn’t oppose each other – like happens in many cases, unfortunately. They should act together. A professional achievement has a lot more sense when it is shared with the ones will love. Coming from a tiring day of work to an empty home is not exactly a happy goal but it is what happens to many.

**SJ: Only question that comes to mind for me that I feel as though you would want an answer to is, “What now?” So, what now?**

**PM:** As someone from a small town in the south of Brazil, and as an eighteen-year-old, I wanted to travel and be part of a world that was unknown to me. I came here, left my family, my friends, university and came here. I wanted to study Journalism – which I’m now doing, I wanted to be here and grow but somehow it is not as good as I thought it would be – like everything in life, I guess?

There is a saying in London that you become a true Londoner after four years in the city. Well, more than four years later, I am still here and one could say I am doing pretty well in life. Yet, I did not achieve the fulfillment I expected I would get when I hopped on that plane. The ultimate question is; how can I feel fulfilled?

I mean, doing a general balance, I’m happy. I don’t regret any of my decisions. But this journey led me to value my roots and my people in a more meaningful way, and eventually open my mind to different possibilities.



# Open Speculation on Alien Life and the Durability of Religion

April 29, 2017

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

According to **The Guardian**, it is uncertain as to the origin of life on other planets orbiting other stars. **NASA**'s current count of exoplanets – planets capable of hosting life as we know it – is at 3,500. Six are thought to be similar candidates to Earth.

With advancements in technology, researchers suspect possible discovery of life similar to Earth's on an exoplanet. Two decades ago, this was more uncertain because of less advanced technology and fewer candidate exoplanets.

"...contact with intelligent life elsewhere in the universe will present theological and philosophical conundrums that many religions will find deeply challenging. This is especially true for Christianity, which primarily focuses on humankind."

One core education in Christian theology asserts the creation of humankind by God with the flora and fauna of the Earth, and the Earth itself, made for human beings. Alien life has moved from the scientific into the theological now.

NASA invested \$1.1 million into the Center of Theological Inquiry, which is an independent institution devoted to the study of the implications for society based on the research findings from astrobiology.

"The idea of infinite space with the infinite glory of God originated with **Nicholas of Cusa**, a German philosopher who kept his infinite theology within the Catholic framework. In 2017, such philosophical thoughts have given way to practical science..."

The theological inquiries begin with God's creation possibly existing outside of Earth's solar system. Outside of the Solar System, others might exist with life, even intelligent life with civilizations and technology – and religion.

"If so, would the inhabitants of those planets believe in the same gods as humans do? How could the creator of the universe deny the inhabitants of those worlds a chance to redeem their sins? Does that mean that God incarnated as Jesus in those worlds contrary to Bible teachings that say that the redemption in Christ was a unique event meant for humans on Earth?"

"Exotheology" could become a thing; "theological issues as related to extraterrestrial intelligence." Religious institutions, *The Guardian* claims, have been durable with new paradigm shifts.

The scriptures become reinterpreted to suit the times. "There is also, quite simply, something special about religion that resonates with humans on a fundamental level."

“For traditional religions and religious institutions, the desire to expand their material wealth and power has often take precedence over the spreading of theological doctrines.” The Earth and humankind have been exploited by it.

The Guardian author speculates that the Copernican or Darwinian revolutions did not overturn the established religious institutions – outside of ideas and some basic views – “in a significant way.”

“The triumph of these institutions is analogous to the audacity of organisms when facing challenges in nature. Religious institutions possess impressive survival skills, greater than individual human abilities.”

# New Robot Can Ask for Clarification

April 29, 2017

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

The **World Economic Forum** (WEF) reported on a new technology which is a combination of natural language processing, speech recognition, biometrics, video analytics, neural networks, and other computational processes. The novel algorithm allows robots to ask for clarification if unsure as to the request from a human operator. The algorithm permits robots to receive speech commands and information based on human gesturing. It is one form of information processing and commanding human beings use consistently.

Professor of computer science at Brown University, Stefanie Tellex, said, “Fetching objects is an important task that we want collaborative robots to be able to do...But it’s easy for the robot to make errors, either by misunderstanding what we want, or by being in situations where commands are ambiguous.”

It is non-verbal communication. When given the speech and gestural command, the robot was better at interpretation of the information than either one alone. Of course, computers can run into problems. This is one important reason for this new algorithm to allow computers to be able to understand human commands.

“When we ask someone for an object, we’ll often point to it at the same time. The new research shows that when robots received both speech commands and gestures, they got better at correctly interpreting user commands.” Tellex said.

If the computer is needed to only understand the question or query, and also to get information for the answer appropriately or to act accordingly, it needs to know what is being asked of it. Therefore, the speech and gesture command combination is important for computers now and into the future when given commands by human beings.

Now, the computer does not look to ask a question based on every single uncertainty. It will decipher, calculate, and then ask accordingly in an intelligent manner. The robot had performed so well in one experiment that participants in the study thought that the computer had capabilities that it did not in fact have.

One of the important features of the system is that the robot doesn’t ask questions with every interaction. It asks intelligently. And even though the system asks only a very simple question. The algorithm allows the robot to make inferences based on the answer.

The research was presented at the **International Conference on Robotics and Automation** in Singapore, and received funding from the Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency and NASA.

# Q&A on Atheism, Women's Rights, and Human Rights with Marie Alena Castle – Session 1

April 29, 2017

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

Marie Alena Castle is the communications director for Atheists for Human Rights. She was raised Roman Catholic, but became an atheist. She has been important to atheism, Minnesota Atheists, *The Moral Atheist*, National Organization of Women, and wrote *Culture Wars: The Threat to Your Family and Your Freedom* (2013). She has a lifetime of knowledge and activist experience, which I wanted to explore and crystallise in an educational series. Here are the results.

**Scott Jacobsen:** You have a lifetime of experience in atheism, women's rights, and human rights. Of course, you were raised a Catholic, but this changed over the course of life. In fact, you have raised a number of children who became atheists themselves, and have been deeply involved in the issues on the political left around women's rights and human rights.

**To start this series, what has been the major impediment to the progress of women's rights in the United States over the last 17 years?**

**Marie Alena Castle:** It's actually at least the last 40 years. In the U.S., control of women is no longer about the right to vote or pursue careers. Those battles have been won. What is left is the religious right's last stand: women's right to abortion and the ultimate control over their own bodies. An anti-women legislative agenda began and has been going on ever since the Supreme Court's 1973 *Roe v Wade* decision.

Almost immediately, the U.S. Catholic Bishops established a Pastoral Plan for Pro-Life Activities that reached down to every Catholic parish in the country. The bishops recruited Catholic academics, journalists, and political commentators to disseminate "pro-life" propaganda. They drew in Protestant fundamentalists and provided them with leaders such as Jerry Falwell. They organized to get "pro-life" politicians elected at every political level and eventually took over the Republican party.

I was there and watched it happen. We Democratic feminists worked almost non-stop to prevent a similar takeover of the Democratic party and, thankfully, were successful. The "pro-life" campaign has never stopped. Over a thousand bills have been, and are, proposed at the state and federal level to restrict women's access to contraceptives and abortion, as well as advantageous reproductive technologies that don't conform to irrational religious doctrines.

(Stephen Mumford has documented this in full detail in his book, *The Life and Death of NSSM 200*, which describes how the Catholic Church prevented any action on a Nixon-era national security memorandum that warned of the dangers of overpopulation and advocated the accessibility of contraceptives and abortion.)

**Jacobsen: Who do you consider the most important women's rights and human rights activist in American history?**

**Castle:** No contest. It's Margaret Sanger, hands down. Many people have spoken out and worked for women's rights throughout history, not just American history. But Sanger got us birth control. Without that, women remain slaves to nature's reproductive mandate and can do little beyond producing and raising children.

This is often claimed to be a noble task. True enough. However, it always reminds me of the biblical story of Moses, who had the noble task of leading his people to the Promised Land, but because of some vague offense against Yahweh, he was condemned to see that Promised Land only from afar and never go there himself.

Women have raised children over the ages and have led them to the Promised Land of scientific achievements, Noble Prize Awards, academic honours, and so many others. But they – and their daughters – have seen that Promised Land only from afar and almost never allowed to go there themselves.

Sanger opened a path to that Promised Land by fighting to make contraceptives legal and available. The ability to control the time and circumstances of one's childbearing has made the fight for women's rights achievable in practical – not just philosophical – terms. She founded Planned Parenthood and we see how threatening that has been to the theocratic religious right. They can't seem to pass – or try to pass – enough laws to hinder women's ability to control their own bodies.

As for human rights in general, a good argument can be made that by freeing women – half of the human population – we free up everyone. As Robert Ingersoll said, "There will never be a generation of great men until there has been a generation of free women."

**Jacobsen: What is one of the more egregious public perceptions of atheists by the mainstream of the religious in America?**

**Castle:** It's that atheists have no moral compass and therefore cannot be trusted to behave in a civilized manner. No one ever comes up with any evidence for that. Most people in prison identify themselves as religious. Studies that rank levels of prejudice for racism, sexism, and homophobia show nonbelievers at the lowest end of the graph – generally below 10% – and evangelicals at the very highest – almost off the chart.

I've had religious people tell me it is religious beliefs that keep people, including themselves, from committing violent crimes. I tell them I hope they hang onto their beliefs because otherwise they would be a threat to public safety. As physicist Steven Weinberg said, "Good people will do good and evil people will do evil, but for good people to do evil, that takes religion." I have known good and evil atheists and good and evil religionists, but the only time I have seen a good person do evil, it was due to a religious belief.

I have also observed that liberal religionists generally share the same humanitarian values as most atheists, but to have that moral sense they had to abandon traditional religious beliefs. There is a lot of evil in religious doctrines. The 10 Commandments are almost totally evil. Read them and the descriptions of the penalties that follow. Read the part about what you are to sacrifice to Yahweh – the firstborn of your livestock, your firstborn son... Yup, that's what it says.

So they include don't kill, steal or bear false witness. There is nothing new about that. It's common civic virtue any community needs to function effectively. So religion promises a blissful afterlife. Ever stop to think what that might be like, forever and ever and ever and ever? People believe that!? I so hope they're wrong.

**Jacobsen: Your life speaks to the convergence of atheism, women's rights, and human rights activism. How do these, in your own mind, weave into a single activist thread? What is the smallest thing American citizens, and youth, can do to become involved in this fabric?**

**Castle:** We all are what we are. I'm an activist because I can't help myself. It's who I am. Others would rather hang by their thumbs than do what I do. They like to get out in the yard and do gardening. You couldn't pay me enough or threaten me enough to get me to do that. We should just try to be honest and compassionate and cut everyone some slack as long as no one is getting hurt. Live and let live.

We are a fragile species, making the best of our short life spans, stuck here on this hunk of rock circling a ball of flaming gas that could eject a solar flare at any time that wipes us out. Life is, as Shakespeare said, "full of sound and fury, signifying nothing." Just accept that. It's reality. Just be decent and helpful and try not to hurt anyone. If that's the limit of your activism, it's still pretty good.

If you think it would be great to be able to do more and to be politically active but that is just not in your DNA, then settle for the next best thing: Find a political activist whose views you agree with and vote the way they tell you. That is the smallest thing you can do. If you did not vote in the last election you made yourself part of the problem and you see what we got. From now on, try to be part of the solution.

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