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Scott Douglas Jacobsen



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Scott

Yes, Canada Passed An Anti-Islamophobia Motion. Yes, We Should Be Worried.

November 8, 2016

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

Sometimes, a Canadian approach to communication, with tact and politeness, can, in no doubt well-intentioned civility, leave out vital truths. Petition e-411 became passed not too long ago. I like most of it. “We, the undersigned, Citizens and residents of Canada, call upon the House of Commons to join us in recognizing that extremist individuals do not represent the religion of Islam, and in condemning all forms of Islamophobia,” petition e-411 concluded. Mr. Samer Majzoub from Pierrefonds, Quebec, submitted the petition on June 8 at 5:45am (EST). The Canadian House of Commons adopted the petition to raucous applause.

In full, petition e-411, which garnered 69,742 supporters, contains truths about issues important to every Canadian community based on the hate crimes faced by individual Muslim citizens and groups because these individuals and communities are fellow individual Canadians and their respective communities. Petition e-411 stated:

1. *Islam is a religion of over 1.5 billion people worldwide. Since its founding more than 1400 years ago, Muslims have contributed, and continue to contribute, to the positive development of human civilization. This encompasses all areas of human endeavors including the arts, culture, science, medicine, literature, and much more;*
2. *Recently an infinitesimally small number of extremist individuals have conducted terrorist activities while claiming to speak for the religion of Islam. Their actions have been used as a pretext for a notable rise of anti-Muslim sentiments in Canada; and*
3. *These violent individuals do not reflect in any way the values or the teachings of the religion of Islam. In fact, they misrepresent the religion. We categorically reject all their activities. They in no way represent the religion, the beliefs and the desire of Muslims to co-exist in peace with all peoples of the world.*

The denouncement, the denunciation, and the resistance of hatred, internal and external, seems like a good thing in most cases to me (of course, tolerance of the intolerance can be bad, too).

Denunciation of hatred, prejudice, and bias against religious individuals based on their religion seems like a good thing. It's contestable whether Islam as a set of beliefs and suggested practices is actually represented in its full by the individual, ordinary Muslim, or even the Muslim community in Canada at large. Petition e-411 appears as good-intentioned, half-truths, in this light. That is, Muslims and the Muslim community appear to follow the doctrine, practices, and beliefs of Islam, as with other religious systems, texts, individual religious community members, and the larger religion's community to one degree or another.

The claims in the beginning of the petition remain true. I respect ordinary believers of all faiths everywhere in addition to the noble aspects of the traditions and the contributions to global civilization over millennia. Muslim scientists, philosophers, and leaders have contributed consistently to global civilization for ~1,400 years. Individuals and majorities of societies have done so following some, most, or all of the tenets of Islam - positive things done in the name of

Islam deserving of praise. Indeed, the same, or similar at least, argument applies to Christianity for ~2,000, for instance. More positive things deserving approbation. In simultaneity, while speaking of history and religion, individuals and societies committed aggression in words and violence in deeds, with the majority, following some, most, or all of the tenets of Islam (or Christianity). Both the positive and the negative remain true in historical contexts for ~1,400 years. Petition e-411 states truths on the positives and leaves out the negatives in the ~1,400-year history of the religion. Canadian politeness and tact seem like concerns in this context, of communication of “good-intentioned, half-truths,” to me.

I hold other mild concerns with petition e-411 - namely, the amorphous term "Islamophobia." On the one hand, hate crime laws can cover the ongoing, deplorable, mildly prejudice, hate, and violence against individual Muslims (or fellow Canadian citizens), e.g. women harassed with racial slurs, and forced to wear or not wear religious symbols, and vandalization of religious community property, e.g. setting ablaze important community buildings like Mosques, which implies denouncement of other religious, ethnic, or gender based bias as well - verbal, emotional, social, and physical. If that is meant by the term, I affirm NDP leader Mulcair in his approval of petition e-411.

Neither persons nor property of communities deserve such ill-treatment. On the other hand, those well-meaning within and without Muslim communities sometimes conflate criticism of religious beliefs, ideas, and practices with ridicule of individual believers or communities thereof. Indeed, some, in an irony fitting for Monty Python, have critiqued those critiquing Islamic principles as "racist", thereby shedding light not on the minds of the accused but of the accusers. The non-scientific, by which I mean non-taxonomical, idea of ‘race’ needs to be kept in mind to claim to read racism in others' hearts and minds, often where it is neither justified nor present. Besides, Islam equates to ideas and acts - theology plus recommended practice, not people or a race. If that is meant, then I disagree with Mr. Mulcair. However, as this term proliferates, knowingly or unwittingly, in its vague, ill-defined form, both interpretations seem dependent on the individual. Signatories to petition e-411 might sign with one interpretation or the other in mind. That's another problem. Hence, the opening about half-truths.

It amounts to well-intentioned half-falsehoods in some ways and truths in others. These extremists and terrorists don't represent all Muslims, but the implication appears to be that Muslims can't be extremists and terrorists because extremists and terrorists aren't "Muslims". You see the problem -that's not true. The violent extremists and terrorists from religions represent terrorists' and extremists' interpretations of religions, as, for this example, the majority ordinary Muslims represent the ordinary interpretation of Islam. To only see the negative would be anti-Islamic bias, to act on it would be anti-Muslim prejudice, it's like sexism. To only see the negative seems like hostile sexism, men appear all bad or women appear all bad. To only see the positive seems like benevolent sexism, men appear all good or women appear all good. The undercurrent, respectfully, is Mr. Samer Mazjoub, and the non-partisan set of signatories, speak for those “over 1.5 billion people worldwide.” They are guilty of that which they criticise, stereotyping - benevolently stereotyping, especially as the signatories and Mr. Mazjoub speak for a sector, but not even close to the entirety, of the Muslim community. Indeed, and therefore, to only see the positive, as petition e-411 does in one religion, is to be benevolently prejudiced for a religion, and in this case for Islam. (Q.E.D.)

My hope and expression in solidarity with ordinary Canadian Muslims, as with Mr. Samer Majzoub and the sector of the Canadian-Muslim population that he represents, is to "categorically reject all" extremist activities, but, in contradistinction to him on a crucial point requisite for a panoramic perspective, with acknowledgement of the extremist activities as an interpretation of Islam with real consequences by an "infinitesimally small number." We live in the developed world's upper echelons of well-being and standard of living in a culture bent towards politeness and tact. It is too easy to speak of the good of religion alone because the environment of Canada in general remains positive. The act of speaking in honest terms would neither embolden enemies nor diminish allies, but represent the breadth of religion via acknowledgement of the good *and* the bad.

Supernatural and Paranormal Beliefs Linked to Worse Comprehension of the Natural World

Benedict Nicholson and Scott Douglas Jacobsen

November 4, 2016

Recent research out of the University of Helsinki notes that those with supernatural belief systems understand the world less than those without them. The study notes that those with supernatural or paranormal beliefs comprehend the material world less, and instead explain events in terms of supernatural entities and paranormal activities.

Supernatural in this context means something beyond the natural, whether entities, energies, or forces. Paranormal means something occurring without scientific explanation. In short, these are related ideas in opposition to the natural and that which can be explained by science, or occurrences that are describable by science in principle.

“In the results, it was found that religious people usually act on instinct over critical or analytical thinking,” Mo4ch News said. Put another way, the basis of the relationship between critical thinking and supernatural/paranormal beliefs is negative whilst the relation between critical thinking and naturalistic beliefs is positive.

The study took 258 people of Finnish origin and asked them to what extent they believed in an “all-powerful, all-knowing, loving God” before being asked about their beliefs in what we might term paranormal events, such as ghosts and telepathy. Their answers were then matched with results on analytical and critical thinking tasks.

According to RedOrbit ‘The researchers found that people who believed in an all-powerful, omniscient deity, as well as those who believed in the supernatural, were comparable to those with autism spectrum disorders in that they struggled to understand the realities of the world in which they lived.’

In further detail, the original research paper, by Marjaana Lindeman, Annika M. Svedholm-Häkkinen, and Tapani Riekk, entitled Skepticism: *Genuine unbelief or implicit beliefs in the supernatural?* (2016), highlighted three main points and had three studies.

For the highlights, first, an examination of explicit and implicit religious and non-religious supernatural beliefs. Second, the level of skeptic implicit supernatural beliefs. Third, the “non-analytic skeptics” supported “confusions” that might predispose individuals to various supernaturalistic beliefs.

According to the outline of the study:

‘Study 1 had 57 subject read a religious and a naturalistic story about death. Study 2 looked into the relations between religious and non-religious paranormal beliefs and implicit views on the imaginary/real status of religious and supernatural phenomena. Study 3 had 63 subjects researched under speeded and non-speeded conditions. The third study was to parse subjects’ “supernatural beliefs and ontological confusions” in those tests based on rapidity of responses.’

“The results indicate that skeptics overall do not hold implicit supernatural beliefs,” Lindeman et al said, “but that non-analytically thinking skeptics may, under supporting conditions, be prone to biases that predispose to supernatural beliefs.”

Russia Today reported that scientific “explanations for physical and biological things such as flowers, volcanoes and wind were less likely to be understood by those with religious or supernatural beliefs.”

Our extrapolation from the findings of the study is that one’s way of knowing the world evolved from supernatural, paranormal, or religious beliefs to more critically grounded naturalistic beliefs. To us, the reports and the research, even though only one study, seem to indicate preliminary indications for the development of critical thinking marked by the transition from supernatural to natural epistemologies. Man species with one identity.

Secularism as Equal Opportunity for All

November 4, 2016

The Economic Times recently reported on a Supreme Court consideration concerning the role of secularism in India. There is an ongoing, heated debate about the role of religion in attempts to garner votes by politicians. Is it good or bad? Could religion (and caste) in India be used to instill “hatred during elections?” It’s an important question. The Supreme Court decision read thus, “Secularism does not mean aloofness to religion but [giving] equal treatment to every religion.

Religion and caste are vital aspects of our public life. Can it be possible to completely separate religion and caste from politics?” It is a point for further reflection on the international state of secularism, especially coming from the world’s largest democracy. There’s over a billion people in India.

It is important to note that secularism is, by definition, the provision of equal opportunity for all religious and nonreligious citizens within secular states, which tends to mean secular democracies. Societies dominated by religion are normally little more than theocracies; one need only look at Iran and Saudi Arabia for current, living examples. Secularism seems to us a prerequisite for democratic ideals, such as egalitarianism, self-determination, and freedom of conscience, to proliferate and flourish.

In a similar manner to the fundamental democratic ideal of ‘one person, one vote’ as well, the enshrinement of secularism in the constitution, in law, and in larger society mean the flattening of the landscape of privileges and rights enjoyed by one belief system over another. Secularism is the freedom to dissent from the majority viewpoint, to stand up for the ideals in which you believe as an individual, and see them given equal merit, regardless of your identity.

No belief system, religious or irreligious, should be above any other by democratic standards. Secularism ensures it, too. In contradistinction to the opposing instantiation of all religion over nonreligion, or one religion over other religions (and irreligion), secularism does not permit the generalised bias, prejudice against, or tacit preference of one belief system over another. It makes for a fairer, more just, society. A society conducive to the implementation of human rights, which are universal values.

This is not something that we are merely saying for the sake of it. Rather, we are recalling the first line in the *Preamble* of the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which states:

“Whereas recognition of the inherent dignity and of the equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family is the foundation of freedom, justice and peace in the world,”

The “equal” status of everyone, whatever group they might, more or less, belong to, and the “freedom” and “justice” in the globe can be further assured with the introduction of secularism into democratic societies. Indeed, it might not be the key to democratic ideals, but, certainly, it is deeply tied to the greater opening angle of the door once unlocked. “Inalienable” is not

something to be taken lightly. It is of tremendous import in secular, democratic, pluralistic societies because, no matter the individual citizen's status, they have been promised, in the highest international document on human rights that they deserve those rights.

We find statements reflecting the kind of egalitarianism that should inevitably come with secularism throughout the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, if you will indulge us while we list a few examples: in the Preamble, we see "highest aspiration of the common people...human rights should be protected by the rule of law...equal rights of men and women..."; in Article 1, "All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights"; in Article 2, "Everyone is entitled to all the rights and freedoms set forth in this Declaration, without distinction of any kind, such as race, colour, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, property, birth or other status"; in Article 6, "Everyone has the right to recognition everywhere as a person before the law"; in Article 7, "All are equal before the law and are entitled without any discrimination to equal protection of the law"; and 'punched' home in Article 28, "Everyone is entitled to a social and international order in which the rights and freedoms set forth in this Declaration can be fully realised." The coda to all of that: equality for all, before the law.

Not a bad starting point, is it? And it is one that can come exclusively through secular values. And as, quite succinctly, described at the outset, secular values ensure the freedom to and from the belief systems of individuals in any society; whereas, the lack of secularism can prevent, and quite likely eventually destroy, that freedom and its basis for pluralism in a society devoid of ideological conflict between individuals holding one belief system or another.

Secularism and freedom of religion enshrined in the very constitutions and legal systems are the most reasonable route that we see towards a fairer, more equal society. Any country or indeed legal district that privileges one religion over another, or one system of beliefs over another in law is inherently discriminatory from its very inception. How can we fight for greater rights for minorities and those discriminated against when a significant portion of the population would already face biases and roadblocks from the birth of a country's legal system? The answer is, of course, that it is impossible, and that is why secularism should be, and indeed is, the only way.

111 (Votes) to 1: the Not-So Golden Ratio

Scott Douglas Jacobsen and Angelos Sofocleous

January 3, 2017

International rights stipulations provide the basis for fundamental human rights. As Ban Ki-Moon has said, “We are all different from one another, but we all have the same human rights. I am proud to stand for the equality of all people - including those whose are lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender.”

Numerous resolutions, from both the Human Rights Council and the General Assembly, make human rights inclusive of LGBT peoples, and LGBT rights distinct and important too. These are not some distant considerations, but immediate, impacting people’s lives, and violated on a consistent basis - hour-by-hour. One recent national event, from Chad, came from a distressing ratio of votes - 111 to 1 - and reiterated this perennial truism

Last month, Chad’s National Assembly voted for a new penal code which criminalises homosexuality with 111 MPs voting for it, 1 against and 4 abstaining. This made Chad the 77th country internationally, and was the 37th country in Africa to criminalise homosexuality. Under the new law, people engaging in homosexual acts can be heavily fined (£60-£600) or serve a 20-year prison sentence.

In fact, according to a legal report by the US Library of Congress all African states, with the exception of South Africa, recognises and permits same-sex marriage. More specifically, in Nigeria, Sudan and Mauritania, homosexuality is punishable by death. This action of Chad’s National Assembly comes after Gambia passed a bill imposing life imprisonment for homosexual acts.

The fact that the vast majority - only 1 exception and 4 abstentions - of Chad’s National Assembly supported the new penal code is worrying. This bill was also supported by the country’s former Prime Minister, Delwa Kassiré Coumakoye, who mentioned that “homosexuality is condemned by all religions. We do not have to forgive something that God himself rejects because Westerners have said this or that”.

There are two issues we need to discuss here: First, the fact that religion plays a role in determining what is legal and what is not. Second, the fact that the former Prime Minister considers that it is a strong point of the new penal code that it does not conform to “Western” styles and principles.

In an era that nations fight for secularism, supporting the complete separation of church and state, some African nations, including Chad, make decisions solely on religious grounds. What is more, Chad’s cabinet mentioned that the new penal code intends to “protect the family and to comply with Chadian society”. It is indeed a worrying fact how nations, like Chad, commit the argumentum ad antiquitatem (appeal to tradition) fallacy and base a whole penal code on tradition, family values and religion.

There is no reason or logic involved in supporting the new penal code apart from subjective statements of this nature. And it is scary to think that because of subjective

statements people are going to end up in prison or get heavily fined. The former PM even called the bill a “fair balance”. This leaves us wondering, however, what may ever be “fair” about the bill when it criminalises basic human rights.

Furthermore, there is every reason to argue that anti-Westernisation is not considered a valid reason for supporting the country’s new penal code. In fact, it shows quite the opposite - its weaknesses. First of all, the issue is not even about what Western countries do. It’s what humans do. As the great journalist and religious critic Christopher Hitchens has said: “I say that homosexuality is not just a form of sex, it’s a form of love — and it commands our respect for that reason”.

Granting homosexuals the right to engage in relationships, sexual acts or marry is itself the same right we are talking about when talking about heterosexuals. No difference is or should be made. In fact, criminalising homosexuality is itself an act that does not serve to protect people of any society or tradition as it on its very basis does not take into consideration that a respected part of the population is attracted to people of the same sex, or even to people of both sexes. Any appeal to religion or tradition fails to provide us with a logical basis on which to support the claims that supporters of Chad’s new penal code which punishes homosexuality make.

Indeed, this “form of love” can be outlawed, and made extraordinarily risky and even lethal in its practice because of cultural and legal factors. Take, for example, the case of Tanzania suspending the outreach programmes for HIV. Why would there be a suspension for outreach programmes for HIV? The reason: homosexuality is outlawed within Tanzania and, therefore, within the logic of the system, seen as not worth considering for appropriate, and needed, outreach for HIV.

And it is not like there aren’t campaigns devoted to the implementation of the international rights via international movements - the UN Free & Equal is one such campaign, and “is an unprecedented United Nations global public education campaign for lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) equality” (OHCHR, 2016b). These are old prejudices, and they keep cropping up. Again, why? It is easier to hate than to love, at least in the short-term.

Which leads back to the international Moral-Educator-in-Chief, Ban Ki-Moon, who said, “It is an outrage that in our modern world so many countries continue to criminalise people simply for loving another human being of the same sex...Laws rooted in 19th century prejudices are fuelling 21st century hate.”

50 Shades of A-theism: A Compendium of Discrimination Against Atheists

Emile Yusupoff and Scott Douglas Jacobsen

November 8, 2016

It may seem hyperbolic to describe atheists as an oppressed minority from the standpoint of living in a Western secular liberal democracy. However, from a global perspective, and even in developed countries that purportedly cherish freedom of belief, atheists face endemic and systemic legal and cultural discrimination, even to the point of death based on their beliefs. The main, real bastions for the non-religious in the world, especially atheists, are China and Western Europe.

That is, from the standpoint of the average citizen living a decent life in Western Europe and (to a lesser extent) North America, the idea that atheists are an oppressed minority may seem outlandish. The claim can seem odd at face-value true because atheists in numerous countries in these regions of the world experience tremendous freedom from a historical perspective. This can be used positively or negatively. But that's what freedom means. It may entail responsibilities, but people should be free to live up to this or not.

However, the freedom of religion in the sense that the state does not actively impose particular beliefs does not necessarily translate to societal tolerance and respect. In the United States, for example, atheists are widely mistrusted and viewed as inherently immoral. There are Gallup, and other polls and studies, indicating that atheists are the most negatively viewed demographic, and particularly unsuited for public office.

The perception that being an atheist means being 'un-American' appears to be difficult to combat. Take, for instance, President Barack Obama and Hillary Clinton's rival to be the 2016 Democratic candidate for the presidency of the United States, Bernie Sanders. The mere suggestions or rumours that they were atheists forced explicit and pronounced public denials. It's not that they are, or are not, atheists. It's the public resentment, fear, and loathing (in America, not just Las Vegas) for those that might have explicitly irreligious and atheistic beliefs. There are currently no (open) atheists in Congress.

Similarly, ad hominem criticisms of a public figure's character are often framed in terms of their purported irreligiosity. Hillary Clinton, right now, has been criticised for not attending an art event. And, as a result, has been accused of being a devil worshipper who performs Satanic rituals. Whilst this is an extreme example, it captures the extent to which irreligiosity is used as a proxy for any purported failure of character, real or imagined.

Tragically for a country explicitly founded on freedom of religion, legal discrimination against atheists still exists in many states. Seven US states continue to technically prohibit atheists from holding political office, in spite of this being in violation of the first amendment and article VI of the constitution.

Whilst Europe is comparatively more liberal, it is hardly a beacon of enlightenment either. Discrimination against non-belief and restrictions on criticising religion are prevalent. The

IHEU's 2013 Freedom of Thought report, which analysed the rights and treatment of the non-religious around the world rated no European country other than Kosovo, Netherlands, and Belgium as "free and equal". Switzerland, the UK, and Sweden experience "systemic discrimination", whilst Greece, Denmark, and Germany experience "severe discrimination". There are laws prohibiting blasphemy in Greece, Austria (de facto), Denmark, Poland, Ireland (de facto) and Germany. And it was only very recently that they were repealed in countries including Iceland (2015), Malta (2016), and The Netherlands (2013).

Across the rest of the world, the picture is even worse. Preferential treatment of the religious in Latin America is endemic, particularly due to the Catholic Church's continued influence and control of education (which is more honestly called religious indoctrination).

The most extreme persecution exists in Middle Eastern and North African countries, where, out of 20 countries, apostasy is illegal in 14. This is particularly striking given the growing numbers of non-believers across Muslim-majority countries, meaning that millions of people are affected and threatened by such laws.

Worse, in a total of 13 countries, being an atheist is deemed a crime deserving of capital punishment. As noted by Anna Vesterinen in New Humanist:

- Iran:** Frequent executions of people found guilty of moharebeh (enmity against God) and anti-Islamic propaganda.*
- Mauritania:** Penal code outlaws apostasy, punishable by death if the accused does not repent in three days*
- Maldives:** All Maldivian citizens are required by law to be Muslim. Leaving the religion is punishable by death.*
- Nigeria:** Under some Islamist controlled areas, apostasy is a capital offence.*
- Saudi Arabia:** Apostasy from Wahhabi Sunni Islam punishable by death, as are blasphemy offences. Frequent executions.*
- Somalia:** Especially in areas controlled by the Al-Shabaab, apostasy is punishable by death.*
- Sudan:** Apostasy punishable by death, however, executions rarely take place*
- UAE:** Apostasy from Islam is punishable by death. However, no known prosecutions in court have taken place.*
- Qatar:** Converting from Islam is a capital offence. However, there have not been recorded punishments since the country's independence.*
- Yemen:** Apostasy from Islam is punishable by death, but government does not enforce the death penalty.*

Even where there is no official state sanction, in many countries expressing irreligiosity results in an effective death sentence at the hands of citizens, who in many cases fear no reprisals from the authorities. In fact, in 2015 alone, four secular bloggers were murdered in Bangladesh, with similar events occurring in 2016. These were highly publicised cases, but it cannot be known for sure if they were the only such examples.

Let's take the opposing consideration into account, where are the death penalties in secular democracies for being theists? No. Is this proportional? Not even close. Does the *United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights* have anything to say about freedom of belief? Yes, the *Preamble* states, "human beings shall enjoy freedom of speech and belief"; "Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; this right includes freedom to change his religion or belief, and freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship and observance." There's no extra bit about being able to believe one thing or another, and to then believe one thing or another, and then having to be killed over it based on the whims of the, usually male, conservative, fundamentalist, authorities. Does this make secular democracies for more, just, and aligned with the universal human values determined by the *United Nations in the Universal Declaration on Human Rights*? Yes.

We argue the religious have the right to believe, teach, practice, worship, and observe as they deem fit for their individual selves as does the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*, and without discrimination and fear for their lives; in addition to this direct statement, we argue the irreligious have the right to believe, teach, practice, worship, and observe as they deem fit for their individual selves as does the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*, and without discrimination and fear for their lives. That means atheists, those without a belief a God or gods, simply deserve the same rights and privileges as the others.

Still, it may appear that this is not specifically an issue faced by atheists per se, but rather a problem of religious intolerance generally. For instance, apostasy laws apply to anyone who renounces Islam, regardless of whether they renounce God entirely or, say, develop a special affection for Jesus. However, this misses the extent to which atheists and secularists are explicitly targeted and are regarded as an active *threat* by authorities in religious countries.

Likewise, it is worth noting that even amongst conservative religious states, there is often comparatively greater freedom of worship than there is freedom of belief more generally. In Iran, for instance, although the freedom to practise Judaism or Christianity can only be exercised within limits, atheists have *no official status*, and must identify as belonging to a religion.

And, as discussed, many Western countries that are generally liberal and secular have laws that are specifically prejudicial to the irreligious and have cultures that are actively hostile to non-belief. It is worth noting that even proto-secular champions of freedom of religion, such as Thomas More and John Locke, only extended this liberty to those who did *worship* in some form or another.

Why is this? Why can people reach the stage where they are capable of tolerating worship of a God or gods that is incompatible with their own but not a lack of belief altogether?

We suggest that it comes down to religion being fundamental to many people's identities and sense of right and wrong. For some, this is underpinned by explicit or sublimated fears grounded in supernatural beliefs about eternal fire and torment in Hell. Whilst people of other faiths are not

yet saved, they are fundamentally saveable, given that they also share the basic premise. Atheists do not, so are closer to damnation.

Similarly, for many people God-as-lawgiver is the linchpin of morality. People of other faiths may have different practices and traditions, but they share the same fundamental perspective of acting righteously and avoiding sin. Atheists, by this logic, are inherently predisposed to immorality. As such, there is something especially disconcerting and suspicious about anyone who does not believe in God or the transcendental.

Furthermore, in many countries, such as Saudi Arabia and Iran, religion is intertwined with political authority and national character. At least culturally, a similar phenomenon exists in the US. Atheism is, then, inherently disruptive and threatening to social order. Indeed, across much of the Middle East, it is true that many of the most vocal critics of governing regimes are atheist and secular activists.

Ironically, this simply provides more reason for us to express solidarity with and champion the cause of those, across the globe, who simply demand the freedom to express their beliefs without fear of oppression.

United Nations Says Women are Needed in Peacebuilding Efforts

Scott Douglas Jacobsen and Terry Murray

November 6, 2016

On October 25, 2016 Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon addressed the United Nations Security Council, in an open debate entitled Women, Peace and Security, reaffirmed the urgent need to have women in the security and peace-building operations on the ‘international stage’.

A key goal is equal representation and women’s participation in UN peace processes. “Women have a vital role to play in preventing conflict and building and maintaining peace,” Mr Ban said, “...this is now widely recognised, far too often, women are prevented from full participation in peacemaking and peace-building.”

There is a consistent history of underrepresentation of women and girls in peace and security building operations. The Executive Director of the *United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women* noted the previous Resolution 1325 appeal for women’s inclusion in the peacebuilding process which dates back a full sixteen years from Ki-moon’s address. This shows how little progress has been made on past resolutions and prompted UN women chief Ms. Mlambo-Ngcuka to reiterate that commitments to the further cooperation with women in peace processes should not be on the books alone, but should be incorporated into practice within countries stricken by conflict.

As well, Executive Director of *EVE Organization for Women Development*, Rita Lopidia, speaking for non-government organisations devoted to the Working Group on Women, Peace and Security reaffirmed women's role within "prevention and resolution of conflicts, peace negotiations, peace-building, peacekeeping, humanitarian response and in post-conflict reconstruction." She further emphasised the need to prioritise the protection of girls and women in conflict situations where existing gender injustices are aggravated.

According to Mr. Ki-moon, at the start of the *National Action Plans on Women*, Peace and Security, there were only four countries involved in total, which is simply miniscule and rather piddling. However, over time that number has grown to the present point where there are now sixty-three. That is a remarkable achievement that has allowed the largest marginalised population in the world to be incorporated into the framework, as they should have been from its inception. Many women and girls are affected, their worlds shattered by conflict, which means sexual violence in both conflict and post-conflict contexts. Violent extremist groups such as Boko Haram or ISIL target women and girls in areas activated by conflict. Often their bodies become the battleground on which the most barbaric acts of aggression are expressed.

In addition, justice requires a global response to the gender deficit in peace-building because of the ethical obligation that women and girls be accounted for and protected in areas of conflict. This is an ongoing problem for which practical tactics and solutions are needed.

The Vatican responded with ostensibly positive rhetoric emphasising the need to give girls access to education, this playing a vital role in their poverty reduction and civic participation.

However, girls and women must also have leadership and decision-making roles in determining the content of education, or else improving their access to 'education' will do little to redress socio-political gender inequalities or the second-class social status given to women and girls.

Women must be involved in setting the education agenda and curricula, not just in delivering it or learning. Moreover, emphasis on women's special roles in 'reconciliation' and 'healing' in post-war situations should not be prioritised over their participation in law and justice, strategy and political conflict prevention. Otherwise their 'participation' will resemble little more than complacent forgiveness and permanent victimhood. Responses must be as effective as they are diplomatic.

Olympian Louis Smith BANNED For "Mocking" Islam: Louis Smith's Olympic-Level Satire

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

November 2, 2016

Satire tends to be used for humour, sometimes ridicule, to expose and criticise relevant issues. Sometimes, however, individuals get in trouble. When this happens, the privileges in society, global or national all comes to light and, moreover, reveals a grand irony...Louis Antoine Smith was born April 22, 1989, and is an artistic gymnast from Great Britain. He is a four-time Olympic medalist. He did this by only the age of 27. He has earned a bronze and silver medal on the pommel horse. He won the bronze medal at the Beijing Olympics as well as a silver medal at the 2016 Rio Olympics.

Recently, there was a film shown about the gymnast in which, during a night-out with his friends, he drunkenly shouted: "Allahu Akbar," (which translates into 'God is Great' in English - from the Arabic). He was in the video with a gymnastic trainer named Luke Carson. The consequence of this would prove unsettling. Indeed, it resulted in Louis Smith being banned for two months in light of interpretations by some that Louis "mocked" the religion of Islam. Note, it is a religion, not the individuals or the membership at large of the religion.

Before the ban, however, under minimal pressure Louis Smith apologised, "I am deeply sorry...I am not defending myself, what I did was wrong. I want to say sorry for the deep offense I have caused and to my family who have also been affected by my thoughtless actions...I have learnt a valuable life lesson and I wholeheartedly apologise." However, this wasn't enough - he was banned for two months regardless.

To me, and perhaps I am crazy to spout ideas from the Enlightenment, freedom of speech extends to ridicule and satire of any religious symbolisms, ideas, and words, even its patrons, prophets, and patriarchs. The same is the case regarding irreligious heroes too, who are alive and experience ridicule and satire all of the time. However, there have been failings here in the west to extend such freedoms of speech to both religious and irreligious 'heroes'. Indeed, it's a one-sided affair. Religious 'heroes', and all the baggage that go with religion, are safe-spaced - protected under religious-sensitivity, whilst irreligious heroes are deemed inconsequential and legitimate topics of mockery.

You can see the double-standard. This cooked up controversy highlights the privilege in society that religion still has. The outrageous implication of his ban is that the coverage is over the mockery of a religion, not the members at large with individuals within the religion that adhere to the principles, doctrines, and practices thereof.

He did nothing wrong other than ruffle some feathers and mess up a new hairdo. My sense of the outrage is, rather, that superficial sensibilities have been raised to heights and praised as 'virtue', when, in fact, they are virulent vices blocking the secret sauce of the ongoing integration of a pluralistic, global society - freedom... of speech, to and from religion, to ridicule, of conscience, and so on.

As Lenny Bruce noted decades ago in America, a bastion of free speech in many ways, if you "Take away the right to say "fuck" and then you take away the right to say "fuck the government." Some words and actions can be unpleasant, indeed, but you can't force another individual to not say or do something.

It is someone's right to pray and say their God is just super in the Olympic domain, and mean it, as it is another person's right to pray and say their God is just super-duper in the Olympic domain, and not mean it.

Lenny Bruce's statement, by analogical reasoning, works the same with ideas and behaviours. If you take away the capability to think or do something, you take away the possibility of ridicule, of satire, often needed, about sacred cows.

It would be the same as doing the motions of the Catholic religion, wine and bread (the whole ritual, by a priest), or prayers of Evangelical Christians, and then being banned from an organisation for having been seen as mocking the religion in general rather than religious individuals. Religions don't have rights. People do.

What does this incident, among countless more severe examples, then show? It shows religion, by default and historical inertia, has privileges, globally. There is a distinct error in conflation between mockery of religious motions, such as behaviours, and terminology, such as 'sacred words', and the doctrines and ideas as abstract concepts that influence behaviour.

People that don't think it works and then do it in satire, or in ridicule, are not harming individuals. Consider the opposite case, the fact that many pray and say 'holy' words in front of individuals that do not believe. It could be offensive to them.

Are football and NFL players being banned for 2 months when they score and then thank God and pray because it is offensive to the irreligious? I don't think so. In many places, by law, the irreligious can be killed or whipped simply by self-identification as non-religious.

Consider this: should we ban those from the Olympics that are showing religious behaviours in the Olympic context where the irreligious are present because they are offending irreligion - and so, as is sometimes asserted, the irreligious as well, by analogy?

It would be proportional, but it would be absurd - because this ban is so absurd. You can't insult abstract objects or ideas. You can insult individuals that hold certain ideas and behave in certain ways. But it's not up to Louis or others to justify their every single move. It's up to the offended to make the distinction between ridicule of ideas and mockery of individuals.

I can imagine a hypothetical Smith Antoine Louis in an alternate universe saying, 'I am so, so sorry...I can't defend what I said because it was wrong, like...super wrong. I apologise to the irreligious. I am sorry for the deep offense I have caused and especially to my dear family who have been also deeply affected by these brainless actions of mine...I learned an important lesson and with all my heart say sorry to those offended.'

This is simply a case of imposition of religion into the public and professional sphere to limit the behaviour of others. Nothing more, nothing less, it is outrageous and insulting to those of good conscience with sufficient rational capacities to make a distinction between people and ideas.

The mockery and satire of ideas and concepts and behaviours is freedom of speech, but it is not a mockery of particular individuals. This is a case of a privileging of religion within society and then being imposed on a high-tier Olympian, Louis Smith. And it is being implemented because everyone has been raised with the tacit (wrongheaded) principles of ridicule of ideas and behaviours as ridicule of particular individuals.

It is not. There is no necessary logical connection between the two. This distinction is an important part of consciousness-raising. This is a damn good time to reflect too. If that is the case, and it is, then Louis Smith should not have been banned and the ban should be repealed because he is mocking ideas and not individuals. In addition, 2-months is rather stringent if you think about it, he spent some time laughing at the repetition of a two-word statement in Arabic, which took less than a minute.

Yet, he's been banned for over 80,000, close to 90,000, minutes. Does that not seem excessive? ...The grand irony is, as with numerous examples of banning or attempted suppression of behaviour and ideas in history - barring the fire at Alexandria (where the burning of books succeeded and warped knowledge of aspects of human history), the 2-month ban brought even more attention to the ridicule of religious symbols.

***No irreligious or religious individuals were harmed in the writing of this article**

Poverty of Privilege: UN Criticises Morocco Over Women's Rights

Scott Douglas Jacobsen and Angelos Sofocleous

November 1, 2016

The United Nations has been critical of Morocco recently with the respect to women's rights, and in particular violence against women. 'The 118th session of the United Nations Human Rights Committee looked into the 6th periodic report of the Moroccan government' with the delegation from Morocco undergoing tremendous criticism over the status of the implementation of women's rights within the country, according to Moroccan World News. The central examination of the Moroccan status of women's rights took place in the context of law, sexual assault or rape, housing, polygamy and child marriage, and the level of discrimination of women.

The research prior to the meeting was done by the Mobilizing for Rights Associates and numerous other Moroccan non-profits. In general, the research was on women's rights with a particular focus on "women's rights in the family and violence against women." Let's run through the list of inequalities, which can mean disempowerment for women, equality and empowerment come as a package.

In law, the absence of rights for one group of people implies a separate set of rules given everything else as equal. That is, women and men are adult Moroccan citizens and should, and deserve, equal rights. A trivial statement, even a truism. When it comes to violence against Moroccan women, women victims of violence, in law, do not have civil protection orders. In sexual assault or rape, which means sexual violence, the World Health Organization defines it as follows:

any sexual act, attempt to obtain a sexual act, unwanted sexual comments or advances, or acts to traffic, or otherwise directed, against a person's sexuality using coercion, by any person regardless of their relationship to the victim, in any setting, including but not limited to home and work.

Victims of sexual violence within Morocco can be, if married and raped by someone other than their partner, "prosecuted for taking part in sex outside of marriage." That is, the Moroccan legal system, in an inverted ethic, turns the punishment for the crime onto the victim. To make this clear, the law is functionally equivalent to the conditional statement: if a married Moroccan woman is raped by somebody other than her husband, she will be prosecuted for sex outside of marriage.

In housing, and once more on the topic of violence against women, but in the domestic arena, female victims of domestic violence need safe havens to escape the abuse - physical, emotional, social, and spiritual - of some abusive intimate partners. This means the need to have housing centers, which remain one common solution to the problem. According the Centers for Disease Control, intimate partner violence comes with tremendous problems for the victim: society via the economy, physical, reproductive, psychological, social, and inadvertent negative effects on health behaviour for women. It is straightforward. The consequences are short- and long-term. Safe housing can help. Morocco was chastised for not having appropriate provision of them.

In polygamy and child marriage, which implies simple marital and intimate relations, the persistence of these activities indicates systemic socio-cultural problems for the country, which cannot be ignored, and were not, by the international community. In the examination of the nation, the exploitation of women through polygamy and girls through child marriage demarcates an unequal power relation and disempowerment of women and girls, across the age spectrum in other words (intergenerational sex discrimination).

In divorce cases, and so if the cases are considered of discrimination in marital and intimate relations because of polygamy and child marriage, in disproportionate violence against women and provisions for victims because of a lack of safe housing, in sexual assault or rape cases involving married Moroccan women because of full blame on them for 'sex' outside of marriage, and in law because of no civil protection orders for women, then the 'icing' to the discrimination pie (of which Moroccan women get a greater share) is general discrimination in divorce.

Historical context informs this, too. It is not only a current, ongoing phenomena with the discrimination against Moroccan women. Indeed, this continues right into the present because of the historical context, in part, with the past states transitioning into the present. Morocco was run by the French. Its citizens did not garner independence from the French until the late 1950s.

In 1958, soon after Morocco got its independence from the French, notable male scholars of the country wrote a Family Code Law (the Mudawana) which would be legally implemented by the state, and is still part of Morocco's legal system. The Mudawana was based on Islamic principles regarding marriage, abortion, divorce and child custody. Despite improvements in the Mudawana in recent years, Morocco still has a lot to cover on its way to bring its legal system to standards where human rights and gender rights are respected and protected, especially when it is still based on Islamic law and principles.

The Mudawana has indeed been updated to allow abortion in case of rape, making the legal age of marriage for both men and women equal and allowing a woman to divorce her husband. However, it is very questionable how, if ever, the reformed version of Mudawana, that was so praised by Moroccan authorities, is followed. The country does not still have a law protecting women from domestic violence, something that puts the country much behind on what can be described as a modern state. In fact, a national survey by the Moroccan High Commission for Planning showed that 62.8% of women had, at least once, been victims of physical or sexual domestic violence. What should concern one the most is that only 3% of those cases were reported to the authorities. What is more, the authorities don't seem to protect victims of domestic violence, as researchers of the Human Rights Watch mention. There is no doubt that in the absence of a strong domestic violence law, the authorities will keep ignoring those cases.

More than 10 years after the Mudawana's greatest reform, its implementation into the Moroccan society still lacks behind. A great number of people, and most importantly women, are unaware of what the law allows them to do and as a result do not seek for taking advantage of the increasing equality that the legal system allows them to. In fact, because of conservatism especially in Morocco's rural areas, women are not interested in implementing the new laws into their society but keep living on the same traditionalist grounds that they are used to. What is more, the Mudawana is limited mainly to urban areas and as a result women in rural and

underdeveloped areas do not have access to justice. Thus, citizens of rural areas do not have the chance to be educated on the new law. As a result, a new kind of inequality has been created, that of the difference in implementing the Mudawana in urban and rural areas. Also, one would expect that the judges and legal personnel would be educated at a great, if not absolute, degree about the new rules and their application to the Moroccan society but sadly this is not the case as there are financial barriers in educating them.

In addition, where a legal system gains its credibility is on its application. The reformed Mudawana, unfortunately, makes unfair exceptions in a way that it still fails to protect human rights and achieve gender equality. It may have been the case that the reformation was praised for modernizing Morocco but statistics and facts show otherwise. A concerning fact is that underage marriage still exists in Morocco. Despite that being illegal, a loophole in the system allows the judges to allow men to marry underage girls if that is 'proven' to be for the girls' benefit.

According to statistics provided by UNICEF, 16% of girls in Morocco are unlawfully married by the age of 18. Proving that despite the law's changes it's difficult to change society's moral values, the 'family honour' system is still in practice in Morocco's rural areas where if a girl remains unmarried then this means that she breaks the family's honour in the community. The judicial system does not seem convinced to change that as it has approved 90% of the cases presented before it which asked for allowing a man to marry an underage girl.

Even in everyday life, the law seems unable to be put into practice. Reports of personal experiences show how sexual harassment against women is part of Moroccan culture and it's considered a norm. A form of sexual harassment of which no woman can escape from, and includes stalking, grobming and catcalling. It seems that Morocco is still a male-dominated society in which men try to be dominant even in their everyday lives, showing that misogyny runs deep in them.

The women's rights examination of Morocco with respect to child marriage and polygamy as persistent practices in the culture to the present day, sexual assault and rape of married Moroccan women with the blame on the victim, the absence of civil protection orders in law, safe housing for domestic violence victims, and the level of discrimination of women in divorce in general.

The Mudawana, or the Family Code Law, is an example of this in historical context as well. It is founded in Islamic Law. Gender rights and human rights are not exactly enshrined in it, in spite of piecemeal improvements - the Mudawana becoming more in line with gender rights and human rights. In addition, the pervasive traditionalism and conservatism in the country create additional barriers for the equality of women and the proper implementation of women's rights.

The research by the Mobilizing for Rights Associates and other non-profits indicates the level of discrimination against women in Morocco, and the UN did not hold back. They gave direct, firm criticism of the Moroccan delegation of the status of women's rights in the country. As presented here, we do, too.

Nietzsche and The Death of God

Scott Douglas Jacobsen and Benjamin David
November 23, 2016

The Gay Science (1882) is a much-revered text written by Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900). He was a German philosopher and philologist. In the text, he provides an unsystematic representation of one conceptualisation of power. There are a number of aphorisms in it, which are simply pithy observations, tintured truths. Nietzsche's aphorism 125 represents a morbid forecast of a world in the aftermath of God's murder. What would that look like to him? The aphorism, entitled "The Parable of the Madman", tells the story of a "madman" who, with lantern in hand and crazed importunity, dashes into a marketplace searching for God:

"I seek God! I seek God!" -- As many of those who did not believe in God were standing around just then, he provoked much laughter. 'Has he got lost?' asked one. 'Did he lose his way like a child?' asked another. Or is he hiding?' [...] [the madman responds]: 'Whither is God?' he cried; 'I will tell you. We have killed him---you and I. All of us are his murderers. But how did we do this? How could we drink up the sea? Who gave us the sponge to wipe away the entire horizon? What were we doing when we unchained this earth from its sun?'"

Nietzsche wrote the parable over 130 years ago. This aphorism continues to be important today, especially given the increasing degrees of irreligiosity spreading across the globe. In general, religion continues to increase, internationally, with irreligion increasing in particular areas, especially in Western Europe and North America.

Even with this particulate increase and overall decline in irreligiosity, how is Nietzsche's rather anomalous aphorism above at all relevant to us today? It centers on the death of God and in the powerful phrase, "We have killed him." God has been killed. By whom? We did it. We murdered the all-powerful creator of the universe. It is direct, personal, and powerful, and especially accusative. Traditionally, that would be meant in a Christian sense. We killed Jesus, or God incarnate, on the Cross. But, then again, what does this really mean?

To answer this question, it would be useful to begin with an explanation of the proverb. So, what's Nietzsche on about here? Let's focus on the historical context in which Nietzsche is writing The Gay Science.

He was in Continental Europe. His homeland was Prussia. He was witness to increasing numbers of people discarding their belief in God, or a deity. This was particularly fascinating, and also hauntingly worrying, for Nietzsche for many reasons. The principal reason for this concerns the trap of nihilism. Nihilism is the rejection of every moral and religious principle in life. A world and life without firm values and precepts. Some might argue this leads to the view of life as meaningless and without true moral values - the "why" starts to lack meaning.

With religious Continental Europe and Prussia rejecting God, and so becoming irreligious Prussia and Continental Europe, the question arose for Nietzsche: can we be certain that our previous source of values - e.g. heaven - is able to be supplanted straightforwardly with a new

source? It could have been convoluted, even impossible. Nietzsche's main concern, as seen in the haughty derision of the madman's interlocutors, is that many of us (Nietzsche had in mind the British-utilitarians) are so smug in our conviction that all our values will be just as consonant as before in a post Judeo-Christian world that any worries we might have concerning the justification of our values preceding God's death would be met with confused glares - if not malicious mockery.

Now, what about us today? Whilst Nietzsche thought that a trans-valuation of values was necessary - the principle of the task being the quasi-naturalistic drive in all life he called the 'will-to-power' - was crucial to overcome nihilism, many might discount that as an alien idea and, actually, a little overblown. Is the task of really that pressing as Nietzsche thought? Put another way, is the danger of nihilism as threatening as Nietzsche insists? Let's first explore the worries in more detail.

If we decide to kill god, murder him, many would claim that the end-result will be that we'll find ourselves unequivocally standing upon a flimsy sort of ethical shifting sand. So, 'whither is God?' No God; thus, an unsound foundation for morality at face value. That is, grounds that will, whether we like it or not, cave-into a state of subjectivity in which our values, and the sense of morality that manifests, become a mere subjective product - an objective ground of values has thus decomposed. Nothing less than momentary desires, wants, and whims in each person is brought to pass in the aftermath of God's demise.

Why, in the face of the dissolution of our objective source of morality, should godless people not just gail, exploit, or even harm those around us? What's the point of doing anything, let alone anything traditionally 'good' as opposed to 'evil'?

Whilst I cannot possibly contend this rather face-value-only view in thorough detail, I will try and give a brief compendium of why many of us are not bereft of the invaluable structures that afford us a solid ground upon which our values are sourced. Like many misunderstandings about value-theory, Nietzsche sadly joins contemporary exponents of the view that values can only be sourced, exclusively, in a timeless supernatural realm. Where, then, are values to be sourced? What other than the supernatural, or the magical-mystical, to found values?

Let's first think about who we are and build upwards from there. I think it would be rather uncontroversial to claim that most people would be willing to concede, that who we are is, in many ways, a product of our culture, indeed I am certain of the fact. We are constructed from the building blocks of the arts, the humanities, the sciences, the people, the places, the relationships, the cultural customs and norms, and so on, of our environment.

Our beliefs, the power which we are able to yield in our comportment, our tacit knowledge, gender roles, etc., are largely constructed in virtue of the community - however large or small - with which we are principally associated. This should not be seen as a moot point. However, this should not be seen as some unavoidably determinate condition of our behaviour. Rather, such communal structures can, alongside those more innate components of who we are, provide a strong basis for a structurally grounded, but nevertheless individuating, sense of self.

Every product is a result of the various evolutionary selective pressures on us. That is, there will be universals within most or all cultures because we are, as is a truism about every living thing, a product of evolution. What's more, we are a common species. All more than 7 billion of us. In evolution by natural selection, we have a natural process creating living things, organisms, capable of culture. Our cognitive architecture and subsequent outputs in interaction with the environment; our physical abilities and concomitant limitations. Each the product of evolution, and so with the suite of derivatives from them, especially those under the rubric of "culture".

Organisms are naturally evolved and culture is derivative of evolutionary processes as products of some species like ourselves. A proper response to Nietzsche's concern about nihilism follows from this. That being, there need only be face value concerns about nihilism. In fact, upon further examination and brief consideration, our evolved tendencies, moral senses and sensibilities, culture, are naturally grounded, and unavoidably so from a modern scientific standpoint, for the vast majority of us (some within-species variation).

And so we have a sufficient universalism in moral senses, or an affirmation of most within a species having an inter-subjectivity, a common range feelings, which is a solipsism with acknowledgement of our being social creatures. We can't help it. It's how we evolved. So even if God is dead, a la aphorism 125, and even if we are the culpable murderers of Him, then nihilism is the first conclusion. What else follows from this?

It is something probably best termed sufficient universalism. It is a good-enough, evolved moral sensibility. It develops over time. As with every other organism, every trait we have is the product of evolution, which is a truism. And many of these wax and wane throughout the course of the developmental life course from child to adult to elder. A moral sensibility developing through the life course within a single species is sufficiently universal, and answers the face-value concern of Nietzsche's "The Parable of the Madman".

So we can say to Nietzsche and his disquieting disciples: have more faith in us humans. Whilst we (impressively) slay god, whilst we entomb him, whilst we dole out his will-arrangements, we can (impressively) lead valuable, structured and deeply moral lives after he's dead whilst, of course, gleefully dancing on his grave whose epitaph reads: "God is Dead - So Let Man Hopeth That His Suffering Doth Die, Too"

70,000 Strong: Argentinian Women Protest "Femicide"

Scott Douglas Jacobsen and Pamela Machado

October 22, 2016

Argentinian women are tired of living in silence, or being silenced when they dare to speak. This is a reality not just in Argentina, but one found across Latin America. As a result, 70,000 women reunited in a march against Femicide earlier this month in Santa Fe, Argentina. It was not the first time a march centred on the 'Ni Una Menos' ('Not One Less') message has happened. In the previous year's Buenos Aires march, the mostly women's march gained attention and notoriety because of police repression and attacks from far-Right groups. This year, the protest ended more peacefully, albeit with reports on social media of some police violence at the end of the march.

So, why are women murdered more in Latin America than in other regions of the world? Femicide has a broad range of definitions, but it largely boils down specifically homicides against women that have something to do with their gender. Surprisingly, despite the above paragraph, Argentina's rate of femicide does not look so bad when compared to its neighbours' incidence of gender-based violence. Latin America is the home of 7 of the 10 most dangerous countries in the world for women in terms of femicide. For example, "El Salvador heads the list with a rate of 8.9 homicides per 100,000 women in 2012," Insight Crime reports, "followed by Colombia with 6.3, Guatemala with 6.2, Russia with 5.3 and Brazil with 4.8."

The sexist nature of Latin American culture is also reflected in their regulations. 'Soft' laws make violence against women pass by unacknowledged, unreported, and without justice. In neither Latin America, nor the Middle East, does the law sufficiently protect women against sexual violence, the BBC reports. The U.S. Department of State recognises that 53% of Latin American women have suffered some type of domestic violence. The rate is believed to be in fact higher because many women fear retaliation or are not even aware of places to go to report their cases and obtain the right support.

A great deal of the Latin American economy is sustained by illegal markets such as drug and human trafficking - bringing profits of up to \$320 million a year in the region, according to the United Nations Office of Drugs and Crime (UNODC). These activities are controlled by powerful gangs and, unfortunately, those who are most affected by it are the young, poor, and uneducated women. In other words, some of those with the least power, influence, and privilege; the most marginalized in society. As noted by Ms. Angela Me, Chief of the Surveys and Statistics Section of the UNODC, there are more men killed than women in the global homicide statistics. "Looking at the global data...80% of victims are men and most perpetrators are also men...Why then discuss femicide?" Me asked, "The great majority of women are killed in the domestic context and this is not an issue of a specific country/region". In short, more men are killed in pure numbers, but more women are victims of domestic murders. Femicide is global but Latin American women face a particularly terrifying reality. "The femicide rate in cases of human trafficking (in Latin America) for victims is very, very high," said Amado Philip de Andrés from the UNODC, "Especially for the purposes of sexual exploitation, which might account for 91 or 92 percent of the cases." That's the why, but what about what we can do.

The first motion in the creation and implementation of a solution to a problem is

acknowledgement of its existence. Second, the need to quantify, compare, catalogue, and analyze the context and the severity - and for this to happen women cannot be afraid of speaking when feeling intimidated and must feel supported. Third, the solution needs to be proposed and appropriate to the circumstances, the culture, and the region. Fourth, there needs to be an increase in awareness. Fifth, and this is where all of us - anyone - comes in 'stage right', we inform ourselves, become involved, and contribute in the best ways that we can with the resources and restrictions that we might at the current moment. Argentina and, indeed, Latin America are no different.

The Church of Scientology: A Dangerous Cult

Scott Douglas Jacobsen and Benjamin David

October 5, 2016

The Oxford Dictionary (Second Edition) defines a 'cult' as the following:

- 1) i) a system of religious worship esp. as expressed in ritual. ii) a religious sect considered to be unorthodox or anti-social. iii) the members of such a sect.
- 2) i) devotion or homage to a person or thing (*the cult of aestheticism*). ii) popular fashion esp. followed by a specific section of society. iii) (*attributive*) denoting a person or thing popularized in this way (*cult film; cult figure*).

A remarkable thing about cult mind control is that it's so ordinary in the tactics and strategies of social influence employed. They are variants of well-known social psychological principles of compliance, conformity, persuasion, dissonance, reactance, framing, emotional manipulation, and others that are used on all of us daily to entice us: to buy, to try, to donate, to vote, to join, to change, to believe, to love, to hate the enemy.

-Professor Philip G. Zimbardo, Stanford University

Writing for a penny a word is ridiculous. If a man really wants to make a million dollars, the best way would be to start his own religion.

-L. Ron Hubbard

Scientology is one of the more prominent cults, a cult founded on the beliefs of its founder, a man called L. Ron Hubbard. Although receiving moderate success as a science-fiction writer, most of the interest that the cult has amassed has largely been brought about in virtue of its status as the fashionable hollywood go-to cult - with famous members including former silent-screen star Gloria Swanson and actors Tom Cruise and John Travolta.

To say that scientologists have offbeat beliefs would be an understatement. Let's focus on them to provide a little bit of context. They believe that Xenu brought millions of people to Earth in a spacecraft some 75 million years ago. Xenu brought billions of people to Teegeeeack (which we now know as Earth), stacked these thetans (an invisible part of a human being, similar to the concept of a soul or spirit in other religions, that exists whether or not it is currently operating a human body) around volcanoes, then annihilated them with hydrogen bombs. These immortal spirits are believed by the faithful to often cling to present-day humans and cause them spiritual harm. However, Scientologists warn that reading Xenu-related documents without taking the prerequisite courses could result in pneumonia.

Scientology pedals a rather uncouth – if not kooky and outright bat shit crazy– state of being for humans to ‘self-actualise’, some ideal and perfected state to be attained, of knowledge or character, for human beings. Through the “modern science of mental health” of Dianetics, and the processes involved with the indoctrination methodologies of Scientology, members would reach further and further towards this ideal by moving up the hierarchy in the cult. When, in fact, they lose more and more money, credibility, and contact with reality, and gain more and more gullibility, ignorance, and rationalisations.

If these two points weren't grody enough to deserve the label 'unorthodox' - a key characteristic of a 'cult' - there is an unqualified devotion to a con man, as per the second of the opening quotes, which speaks volumes to the character of the divine leader or clever charlatan – perspectives differ. L. Ron Hubbard is the main figure of sanctification within the Church of Scientology because, of course, he's the founder. Even deceased, as if in-corporeally mystifying the ratiocinative capacities of followers to this day, people continue to follow L. Ron Hubbard, his cult, and the 'extra-curricular' activities such as Dianetics and targeting of celebrities for recruitment. Celebrities have influence and money.

We think that the Church of Scientology fits the formal definitions provided at the preface to this article. That is, there is a system of religious worship as ritual, anti-social aspects, unorthodoxy (thetans, Xenu), members related to those sub-definitions, devotion to an individual, segmentation to a sufficient degree to separate from society (related to the "anti-social" terminology), and tends to denote a particular individual (L. Ron Hubbard) and thing (Dianetics, thetans, Xenu, and so on.) Need we say more? Of course, it's needed. Truisms bear repetition.

More properly, the cult is entitled, not Scientology in full, but the Church of Scientology. It can have the misnomer of a 'religion'. Professional investigator, skeptic, secular humanist, and atheist James Randi, of the James Randi Educational Foundation, wrote an article entitled Scientology-It's Still Around, BUT...The cult receives mixed legitimisation through the title of "religion" dependent on the country.

For example, in the aforementioned publication by James Randi, circa January 31, 2012, he said, "only Australia, Croatia, Hungary, Italy, Kyrgyzstan, Portugal, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden, Taiwan, and the USA, grant Scientology the privileges of a legitimate religion, while other countries, notably Belgium, Canada, France, Germany, Greece, and the UK, refuse Scientology that status," which implies a mixed legal narrative and status. This isn't the only discrepancy.

Scientology conducts factious methods – often unmerciful in nature and purpose, which is to defame and dismiss critics through character assassination by any means necessary – to bulwark its religion against dissenters and critics. This is probably the most deplorable aspect of the cult.

Its hyper-litigious activities against critics and ex-members is a reflection of this – if someone is bold enough to cast any aspersions against the cult, efforts will be made to indict, demonise, and smear them. (We'll see. Maybe, we can make a 'prophecy' here.). Moral standards are thus set arbitrarily by the dictates of the cult, as cults do. Paulette Cooper is an example. Not only critics, merely forfeiting the religion can lead to a situation in which 'apostates' receive (and the doctrine of Scientology permits) harassment and smear campaigns against them.

Such factious methods have cruelly fostered a fortress within the religion – trapping people inside it and thus sustaining its number of adherents. It often succeeds in burgeoning its numbers by taking advantage of uncritical thought and, not forgetting, the 'foot-in-the-door' phenomena.

People become involved in the organisation more and more, little bit by little. This can build into the encouragement of disconnection from family and relationships – hence why it's coined a 'cult'.

This forms the basis of the anti-social (and, frankly, abject) aspects of the cult. It is anti-social through its sophisticated, even mundane at root, methodologies to isolate prospective members, or full members, from family and friends. Better yet, they can involve the family members in the delusions and recruitment.

Another cause célèbre, of course, is its scientific views, which means non-scientific views about nearly everything under the Sun. They reject medication and psychiatry in favour of pseudo-scientific ideas such as the E-Meter and Dianetics. No Medication. No psychology. No psychiatry. Nothing remotely scientific. Everything targeted to the gullible, or insane. Physical and mental ailments caused by Thetans attaching themselves to humans. First of all, Thetans don't exist. So, there's no attaching. E-Meter Sessions are solutions. E-Meters, and by implication the practitioners and sessions, are bogus science. Well-financed, legally protected, non-sense, or the technical term: bullshit. Thus, many critics claim – and rightly – that Scientology's 'science' is nothing more than pseudo-science, for it has no scientific basis.

Cults do not differ much in recruitment methodologies. The main thrust, by implication, is to befuddle and use people. For humanists, the anti-science and anti-human content and purpose of this cult is an affront to fundamental values. Thusly, it is of concern to all valuing people and real science. The main targets for many cults are those going through difficult emotional times in life, which means anyone at least at one or another point in their lifespan. Anyone can be victim. In sympathy, we repeat: anyone can be a victim. Victims don't need critique. They need our help to transition back into the real world and away from these vicious collectives. Be aware, think critically, thankfully, most are capable of it to some capacity.

Black Monday - Women's Reproductive Rights in Poland

Scott Douglas Jacobsen and Nicola Young Jackson

October 6, 2016

What made hundreds of thousands of women in 60 cities across Poland protest and wear black? It was called Black Monday. The main reason was a new proposal for a blanket ban on abortions. International women's rights are the theory of women's empowerment. Their implementation is the practice. The positive consequences observed amount to the results.

In repeated episodes that see women's rights increasingly repudiated, either through the refusal to implement them or a flat-out rejection of their existence (theory or practice), negative consequences tend to follow. Citizens know this, because the negative consequences impact people. Citizens will protest it, not all, but many - even most.

Poland is an active case study. Some see recent reactions to a proposed bill by the governing Law and Justice party as autocratic. The party is led by Jaroslaw Kaczynski, who has hinted that the government might compromise. That is, a suggested ban on pregnancy terminations due to foetal abnormalities, and termination permission on rape/incest pregnancies.

Within the proposed law, there are three reasons provided for it. "... (1) a severely damaged fetus, (2) danger to the mother's health, and (3) conception after incest or rape," Murray said, "...the government has the firm backing of the Catholic Church, which now rejects the compromise it accepted in 1993 when the current restrictive abortion regime was adopted."

This proposed law is not a halfway measure. It would outlaw every single abortion. It would be an absolute law. Women, and other citizens, in Poland have reacted to the proposed law. "Black Monday" is the term for the protest of hundreds of thousands of women against the proposed law in "60 countries".

What does the Polish constitution state about such matters? Nations contain internal frameworks and structures, which creates the foundation for civil society. Poland's constitution and legal system create the frameworks and structures. The term "women" has explicit statement in 3 stipulations. Two in Article 33 and one in Article 68 (The Constitution of the Republic of Poland, 1997). Article 33.1-2 states:

Men and women shall have equal rights in family, political, social and economic life in the Republic of Poland.

Men and women shall have equal rights, in particular, regarding education, employment and promotion, and shall have the right to equal compensation for work of similar value, to social security, to hold offices, and to receive public honours and decorations.

Article 68.3 states:

Public authorities shall ensure special health care to children, pregnant women, handicapped people and persons of advanced age.

Within consideration of the recent controversy surrounding the proposed law, these should have due consideration. This law is outdated and regressive. It is the most restrictive in Europe. The proposed law would be even more so.

It is aimed at women. It treats women as vessels to carry a fetus. Women's well-being is not of importance to these lawmakers. Whether you feel an unborn foetus is alive or has the potential to be living, the welfare of the mother is still paramount.

Preventing abortion is not giving the unborn a chance in life, it is giving them a disadvantaged start in life. Being born to a woman that either feels incapable or did not chose to have you, is unlikely to be healthy for fetus or mother. Not allowed an abortion, when it risks a woman's life, clearly could result in both not being able to live.

Women do not chose to have abortions lightly. They each have their own reasons. An unwanted child has fewer prospects compared to other children. She might not have good reasons such as not being able to provide a comfortable and loving environment.

If a woman was raped, a woman may choose to keep the child, but she shouldn't be forced to keep it or punished for not. The fact is when a desperate woman who for whatever reason feels she cannot bring a child into this world, she will have an abortion legally or illegally.

The official figures already estimate 150x more abortions in Poland take place illegally than legally. This law will force more abortions underground, which means unsafe and possibly fatal conditions.

In spite of the Catholic-backed law proposition, hundreds of thousands of protesters in Poland are empowered enough to be able to organise the strike. The vast majority of Poles remain Catholic. Black Monday shows that the Vatican's views on abortion clearly do not represent those of the country.

This is a case where a country is regressing back to the Dark Ages and by doing so, actually making the voices of women stronger. It was bad enough that abortion in Poland was the most restrictive in Europe, but to make it entirely illegal has united many women in Poland. And indeed, we know that protests do work!

Now, the world is seeing the result.

The Overlooked Complexities of the Iranian Chess Tournament Boycott

Scott Douglas Jacobsen and Tara Abhasakun

October 17, 2016

Swedish chess players and the US Champion, Nazi Paikidze, have been outspoken about their refusal to wear the hijab in Tehran, Iran for the Women's World Chess Championship.

At the moment, many of the more pertinent arguments are centered around what benefits Iranian women. This makes sense, considering the restrictive dress code for women in Iran. What seems to have been forgotten, however, is that women have a right to boycott Iran simply for their own rights as individuals not to wear the hijab. Even if boycotting the tournament hurts Iranian women, neither Paikidze nor the Swedish players have an obligation to play in Iran if it means wearing a clothing item that is enforced for women and not men.

There are two angles from which to consider the boycott. First, the question of what will promote Iranian women's participation in public life. Second, the less discussed angle about individual rights, especially as applied to individual women in this instance. Each perspective has validity.

Let's consider the angle of Iranian women's participation in public life first. If the tournament is held in Iran, girls in Iran will see women in an international professional capacity. Right now, Iranian women make up 60 percent of Iran's university students, yet less than 20 percent of the country's working population. In 2015, an Iranian football player was unable to play in an international tournament because her husband did not permit her to travel. Seeing the Iranian women's chess team compete in an international tournament could have a positive impact on young girls in Iran who wish to be a part of their country's workforce, and particularly those who wish to become athletes.

Women Iranian chess grandmasters, Sara Khadem and Mitra Hejazipour, consider the boycott detrimental to women's sports in Iran, as it would deprive them of what Hejazipour describes as "an opportunity to show our strength." This is a fairly solid argument against the boycott, if the tournament does end up taking place in the Islamic Republic.

If, however, the Swedish and American players can push the tournament not to be held in Iran, then their decision to boycott is for the best. It will make the statement that this tournament will not be held in a country that tells women what to wear. Young Iranian girls will still get to watch Iranian women play chess, even if it's on a television screen. But if the tournament cannot be moved to another country, then they should not boycott the championship, because they will be denying Iranian women a major opportunity.

Now consider the angle of the individual right of Paikidze to not wear a hijab. Individual rights to freedom of dress are important because the individual is the fundamental unit within society, nationally and globally. A woman exercising her own right as an individual to not wear a piece of clothing is making a stand for the collective rights of women.

Which angle is more important? This is a question for all progressives to consider. The

individual rights of the Swedish and American players, which is a part of the universal right of women to not wear a veil? Or the inspiration for girls in seeing powerful female role models in a country where women are often discriminated against in the public sphere?

If worst comes to worst, and the tournament officials insist that the tournament be held in Iran, then the Swedish and American players have every right to boycott the tournament altogether due to their own rights as individuals not to wear the hijab. But, again, will it benefit Iranian women more than the opportunity to compete in a tournament while wearing the hijab? The answer to that, we believe, is no.

If, however, the Swedish and American players are able to push the tournament to be held in another country, their boycott of Iran could be a success. This way, chess players of all nationalities will be allowed to compete wearing whatever they choose to wear.

Something is, nevertheless, straightforward: this is surely a very pivotal time for the larger discourse concerning women's rights. A dilemma for feminists has emerged, a dilemma that will, you can be sure, have far-reaching significance.

The Problem of 'Faith Schools' in Britain

October 13, 2016

Scott Douglas Jacobsen and Angelos Sofocleous

In the United Kingdom, a faith school is one that teaches a curriculum based on a particular religious denomination or sect. This means formal associations with religion in education for the young. Whilst the United Kingdom may not be governmentally secular, the UK is a secular culture, and this can be an issue, even a major problem, and continues to be a source of contention among the young, adult, and elderly sub-populations. What are the issues?

In this piece we will try and address the main issues we think are paramount to the discussion about the legitimacy of having faith schools here in the UK. Here is the first: the public at large pay for faith schools, which they do without the consent of other citizens, even citizens who may have no formal religion. Now, why should non-religious citizens pay for religious education rather than a non-discriminatory education, especially for the young and vulnerable sub-populations? In other words, those without a formal religious background, or even at-a-distance advocacy, and with kids, are having their children sometimes indoctrinated into formal religious education as per the general curriculum associated with a particular religious denomination or sect, at times against their wishes.

Indeed, these schools can actively discriminate against parents that are humanist, atheist, agnostic, apatheist, and so on, by selecting children based on religious association. What is the justification? This can limit the number and type of schools available to the non-religious in the United Kingdom. Thus, in case parents want to send their kids to a specific school, they will not be allowed to for reasons based solely on religious grounds, which is a form of religious discrimination against the non-religious in a secular society.

In addition, there are assumptions about the beliefs of children in relation to the beliefs of their parents or guardians. That is, the children without particular ideological stances, economic, political, religious, socio-cultural, and so on, are asserted in the socio-cultural milieu to have the same stances, ideologically, as their parents. This is a logical fallacy, a few in fact such as "argument to the people" with the bandwagon approach, appeal to tradition, appeal to biased authority, and, of course, the fallacy of division.

The argument to the people with the bandwagon approach takes the form of many, even most, people are doing this with their children and, therefore, it is the right thing to do. The appeal to tradition is that "everyone's done it", and "it is tradition", and, thus, we should support faith schools (because it's tradition). Appeal to biased authority comes into effect when the parents, the religious, or religion's membership are taken into account on the decision of the faith school, who are, well, rather biased on the matter. The core of the arguments come from a fallacy of division, which is that the children are a part of a family with one or both parents that are one particular religion (or lacking them) and that means, therefore, children (being a part of the family unit) are a part of that religion (or lack thereof).

It should not be promoted. Children should be encouraged to think for themselves and not just be

put into a specific ideology, either if that is promoted by the state or if it's the ideology their parents follow.

Now, in light of the qualms we just details, we will argue for the following necessary approach which will, we believe, stave off the dangers that faith schools invariably pose, a position that will hopefully substantiate as the article develops: (good) schools without religious association should be increased in addition to the decrease of independent faith schools. Schools should be a place for secular education apart from religious denomination or sects. Schools should not advocate for a particular religion. As the Secular Charter of the National Secular Society states: "Religion should play no role in state-funded education whether through religious affiliation of schools, curriculum settings, organised worship, religious instruction, pupil selection or employment practices."

Children do not seem old enough to have ideological stances considered and chosen - let alone have them imposed upon them at youth. In fact, some say there should be no compulsion in religion and others tell the Parable of the Hypocrite, or all speak of the Golden Rule (positive or directive form, negative or prohibitive, or empathic or responsive forms) which seem like good principles to uphold, whether religious/irreligious, and worthy of enactment at the national level down to the individual (the young and the old). In other words, school should be a safe place for children apart from, at times and to a degree, the indoctrination from authority figures, whether educational or parental.

Now, in light of our suggestion just detailed, we want to preempt possible responses. some might argue that children behave better in faith schools as they have better morals. In this manner, faith schools might try to enforce certain moral values, consequently managing to impose the idea that religion is sufficient and necessary for morality. In fact, quite the opposite takes place. According to the Social and Moral Development index, religion around the world, instead of promoting equality, respect for human rights and toleration of non-religious individuals and institutions, as some say it preaches, it greatly suppresses them and in most cases it punishes them.

Children may be seen as unable to develop their own moral code at a young age, or it's substantially inchoate, but that's no legitimate reason to impose a specific moral code to them. Undoubtedly, they should be taught to respect, tolerate, develop their way of thinking, be open-minded and do not discriminate. And these can not take place in an institution that discriminates on students in its own admission process.

Now, there's another reason why we think the approach we pose should supplant the status-quo: there is little evidence that faith schools will do any good for the whole community. They will decrease, rather than increase, children's knowledge on religious education. Rather than taking religious education through humanist manners, where all religions are equally considered and are treated wholly through a sociological perspective, faith schools will be biased towards their religion, and even if they teach about other religion, there is great doubt that they will not do this in a proper way.

Moreover, there are fears that faith schools will not take the scientific approach in science

classes, but instead, teach what they believe themselves to be true. This will happen as, unfortunately, there is little control or inspection on what faith schools can teach. As a result, each faith school will be free to teach children about creationism and abstinence before marriage, and also promote their homophobic and anti-abortion ideologies as facts rather than mere beliefs.

Faith schools definitely have no place in a secular country. Not only this will create segregation between preadolescents and teenagers but they will act like a dogma, imposing to them certain ideologies, rather than teach them to think for themselves. In addition, education will be put in the hands of people who are not much regulated or controlled by the state, and this creates an unsure future for our society. Faith schools, by their very own nature, will discriminate on children, their parents and teachers, as they will not accept children who themselves or their parents are not members of a specific religion, or will prioritise over religious children or parents. The same applies to teachers.

What makes our suggestion viable? Unlike the status quo, our position is not based on illogical premises and logical fallacies. What is more, our suggestion can, through manifesting secular society in education, restrain outmoded theological immorality against children, and the abuse of educational, parental, and religious authority. Schools should be open to all, have fair admission policies and respect and promote each student's individuality. Trying to dogmatize education will undoubtedly bring disastrous results to our society and bring it a step away from being secular. As a result, a society where faith, not reason, and discrimination, not acceptance, will prevail.

Let's Talk About Climate Change

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

September 2, 2016

Let's talk about climate change, more, and with greater depth to inform public policy, and current and future national investment. I think and feel it's a good time here and now. Climate change, or global warming, is happening ([The Government of Canada, 2015a](#); [NASA, 2016a](#); [David Suzuki Foundation, 2014a](#); [The Royal Society, 2016a](#)). Who says so?

The National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) says, "97 percent or more of actively publishing climate scientists agree: Climate-warming trends over the past century are very likely due to human activities" ([NASA, 2016b](#)).

The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) in the Climate Change 2014 Synthesis Report says, "Human influence on the climate system is clear, and recent anthropogenic emissions of greenhouse gases are the highest in history. Recent climate changes have had widespread impacts on human and natural systems." ([Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, 2015](#)).

The British Royal Society says, "Scientists know that recent climate change is largely caused by human activities from an understanding of basic physics, comparing observations with models, and fingerprinting the detailed patterns of climate change caused by different human and natural influences." ([The Royal Society, 2016b](#)).

And the Government of Canada says, "The science behind man-made climate change is unequivocal. Climate change is a global challenge whose impacts will be felt by all countries, particularly the poorest and most vulnerable. Indeed, impacts are already occurring across the globe. Strong action is required now and Canada intends to be a climate leader." ([The Government of Canada, 2015b](#)). What do these mean, plainly?

In short, the vast majority of those that spend expertise, money, and time to research the climate affirm that global warming is a reality, and a looming threat to the biosphere ([Upton, 2015](#); [Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, 2015](#)). So that means, in general, if you know what you're talking about regarding the climate, you understand it's changing. You know it's warming globally – not necessarily locally, wherever any particular local is, which would be weather. What does this imply?

Well if it is inevitable and ongoing, then its solution or set of solutions is a necessity, which should be the center of the discussion. Not if, but when, and therefore, how do we work together to prevent and lessen its impacts? There can be legitimate disagreement about the timeline and the severity within a margin of error based on data sets, or meta-analyses, but legitimate conversation starts with an affirmative. So why is it significant?

Because most of the biosphere exists in that "extremely thin sheet of air" ([Hall, 2015](#)) with a thickness of only "60 miles" or ~96.56 kilometers called the atmosphere. It is happening to the minute sheet of the Earth, and in turn affects the biosphere. So small, globally speaking,

contributions to the atmosphere can have large impacts throughout the biosphere and climate, as is extrapolated from current and historical data. What is the timeline, and why the urgency?

Because, in general, it will cause numerous changes in decades, not centuries (Gillis, 2016). That translates into our parents, our own, our (if any) children, and our (if any) current or future grandchildren. In other words, all of us, present and future. What kind of things would, or should, we expect – or even are witnessing?

For starters, we'll experience average increases in global temperatures, impacts to ecosystems and economies, flooding and drought, and affected water sources and forests such as Canada's (David Suzuki Foundation, 2014b; David Suzuki Foundation, 2014d; David Suzuki Foundation, 2014e).

It affects the health of children and grandchildren, and grandparents, through heat-related deaths, tropical disease increases, and heat-aggravated health problems (David Suzuki Foundation, 2014c). It is adversely affecting biodiversity (Harvard University School of Public Health, 2016) and threatening human survival (Jordan-Stanford, 2015).

Recently it was reported that the Arctic winter sea ice is at a record low (Weber, 2016). There'll be sea-level rise and superstorms (Urry, 2016). And it affects all, not just our own, primate species, according to primatologists (Platt, 2016). So even our closest evolutionary cousins, via proximate ancestry, will be affected too. This is a global crisis. What are major factors?

Population and industrial activity are the big ones. Too many people doing lots of highly pollution-producing stuff. It's greatly connected to the last three centuries' human population explosion and industrialization, which was an increase from about 1 billion to over 7 billion people (Brooke, 2012). So life on Earth is changing, in part, because of human industrial activity with increasing severity as there are more, and more, human beings on the planet (Scientific American, 2009). What's being done to prepare for it?

Nations throughout the world are preparing for the relatively predictable general, and severe, impacts of it (Union of Concern Scientists, n.d.). The international community is aware, and that explains the Paris climate conference (COP21) during late 2015 (European Commission, 2016), which Prime Minister Trudeau attended for our national representation at this important global meeting (Fitz-Morris, 2015).

Alberta is making its own preparation too (Leach, 2015). And, apparently, small municipalities in Canada are not prepared for its impacts (The Canadian Press, 2015; The University of British Columbia, 2014). But there are those in Alberta such as Power Shift Alberta, hoping to derive solutions to climate change from our youth (Bourgeois, 2016).

So there's thoughtful consideration, and work, from the international and national to the provincial and territorial, and even municipal levels, for the incoming changing crisis. Whether something can be done about it at one magnitude or another, it is being talked about more with concomitant changes to policy and actions following from them.

All of this preparation, or at least consciousness-raising, is relevant and needing further integration. Climate change will only get more severe unless we do something about it. So, again, that means it's all a question of when, not 'if'.

If we want a long-term, robust solution to assist in the reduction of CO2 emissions, a carbon tax fits the bill for a start. Then there's future energy resources including Hydro, bioenergy, wind, solar, geothermal, and ocean ([Natural Resources Canada, 2016](#)). And the flip side of the coin for an energy source is a place to put that energy via future storage technologies also ([Dodge, 2015](#)).

But there's something needed prior to and alongside all of that, which leads back into the original point. Talk about it. Discussion and conversation is the glue that will bind all of these together. The energy sources and storage-devices of the future, the preparation for the effects of climate change that is happening and will continue to happen, and so on, need chit-chat throughout democratic societies for even more awareness of it.

So let's do something about it, by talking about it more through a national discourse. Here and now.

Pussy Riot Protests Through “Make America Great Again” Viral Video

Scott Douglas Jacobsen and Pamela Machado

October 30, 2016

With two weeks until the US Election, Russian punk band Pussy Riot sparked controversy through a viral video entitled “Make America Great Again” protesting the comments of Republican presidential candidate Donald Trump.

In the beginning of the month, there was a video released showing Trump using offensive vocabulary when talking about women. The band clearly alludes to the video when singing “Grab them by the pussy.” an expression that became the mark of the scandal. Pussy Riot member, Nadya Tolokonnikova, said, “...Trump’s words are not just words. Those words lead to violence.”

The single, however, does not represent the group's support to Hillary Clinton, who as far-Left supporters were on Bernie Sanders' side for the Democratic candidate. “Let’s just say his policies appealed to me more,” Nadya told TIME. “But it’s not good to talk about that now. It’s a harmful conversation. Their wish is to make a strong presentation against Donald Trump.”

The video released on Thursday was not as radical as Pussy Riot's previous productions and their own political belief. "Of course we wanted to just say, ‘F—k Trump’" Tolokonnikova told TIME, “But we didn’t do that. We wanted to get our message across to people who might not be as aesthetically radical as we are at Pussy Riot.”

Apart from this critique, Nadya also raised other polemical issues that marked Trump's electoral campaign. The lyrics to the song highlight pressing issues in the world including Mexico, Syria, Palestine, African-American lives, and the status of women, even torture and killing.

The viral video was intended to be graphic. It was to highlight the implications of Trump’s words. His words imply real-world consequences. There were previous videos such as “Organs” and “Straight Outta Vagina”.

These sparked controversy and discussion for the public and the fan-base of Pussy Riot. Organs was based on government oppression and women’s sexuality. Straight Outta Vagina was themed on women’s empowerment in general.

These songs are part of a consistent tradition by the punk rock group to protest what they see as injustices against women and government oppression. Their protests can have negative consequences for them.

They are known for being a feminist punk rock music group, protesting and opposition to Vladimir Putin (who they compared Trump to in Make America Great Again), and advocating for lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) rights.

In fact, these are not the first time Pussy Riot tried to shake things in the political scenario before meaningful elections. In 2012, two members of the group, Nadya herself and Maria Alyokhin, were arrested because of a public anti-Putin protest in Moscow. It was one day prior to the one that got him re-elected.

Putin has connections with the Russian Orthodox Church. Indeed, protests from Pussy Riot against Putin have been seen as attacks on the Russian Orthodox Church, according to The Guardian.

The members have fought back in legal cases. For example, in May, 2015, Nadya Tolokonnikova and Maria Alyokhina, along with others, filed a suit to the European Court of Human Rights.

In the suit filed, they claimed there was police inaction in addition to the refraining from prosecution of Cossacks who had assaulted Pussy Riot in the midst of a video shoot. The video was for the Sochi Winter Olympics, and entitled “Putin Will teach You to Love the Motherland”.

In an earlier interview by Esquire, Pussy Riot lead singer, Nadya, said, “I wouldn't say Russian society is misogynistic. Our country was one of the first to give women the right to vote, in 1917...So we have a good history of feminism and state-supported feminism.”

Education News in Brief

October 14, 2016

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

Creating the Africa of the 21st century

According to [All Africa](#), the closing of the two-week Third Country Training Programme (TCTP) came with grand statements by Shem Bodo, Senior Programs Officer with the Association for the Development of Education in Africa (ADEA).

Bodo said, “Probing and thinking critically is what will make Africa a continent of the 21st century... inculcating skills at an early age is the key.” This is one statement among a growing movement.

Africa has a continental vision with the African Union in its Agenda 2063: The Africa We Want. That document makes an explicit call for a “revolution of education, skills and active promotion of science, technology...”

Nerd-in-Chief for the US as 300 million USD in science funding unveiled

According to [CNET](#), the United States unveiled 300 million USD funding for science through President Barack Obama. It is “federal and private money earmarked for support science and technology.”

There is 165 million USD devoted to “smart city initiatives” for the reduction of traffic congestion among other things. 70 million USD is meant for researching in brain diseases such as “Alzheimer's, Parkinson's, depression and other diseases.”

There will be 50 million USD for “small-satellite technology that enables high-speed internet” and 16 million USD to improve the medical care for Americans through the Precision Medicine Initiative.

Turkish teacher recruitment process systematically looks for affiliations

According to [Al Monitor](#): Turkey Pulse, the post-putsch massive purges included the governmental suspension of 28,000 teachers with the intention of uprooting the followers of Fethullah Gulen, who was accused as mind behind the coup.

Many Kurdish teachers and trade unionists allied with “the opposition were also caught in the net.” The government announced 20,000 replacement teachers for vacancy filling with written exams and an interview, the new part, for the recruitment process.

The questions in the interviews have been about religious and political affiliations of the candidates, and in a systematic way, to determine the kind and level of support for the rule Justice and Development Party (AKP), according to the Education and Science Laborers Trade Union (Egitim-Sen).

Education News in Brief

November 15, 2016

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

One religion dominance not allowed in public institutions such as schools

According to The Times Live, 6 former Model C schools had pupils recite prayers from the Christian faith in assembly. Students had to “pray before sport matches and describe themselves as having a predominantly 'Christian ethos'”

They are having to defend the right to follow a single religion in the courts. The Johannesburg High Court will be hearing the case and this will have “implications for any state school that promotes one religion.”

That promotion would include “dress code, prayers or readings – even if the religion reflects the belief system of the majority.” The “OGOD, the Organisasie Vir Godsdiensle Onderrig en Demokrasie,” noted that the constitution and the National Policy of Religion disallow one religion dominance in public institutions.

US broken education system caused Trumpism

The Toronto Star described the nature of the Trump phenomenon, Trumpism, as resulting from the breakdown of the American educational system, which comes from the abandonment of the educational system.

The author congratulates Canada on having a good educational system, and thinks that as long as it can be maintained then the nation will not crash as “our next-door neighbour has, a backyard of flaming wreckage and oh no, where are the nukes.”

“Education is the key to civilized life” the columnist asserts and the underfunding of US schools tied to the absence of teachers and the inadequate salaries for teachers has eroded the educational system in America.

England’s unsustainable educational system according to the Financial Times

The Financial Times describes the “tatters” of England’s educational system because of the unsustainable level of funding given to the system, which means that the funding levels will need to change at some point in the future.

Alison Wolf, Professor at King’s College London, states that the increasing numbers of university graduates creates one funding system that cannot keep up and the “technical qualifications below degree level have suffered” resulting in a decline in “student numbers.”

That is, the current demographics of the university graduate population cannot be sustained because of the poor suitability for the current job market, and those that could fill them will be

able to fit into the market. Thus, the situation is described as having “serious flaws” with high levels of expense and involves “a major misallocation of resources.”

Education News in Brief

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

October 20, 2016

Theresa May defends creation and expansion of grammar schools

According to [The Guardian](#), Theresa May has plans for the allowance, and has defended, the “creation and expansion of grammar schools. May made calls for supporters of a “selective education to submit evidence of their success.”

The speech was considered “defiant” by May. Independent schools and universities are being asked to take part in the public sector, which was “indicated” within the speech at the “event on the terrace of the House of Commons.”

Only 2.6% of grammar pupils come from poor backgrounds. Six Conservatives have expressed concerns about these plans so far. “The government is consulting on this,” May said.

Amazon Web Services new cloud educational service

According to [Street Insider](#), Amazon.com’s Amazon Web Services, Inc. made an announcement about new web capabilities intended to improve global initiatives for cloud-related learning for educators and students.

The service is called AWS Educate. It contains more than 25 individually paced modules called “Cloud Career Pathways” devised of “instructional videos, lab exercises, online courses, whitepapers, and podcasts.”

These provide “four overarching job families...: Cloud Architect, Software Developer, Operations-Support Engineer, and Analytics and Big Data Specialist.”

Dubai Cares commits money for education in emergencies

Relief Web [reports](#) that Dubai Cares made an announcement about USD 20 million towards to the International Network for Education in Emergencies (INEE) in order to “promote access to quality, safe, and relevant education for persons affected by crises.”

It is a large part of the Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum Global Initiative. Initially, this will cover three programmes including Lebanon, Niger, and Sierra Leone. More programs are to be announced this year.

Dubai Cares “launched a new community awareness and fundraising campaign, known as #LastILearned, in support of its Education in Emergencies strategy. The campaign will run for one month and aims to raise funds and build awareness of the plight of children affected by conflict and natural disasters.”

Teachers protest no pay for part of September

The Jerusalem Post reported that starting on Rosh Hoshana educators began to protest because, to their surprise, thousands of shekels had been missing from their September paycheques without warning.

The Education Minister claimed that the reduction in pay or the deduction from their paycheques was due to the reform in the transportation for the public, which led to the Finance Ministry making the changes.

The Ministry of Education notes that it understands the anger of the protesting educators and that they are a “backbone” to the society, and hopes to rectify the situation soon.

Education News in Brief

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

October 28, 2016

Brock University has inappropriate” category for costumes

According to The Gazette, the Brock University Student Justice Centre has encouraged students to look into their website for the Halloween outfits, which is to ensure students do not wear “inappropriate” costumes.

Indeed, there is a category labelled inappropriate. That is, as noted in the report, “on the topic of cultural appropriate their check list appears like a dull reaction to last year’s blackface fiasco.” A time that four boys dressed as a Jamaican bobsled team.

The Student Justice Centre at Brock University provided a set of questions for students to reflect on and “should ask themselves before dressing up in a particular costume.” Some banned costumes are “cultural headdresses, Caitlyn Jenner depictions and even a Donald Trump mask.”

Education crucial for acceptance of transgenders

CBC reports that in Windsor a transgender woman, Lorraine Sayell, states that education is crucial for the proper comprehension of “issues” faced by the LGBT community, which is an ongoing issue itself.

Sayell said that there is a rejection of services to genderqueer individuals, or those that don’t “identify as male or female” and can be a consistent struggle in communities in life for them.

“Particularly in the last five years or so, the issue of transgender has become very public...It is very much talked about both in positive and negative terms. So, this is something that is not going to go away. We have to get ahead of it,” Sayell said.

New US President will not spend finances on reforms in the schools

According to The Economist, the new president will not be prioritizing school reform. Only 12.7% of the total USD600 billion is spent on the federal government in America. There are the states and the 13,500 districts that split the rest.

Furthermore, the US spends more than most nations to produce some of the worst educational outcomes, which is highly inefficient. George W. Bush and Barack Obama spurred reform through the power of the federal government.

No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act of 2001 was one aspect of this. Another was the “Race to the Top” initiative beginning in 2009. The former was Republican. The latter was Democrat. Regulation school reform, as an era, is ending. The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) was passed a recent replacement for the NCLB. Power is given back to the states for standards and tests.

Higher education institutions need to integrate with modern technology

Business Wire reports that Technavio put out an analysis entitled global higher education m-learning market to highlight the “most important trends expected to impact the market outlook from 2016-2020.”

Individuals with stakes in post-secondary institutions know that they need to integrate newer technology into their systems. That means upgrading their current systems or purchasing more advanced ones altogether for new infrastructure.

“This has led to the adoption of education technology solutions across various institutions” for the improvement of the learning opportunities and outcomes of students, but the cost of this “digitization” has been an issue.

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Questions from Rudd over “one size fits all” university education

According to [The PIE News](#), there are questions being raised about the viability of “one size fits all approach” to post-secondary institutions, especially with the “hundreds of different universities” on offer at the moment.

Amber Rudd, United Kingdom Home Secretary, said, “foreign students, even those studying English Language degrees, don’t even have to be proficient in speaking English.”

Rudd spoke of lower quality courses without specification of details. She described the current university system’s acceptance all students “irrespective of their talents and the university’s quality.”

Rising cost of education makes students turn international

According to [The Daily Trojan](#), the price of university tuition and living costs are making many students in the United States look internationally for their education, which can often mean European institutions of higher education.

The value of a university education is consistently mentioned as crucial to American students “from the moment students enter kindergarten.” Students come to the realization just how much tuition cost, and therefore move out of the States for their education.

Kasumyan says, “The U.S. does not entirely leave students to fend for themselves, but neither does it prioritize education as much as it should, evident in its meager budget when compared to the billions dedicated to military expenditures.”

Chinese value and pay high prices for international educations

According to Bloomberg, Chinese students are paying the expensive costs for what is considered prized international education. It is reported that expatriates with children see international schools as the “only realistic choice for an education in a foreign country.”

That is, the best option appears to be international education for Chinese students, which implies international education at home and abroad. The idea of international schools internal to China for Chinese parents and students might seem odd.

However, this is a common phenomenon and this is becoming an increasingly prevalent phenomenon. The Bloomberg video in the hyperlink explores this in greater depth for those with an interest.

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Russia's 5-100 plan under scrutiny

According to The PIE News, Russia's major internationalization project for higher education, Project 5-100, is being called into concern by the Minister of Education and Science, Olga Vasilyeva.

Vasilyeva said, "The budget should be spent very carefully," which was a warning from the new minister. The investments from Project 5-100 will be huge. This makes the Vasilyeva focused on the expenditure of the budget, which she argues should be in a careful manner.

"We are currently suspending any further consolidations of Russian universities for an indefinite period of time...The programme involves huge investments in the development of certain local universities; however, there is a big question, whether these funds will be repaid," Vasilyeva said.

Discussions opening over the importance of international rankings for schools

According to The Times Higher Education, some universities rise in the international school ranking because of increases in the pay of professors and instructors at their institution, which has raised questions about international rankings.

Duncan Ross, Data and Analytics Director at Times Higher Education, said, "One of the most frustrating questions I get asked by people at universities is: 'How can I go up in the rankings?' which is one of the least interesting questions about the data we have."

Ross would prefer questions about being better at things considered important by the institution and its membership. Vice-Provost for Planning and Assessment at Pennsylvania State University, Lance Kennedy-Phillips, considers rankings context-providing and not the driving force behind university operations.

Chinese value and pay high prices for international educations

According to The Christian Science Monitor, Sustainable Development Goals (MDGs), which followed the Millennium Development Goals, of the United Nations have 14-year ambitions to train "69 million new teachers" for the needed slots in education.

The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) released statistics stating the need for those 69 million teachers for "263 million children worldwide who do not attend primary or secondary school."

Silvia Montoya, UNESCO Institute for Statistics Director, said, "Entire education systems are gearing up for the big push to achieve Sustainable Development Goal 4 by 2030...[but] education systems are only as good as their teachers."

Religion News in Brief

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November 15, 2016

A rainbow in religion

The Guardian reports that there was a slogan on London buses in 2012 to target Christian groups' comprehension of sexuality as binary rather than a "spectrum of many shades" in terms of moral valence.

Some have viewed this as a binary adversarial perspective about the rightness and wrongness, and degrees of it, for the ethical implications of individual and groups decision about sexual activities.

"The tragedy here is not just the absurdity of trying to purge the world of its crazy variety," the Guardian said, "but in the pain and hurt it causes those who can't or won't force themselves on to our reductionist templates.

Israeli government backs call to block Muslim prayer

Christianity Today reported on the controversial ban on mosques to be able to have a Muslim call to Prayer within Israel, which won support from the government after a measure bolstered by Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu.

The prayers are traditionally called from minarets five times per day, and these have been the "battleground" of the conservative or Right wing of the Israeli political movements.

It has been stated that this is not an attempt to "harm freedom of religion but rather to prevent the harming of people's sleep."

Baha'i members say Iran want to 'crush' the religion

According to ABC News, the Baha'i International Community has expressed deep concerns about the attempts by Iran to "crush the religious minority" and that this has increased under the Presidency of Hassan Rouhani.

There was a 122-page report with statements that there is a "campaign to incite hatred against Baha'is" such as the spreading of over 20,000 bits of anti-Baha'i propaganda via the Iranian media.

Rouhani was inaugurated in August, 2013. There have been 151 Baha'i arrests in addition to 388 "incidents of economic discrimination" that have included intimidation, threats, and shop closings.

Muslim College Chaplains Extend a Hand Across Religious Divides

The New York Times said that a Muslim chaplain, Fardosa Hassan, helped a woman, Emma Bloom, through a time spiritual doubt through helping her “feeling more settled in her soul.”

She, Hassan, considers doubt as a necessity in terms of belief rather than “its irreversible solvent” because “divine texts can be interpreted by human hands and in modern ways.”

The conversations with Ms. Blom and Ms. Hassan (the Muslim chaplain) took place for close to 2 months before the settling feeling of Ms. Blom’s “soul” began to solidify in their place.

Religion News in Brief

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October 20, 2016

Bangladeshi murder suspect arrested

According to [NDTV](#), the central suspect in the murder case of secular Bangladeshi blogger has been arrested as of recent.

The secular Bangladeshi blogger, Nazimuddin Samad, was a law student and was murdered after the publication of a blog post critical of Islamists.

Counter-Terrorism and Transnational Centre unit and Detective Branch of police arrested the suspect, Rashidun Nabi, from Sayedabad.

Chinese government cracks down on parental ‘luring’ of kids into religion

The Independent [reported](#) on the government China’s call on friends, neighbours, and relatives that might be “luring minors into religious activities” in one province of China with the largest Muslim population.

November 1 in Xinjiang will be the first implementation of the education rules. There will be removal of children from their parents’ care and send them to “receive rectification” at specialist schools” in the case of the luring into religious activities.

With the “significant ethnic Uighur population” in this region of China, the limitations or restrictions are being “enforced on the practice of Islam” with the implementation of the new rules resulting in even further punishment.

Secular father prevents circumcision of newborn

According to Arutz Sheva, a father prevented a circumcision. The father very shortly before a circumcision of his son prevented the circumcision. It was the secular father's newborn son.

The 'sandak' was to be performed by Rabbi Kanievsky. Sandak is a term for an honoring for a child at a Brit Milah or circumcision ceremony in the Jewish tradition.

The report states: “A number of families were participating in the joint event, and when the turn of the child in question came, his father suddenly appeared, grabbed him up, and fled.

Secular Student Alliance sells souls to religions

According to [Daily Texan Online](#), the Secular Student Alliance has set up an auction for souls to be able to raise funds for the alliance.

It was called, and was the first, the Soul Auction. Various formal religions were represented with different jars such as Mormonism, Islam, Catholicism, and so on.

Based on the greatest amount of donations to a particular religious denomination, the SSA would attend a service of that religion.

Kaine and Pence debate seen as “honest” and “sincere” regarding faith

According to Salon, Longwood University, which is a public university in Virginia, was host to “the first and only vice presidential debate” with many calling the “most honest” and “most sincere” debate in some moments.

These were moments marked by Sen. Tim Kaine (D-VA) and Gov. Mike Pence (R-IN) having open discussions about their faiths. Pence made open appeals to the abortion and life’s sanctity concerns of the Christian right.

Kaine made clear emphasis on individual choice and the “moral responsibility of honoring” it. The Salon article author notes that the “focus stemmed from the fear, particularly among white southern evangelicals, of disturbing an old order based on white supremacy, heterosexuality and female domesticity.”

High Holy Days unavoidable for secular Israelis and diaspora Jewry

According to Haaretz, diaspora Jews and secular Israelis can learn from one another during the occurrence of Yom Kippur.

The High Holy Days remain "unavoidable" within the borders of Israel. This "religious New Year permeates the country's natural rhythms."

Both diaspora Jewry and secular Israelis take part in them or rake advantage of these special days. It is noted secular Israelis, for instance, might use them as "pseudo-holidays".

Bart Ehrman and Robert Price debate

According to Chicago Now, Professor Bart D. Ehrman and Dr. Robert M. Price are having a debate on October 21 in Milwaukee, Wisconsin on the topic of Jesus’s existence or non-existence.

Ehrman wrote five New York Times bestsellers to date in addition to be a distinguished professor of religious studies at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill. He is considered a “leading authority on the New Testament and the history of early Christianity.”

Professor Robert M. Price is a former Baptist minister with a PhDs in systematic theology and the New Testament. He is the “professor of biblical criticism at the Center for Inquiry Institute” and considers Jesus a mythological figure.

School works to keep secular status

According to The Record, a school is working hard to keep its secular status after two Muslim students were discriminated against.

The students wanted to pray and were not allowed to pray. The school, Webber Academy, is fighting to keep its secular status based on this.

The Alberta Human Rights Commission decision, last summer, was upheld by a lower court judge in addition to the \$26,000 fine.

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Trump supporters strong among religious far-Right

Vox reports that that 2016 American presidential election is “about values” and the larger vision of America amongst the voting population, which comes in the two representatives of the Democrats, Clinton, and Republicans, Trump.

Prominent “white evangelical Republican voters themselves are still there” as “values voters” and are among “Donald -Trump’s most stalwart defenders.”

Many of these supporters with deeply held religious convictions are bound a narrow range of issues including “abortion, same-sex marriage, school choice and school prayer, and deeper problems with a hypersexualized mass culture that takes sex outside of marriage as a given.”

Civilization VI has religious victory route

Eurogamer notes that one of the new big video games, Civilization VI, contains various religious elements as with the previous series of the game, where players can win via religion, for example.

To spread a preferred religion within the game, the player will need to acquire Faith with continuous quantities of the resource throughout the game to be able to strike a Faith-based victory, or a Religious Victory.

The Religious Victory can be had through the training and sending out of Apostles and Missionaries to “help spread the good news.”

Baha’i members say Iran want to ‘crush’ the religion

According to ABC News, the Baha’i International Community has expressed deep concerns about the attempts by Iran to “crush the religious minority” and that this has increased under the Presidency of Hassan Rouhani.

There was a 122-page report with statements that there is a “campaign to incite hatred against Baha’is” such as the spreading of over 20,000 bits of anti-Baha’i propaganda via the Iranian media.

Rouhani was inaugurated in August, 2013. There have been 151 Baha’i arrests in addition to 388 “incidents of economic discrimination” that have included intimidation, threats, and shop closings.

Indian Supreme Court will not debate greater meaning of Hindutva

According to the Hindustan Times, the Supreme Court, in India, will not enter into a greater debate as to the meaning of Hindutva, but, nonetheless, asserted that “asking for votes in the name of religion was “evil” and “not permissible”.”

The Supreme court was revisiting the judgment in 1995 about the Hindutva as a “way of life and not a religion” and that this might imply disqualification if candidates invoke religion for votes.

Chief Justice, TS Thakur, said, “It is difficult to define religion. There will be no end to this.” This was an observation and comment made with elections only five months away.

Religion News in Brief

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November 4, 2016

American women have same abortion rate with medication and surgery

According to Religion News Service, US women have begun to end pregnancies with medication at about the identical rate as they would do with surgery, which marks an important point “for abortion in the United States.”

This comes in the wake of a recent net decline in abortion whilst the decision, or choice, to have an abortion remains a controversial subject along political and religious lines in America.

It was the basis for a “fiery exchange in the final debate between presidential nominees Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump.” Medication-induced abortion was expected to overtake the surgical option when it won US approval 16 years ago. It might, but now it’s only equal.

Faith in progress and technology for happiness.

Quartz reports that religiosity has been overtaken by faith in progress as the way to make people happier within secular societies. Traditional, orthodox “religious belief best bolstered well being” in the past because it provided a sense of control.

University of Cologne, Germany social-psychologists state that science “satisfies the secular” quite a lot, and that technology has become the default as opposed to prayer, for an example.

1,500 people were surveyed in the Netherlands. They were surveyed about “values, religiosity, personality traits, beliefs about progress, and so on. They concluded “that both belief in scientific-technological progress and religiosity were associated with higher life satisfaction.”

Archbishop of Canterbury praised UAE on freedom of religion

The National reports that the Archbishop of Canterbury, Justin Welby who is the senior-most cleric in the Church of England, stated that the United Arab Emirates set a good example of permitting Christians to practice their faith.

"I am concerned that this is becoming the exception rather than the rule though in many parts of the world," he said, "It will be a joy to worship today at St Andrew’s Church here in Abu Dhabi.

"Many politicians and religious leaders came together in the UAE for discussions and discourse on how to “promote tolerance and understanding.” The aim of the meeting was to have pragmatic ways to have freedom of religion within societies.

Author looks at the decline of religion in America

According to The Catholic Sun, Kenneth Woodward published a book entitled *Getting Religion: faith, Culture, and Politics from the Age of Eisenhower to the Era of Obama*.

“Woodward was the religion editor of Newsweek Magazine for nearly 40 years until his retirement. He wrote about everything, he knew everyone, and he saw it all. This makes him unique,” The Catholic Sun said.

Woodward chronicles the continual decline of religion within America in what is seen as decreases in “both religious principles and religious liberty. This is what first made America exceptional in the history of the world.”

Author looks at the decline of religion in America

Oxford University Press Blog says that modern Pagans are challenging the traditional definitions of religion. That is, “Pagan religions, both newly envisioned and reconstructed on ancient patterns, are growing throughout the world,” OUP Blog said.

Druidry, Wicca, and so on, have been maintained by individuals within the English-speaking world and this comes along with other attempts around the world to retain aspects of “indigenous or tribal traditions.”

Religion News in Brief

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Comet hit 10 million years after the impact that killed the dinosaurs

According to Science Magazine, a small comet impact kicked off the PETM, stirring up the carbon just 10 million years after a similar event decimated the dinosaurs.

A group of scientists claim that there were rising temperatures by as much as 5°C to 8°C with concomitant huge wildlife migrations 56 million years ago. This is called the Paleocene-Eocene thermal maximum (PETM). Researchers did not know its cause for some time.

However, in an article this week in *Science*, a very prestigious journal, scientists presented findings of “glassy, dark beads, set in eight sediment cores tied to the PETM's start.”

These are spheres “associated with extraterrestrial strikes.” - spheres that are often associated with extraterrestrial strikes. The spheres appeared to be “microtektites,” which is “debris” caused by comet or asteroid strikes against the Earth at high speeds.

Nerd-in-Chief for the US as 300 million USD in science funding unveiled

According to CNET, the United States unveiled 300 million USD funding for science through President Barack Obama. It is “federal and private money earmarked for support science and technology.”

There is 165 million USD devoted to “smart city initiatives” for the reduction of traffic congestion among other things. 70 million USD is meant for researching in brain diseases such as “Alzheimer's, Parkinson's, depression and other diseases.”

There will be 50 million USD for “small-satellite technology that enables high-speed internet” and 16 million USD to improve the medical care for Americans through the Precision Medicine Initiative.

Wales aims for more scientists

According to Science Magazine, Wales wants more scientists and has the Welsh government has developed the Sêr Cymru initiative in 2012 as part of a larger set of governmental science strategies.

The aim is to make Wales world-class in areas of possibility for being the among the greats in the world in those domains. There has been a commitment of £50 million “to bring prestigious research chairs to Welsh universities.”

A second £60 million...phase of Sêr Cymru” was launched in December, 2015, through offerings for mid- to early-career scientists. Chief Science Advisor for the Welsh Government, Julie Williams, said, “Our ambition is to grow research.”

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Scott Douglas Jacobsen

November 15, 2016

Dan Rather supports science

According to [Scientific American](#), Dan Rather supports science and says that it is more important than ever in the modern world. Some questions might be raised about the presidential election of 2016 by future historians.

The Trump Administration will need to work on the scientific front because of the pressing concerns of the modern world that require scientific solutions and pursuit for their alleviation.

“The political press treats science as a niche issue. But I would argue that it is central to America’s military and economic might,” Rather said, “that it shapes the health and welfare of our citizenry, and that our governmental support of the pure pursuit of knowledge through basic research is one of the defining symbols of American excellence.”

“Supermoon” is here

Space.com [reports](#) that there will be a November “supermoon” on November 14 that can provide “an extraordinary sight for skywatchers,” which is “a full moon is at its perigee, or closest point to Earth during the lunar orbit.”

It will be the brightest and biggest moon, supermoon that is, to date in about 69 years, where the next one is expected to come on November 25, 2034. It is a rare event, and a rarefied experience for those that had or have the chance to see it.

NASA's Noah Petro, Deputy Scientist of the Lunar Reconnaissance Orbiter mission, said, “The main reason why the orbit of the moon is not a perfect circle is that there are a lot of tidal, or gravitational, forces that are pulling on the moon.”

New Zealand shakes and kills

Science Magazine [said](#) that an earthquake hit New Zealand on November 14, which killed 2 people, and that New Zealand has convoluted seismic activity based on the judgment of experts.

James Goff, Seismologist and Tsunami Expert at the University of New South Wales in Sydney, Australia, said, “[New Zealand -seismology] is a lot more complicated than we thought... We are finding out again that there is seismic activity that we didn't really know about.”

The US Geological Survey found the epicenter was a 7.8 magnitude earthquake near kaikoura, which is a coastal tourist town. The shallow quake from the earthquake “caused extensive damage to infrastructure.”

Religion News in Brief

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October 20, 2016

Scientists make accidental discovery regarding CO2

According to [Science Alert](#), the world has hit the greatest levels of CO2 in the atmosphere in over 4 million years, which means that it is permanent and past the point of safe. That was last month.

The author of the Science Alert report note that “if we can turn CO2 into a fuel source, we can at least slow things down a bit.” Scientists discovered the way to do this.

US Department of Energy Oak Ridge team member, Adam Rondinone, said, “We were trying to study the first step of a proposed reaction when we realised that the catalyst was doing the entire reaction on its own.

Does English Have to Be the Dominant Language of Science?

A Scientific American blogger [reflects](#) on the necessity or non-necessity of having English as the lingua franca for scientific throughout the world amongst the globe’s scientists.

The blogger notes that the English language as used in speaking in science “is as important as any other part in a methods section and should be deliberate and fair.”

Peer review is an integral part to the modern scientific operations. Biases in language create barriers for articles and reviews. “Keeping a constant critical eye on our methodology helps us strive for scientific excellence and objectivity”, the author said.

Scientists discover depression isn’t just ‘all in the head’

According to [Science Alert](#), depression has been sourced to physical structures in the brain based on MRI research and evidence, which debunks the notion of depression as “just a ‘frame of mind’.”

The researchers scanned over 900 people’s brains with the depression symptoms of “feelings of loss and low self-esteem” linked to the orbitofrontal cortex. This portion of the brain is devoted to “sensory integration, expectation, and decision-making.”

Jianfeng Feng, a Computational Psychiatrist at the University of Warwick in the UK and Fudan University in China, said, “Our finding, with the combination of big data we collected around the world and our novel methods, enables us to locate the roots of depression”.

Primates besides humans create stone tools

The [Telegraph](#) reports that archaeologists discovered primates besides humans have been able to

fashion stone tools for their own use. These have been called “tool-like flakes” in the article.

This might place decades of research into question because of the discovery of capuchin monkeys in Brazil observed “hammering rocks to extract minerals, causing large flakes to fly off.”

Previous discoveries have shown that only humans made such flakes. The process to make them is known as ‘stone-knapping’, where a bigger rock is hammered by one other stone to create “sharp blade-like slivers”.

Religion News in Brief

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October 28, 2016

Patient Zero for HIV ‘cleared’

According to [BBC News](#), Gaetan Dugas was one “of the most demonised patients in history” and “has been convincingly cleared of claims he spread HIV to the US”, which diminishes the demonised, “legendary status”.

Dugas was a homosexual flight attendant. He acquired the name Patient Zero. Via a publication in the prestigious journal *Nature*, he was shown to be one of among thousands infected with HIV/Aids.

New York was found to be a nexus for the incubation and spread of HIV/Aids. It was recognized in 1981 when unusual symptoms emerged among gay men. Researchers have been able to look back farther in time with stored samples from 1970s hepatitis trials, which contain HIV.

Probe glitch possibly behind Mars probe crashing

According to [The Guardian](#), the European Space Agency (ESA) describes how a potential computer glitch might have caused the crashing of the probe that was sent to Mars.

Apparently, the plummet began a couple miles up. Further satellite images “confirm” that the probe, or spacecraft, was travelling at about 300km/hr and “smashed into an equatorial Martian plain on October 19th.

“After a flawless start to its descent, the craft’s landing sequence appears to have gone out of kilter” and The ExoMars 2016 lander put out its parachute much too early, and the retrorockets should have been on for 29 seconds but only were on for 3. The plummet and crash followed.

Science budget unaffected post-Brexit

The Register [reports](#) that Jo Johnson, Science Minister, promised the United Kingdom government will continue to allocate funding to the science budget “to underwrite EU funding following Blighty’s departure from the European Union.”

PM Theresa May notes the Brexit negotiation will take place following the Article 50 of the Lisbon Treaty “triggering” in March, 2017. Johnson made assurances that the government committee devoted to this is “working hard.”

According to Johnson, there is a “strong commitment” on the part of the UK government to “not use any of the £26.3bn science budget pledged in April 2016” in support of monetary support cut by the EU.

Bad scientific climate a problem for the practice of it

EurekAlert notes that an acrimonious political context can slow down science and its progressive effects, which is especially important as a consideration in the midst of the Fourth Industrial Revolution and in a Knowledge Economy.

“The House of Representatives Science, Space & Technology Committee has been operating in lockstep with the combative political climate this election season” with detrimental consequences on science.

There have been 25 subpoenas since “last year.” These were raised to investigate the activities of science agencies and others. Some “scientists say the efforts are having a chilling effect” rather than bringing any problem behaviour to the fore.

Religion News in Brief

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

November 4, 2016

Times when US presidents ‘banished’ science

The Atlantic reflected on the time the differences in American presidents and their advocacy, or lack thereof, of science in the political sphere for an impact of US public life.

Harry Truman used to confide in William T. Golden. Golden made a recommendation for an official science advisor to the president in 1950, which was a fortuitous move for science.

However, in “1973, Richard Nixon” had “grown increasingly dismissive of the advice coming from scientific experts, and...abolished the position entirely.”

“Geeking Out for Science”

According to Scientific American, the GeekGirlCon occurred from October 8-9 with representation of science for kids, so that they could “explore the world of science and engineering with creativity and hands-on fun.”

Some dressed up in the event. It was aimed to inspire girls to become interested in science. The purpose is the need for future science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) graduates.

The future economy and jobs market is, as is becoming apparent to more and more, a knowledge economy. Events like this support those endeavours. The National Science Foundations in the US created a competition for high school students interested in STEM.

Bones into Jelly!

Science Magazine notes that 10,000 years ago in the Stone Age, in other words our ancestors, hunter-gatherers actually built houses, hunted, and conducted shamanic rituals out in the “wetlands of North Yorkshire.”

“Archaeologists uncovered” a Mesolithic dwelling called the Star Carr (1948). There were highly preserved animal bones, wooden and bone tools, and headdresses. More recently, the researchers found Star Carr breaking down.

In fact, the “waterlogged wood rapidly mysteriously” broke down in addition to the bone turning into a jelly, which were, in a paper published in the Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences, termed “jellybones.”

Religion News in Brief

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

October 6, 2016

Anti-science is becoming an international “contagion”

According to [Environment 360](#), British Labor MP Jo Cox was assassinated by a right-win nationalist last June after having tweets “about oceans, fishing, and trawler fleets” on her Twitter account.

Cox made reference to the International Council for the Exploration of the Seas (ICES), which is one “the oldest international scientific institutions in the world...founded in Denmark in 1902” to scientifically explore the oceans.

ICES scientists measure fish stocks. This can inform politicians in reasonable quotas for fishing. Nigel Farage described quotas as an attack on national sovereignty for Britain. These are but two of attacks on “science-driven policies of the EU” grounded in “the scientific process” and “evidence-based policy.”

Nobel Prizes for strange states of matter

According to [QC Online: International](#), Nobel Prizes were awarded to three men - David Thouless, Duncan Haldane, and Michael Kosterlitz – with the possibility that their work could contribute to “more powerful computers and improved materials for electronics.”

In the 1970s and 1980s, their work showed the properties of matter’s stranger states of existence. The Royal Swedish Academy of Sciences said, “Their discoveries have brought...theoretical understanding of matter's mysteries and created new perspectives.”

The Nobel Prizes, co-won, came with monetary reward as well. It was about 8 million kronor. 4 million kronor to Thouless alone, and 4 million kronor to Haldane and Kosterlitz together. Haldane received the call about the prize. “My first thought was someone had died,” Haldane said.

China National Genebank opening

According to [PR Newswire](#), China has officially opened the China National Genbank (CNGB) to facilitate and conduct international genomics collaboration for the provision to scientists around the world access to “the world’s most comprehensive and sophisticated biorepositories.”

The aim is to produce innovative research in human health and to contribute to “global biodiversity conservation efforts.” CNGB is a billion-dollar enterprise with over 47,500 square metres of coverage.

It was “initiated by China's National Development and Reform Commission in 2011.” It was developed out of the Beijing Genomics Institute, which is the largest genomics organization. Ultimately, “the mission of CNGB is to preserve the essence of billion years of evolutionary history and deposit the life foundation of billions of people.”

Religion News in Brief

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

October 9, 2016

Anti-scientific politicians a growing problem in the U.S.

According to Scientific American, in an article by Shaw Otto, there is a warning about a growing anti-scientific movement, which appears to gaining momentum and possibly becoming a “growing problem in American democracy.”

That is, politicians holding anti-scientific beliefs can instantiate positions in direct opposition to “the core principles that the U.S. was founded on,” which are founded in “no king, no pope and no wealthy lord” being more “entitled to govern the people than they [are] themselves.”

Otto describes the current political situation as a post-fact. The regularized denial of scientific principles, laws, and facts become dangerous to an informed electorate. The normalization comes from “political, religious or economic agendas of authority.”

Native Americans are not anti-science

According to Salon, authors Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz and Dina Gilio-Whitaker, the Native Americans, or American Indians, have fewer reasons to be anti-science than most and there is a history of “science...used in service of U.S. political agendas to dispossess them of their lands and subjugate them.”

Jason Antrosio, Professor of Anthropology at Hartwick College, claimed “many Native Americans refuse to participate in genetic studies,” where there seems to be a “belief that Indigenous Americans somehow owe their DNA to genetics studies...”

“...and that when they disagree, they are automatically deemed to be against science.” The authors note the case of astronomy, which appears to be one of the first sciences. They state the commonality of all people, at one time or another and as with Indigenous peoples, through reading “the heavens to keep track of time.”

Other primates can read minds like humans

According to Science Magazine, there’s a classic experiment to test for theory of mind (ToM), which is “the ability to attribute desires, intentions, and knowledge to others.” That is, the test is for the ability to have an internal model of another mind.

Humans were thought to be unique in this capacity. As it turns out, other primates might have this ability that, to a limited or less great extent than, human beings. In particular, there’s the phenomena of knowing when someone holds a false belief, a counterfactual view

It is an ability “believed to underlie deception, empathy, teaching, and perhaps even language. But three species of great apes—chimpanzees, bonobos, and orangutans” can tell if an individual has a false belief.

Women's Rights News in Brief

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

October 14, 2016

Women's rights organisations' funding on a five-year decline

According to [The Guardian](#), the funding to women's rights groups have continued to decline by over half through the previous five years, which contrasts with recent reports on the improvement in the lives of women in the long term through women's rights organisations' activities.

There was a financial support review of the major donor countries. According to the Gendernet report, which is a "subsidiary body of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development" (OECD), only .5% or £144m was dedicated to promotion of gender equality in poor countries.

The number in 2011 was 1.2%. In short, the monetary funding has decreased substantially from the previous amounts. "Only 8% of the funds earmarked for civil society went" straight to the developing country groups with a "fraction" to local women's groups.

Muslim women challenge polygamy and triple talaq

According to the [Daily Mail](#): India, a "war of words" emerged in the wake of All India Muslim Personal Law Board's (AIMPLB) boycott of a "questionnaire on authoring a common code for issues such as marriage, divorce and property rights."

The AIMPLB made the accusation that the law panel acted as "an agent of the Narendra Modi government." That is, the proposal for the Uniform Civil Code threatens the diversity and pluralism of India. Many Muslim women activists stated that the AIMPLB does not speak for "the entire community."

President of Maulana Arshad Madani, Jamiat-Ulema-e-Hind, said, "If a uniform civil code is implemented, attempts will be made to paint all in one colour, which is not in the interest of the country." Many Muslim women challenged the legitimacy of the practices of triple talaq and polygamy.

Women climb Africa's highest mountain in call for land rights

According to [Reuters](#), a Kenyan woman's, Ann Ondaye's, husband died and the deceased husband's brothers took the widow's possessions. Ondaye is left with three young daughters.

There were attempts to oust her from her "matrimonial home" with claims about her children not being entitled to the father's land. Why? They're girls. Elders in the Luo community, and women activists, fought for Ondaye to stay on the 2.5-hectare lot of land.

“Ondaye is one of hundreds of women from more than 20 African countries meeting in Tanzania this week to write a charter” that will make explicit demands for the improvement of “access to and control over land.” The fittest will climb Mount Kilimanjaro to sign the charter.

Women's Rights News in Brief

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

October 19, 2016

Donald Trump and reflection on the status of women and girls

According to The Jakarta Post, Donald Trump is the “buffoonish, hyper-narcissistic, xenophobic, misogynistic, mentally and emotionally retarded Republican presidential candidate...”

The author article goes on to use to present statistics about women and girls in addition to the International Year of the Girl Child and its “Girls’ Progress = Goals Progress: A Global Girl Data Movement”. They report that 700 million women have been married prior to the age of 18, and “more than one third were married before 15.” It is economically related, too.

Poor girls are 2 ½ times more likely to marry in childhood. “Pregnancy happens soon after marriage, even when they are not mentally or physically ready”, the author said.

California porn star says enforced condoms violates her rights

According to The Guardian, a porn star considers the enforcement of condoms on porn sets a violation of her rights to do what she wants with her body, which is an argument made by Tasha Reign.

Reign was recently handing out pamphlets in San Diego, California at UCSD to protest Proposition 60, which is for the mandatory wearing of condoms for adult entertainers while filming sex scenes Reign is a self-identified feminist.

“It’s extremely difficult for somebody to be able to maintain an erection for 45 minutes, and to be able to pop with a condom...I hate the idea that some man is going to tell me what I can and can’t do”, Reign said.

Scarlett Johansson speaks for women’s reproductive health

Motto reports on the recent statements by Scarlett Johansson on women’s rights and the right for women to choose what to do with their bodies in addition to her accepting an award for work done with Planned Parenthood.

Johansson said, “Planned Parenthood has always been there for me and for the 2.5 million men and women who rely on their services annually”. She is a “strong advocate” for reproductive health organizations such as Planned Parenthood.

“A woman’s right to choose what to do with her body shouldn’t just be a woman’s rights issues”, said Johansson, “It’s the year 2016 and this is a human rights issue. A woman’s right to choose is a deeply personal one and should not be a part of anyone’s political platform”.

In Liberia, Barzon advocating for women's rights

According to All Africa, the “Head of Liberia’s delegation” who went to the Rural Women Land Right Summit in Tanzania made a calling for the government to make sure that women in the rural areas have their rights to own land upheld.

Madam Jesadeh G. Barzon made firm statements about that land not being taken away from them. The importance to not take the land and, therefore, their livelihood away from them.

Barzon, Chairperson of the Zwedru Rural Women, stated that she climbed Mt. Kilimanjaro in order to have women’s voices heard for their “rights to land, investment and inheritance and the abolishment to early marriage.”

Women's Rights News in Brief

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

October 28, 2016

Worldwide war against women

According to The Village Voice, there is a war against women around the world. The article notes that “a conservative Muslim president announces that women who don’t stay home and bear children are ‘deficient.’”

Russia’s Duma represents a campaign to decriminalize domestic violence, where the majority of victims are women. India has an editor of a liberal investigative magazine put his hand up a cornered employee’s skirt. The incident, or crime, is dismissed as “drunken banter”.

Within the Philippines, “the new president jokes about” missing the opportunity to lead a gang-rape, which reflects consistencies among individuals in power, or men in stations of authority in the world.

Canadian Rights Record for Women's Equality record under review

Net News Ledger reports that the Canadian rights record for women’s equality is under review at the United Nations in Geneva with the 65th session of the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women.

The new federal government, with the self-identified feminist Prime Minister, Justin Trudeau, and son of the late ex-Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau, calls for a “nation-to-nation relationship, and acknowledges that ‘poverty is sexist’.”

The Net News Ledger states that “Canada needs a comprehensive and holistic national gender equality plan that addresses all forms of discrimination against women and girls. It must take an intersectional approach, recognizing that particular groups of women and girls—including First Nations, Inuit, Métis, racialized, disabled, refugee, immigrant, transgender, lesbian, bisexual and single parent women and girls—experience particular forms of discrimination and deepened disadvantage.”

UN recognizes Afghan’s women’s ability to fight extremism

UN News Office notes that following an Afghan civil society meeting with representatives meeting in Kabul that women’s rights are key to the overall strategies to combat violent extremism.

The meeting was a part of a larger day entitled Global Open Day to assist women. It was themed on peace, security, and women. The UN Secretary-General’s Deputy Special Representative for Afghanistan, Pernille Kardel, and the Country Representative for the UN Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (UN Women), Elzira Sagynbaeva took part.

Kardel said, “In Afghanistan, ideologies imposing discriminatory belief systems continue to deprive women and girls of basic human rights such as freedom of movement and access to education and health.”

Women's Rights News in Brief

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

November 3, 2016

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

According to the Daily Mail, men in Indonesia have begun to put on skirts in protest against the persistent discrimination against women.

An individual, Syaldi Sahude, recollected the statistics that about 85% of Indonesian women have suffered from “violence at the hands of their partners” and remain in those relationships.

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

Protecting women human rights defenders in Honduras

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

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

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

Sex workers' rights in public discourse in Latin America

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

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

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

Women's Rights News in Brief

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

October 6, 2016

Istanbul summit to bring together women for justice

According to Daily Sabah, the Second International Women and Justice Summit will be hosted next month from November 25-26 with the theme of "Speak Up for Justice!" for women to discuss problems faced by women.

The summit will be hosted by NGOs including Women and Democracy Association (KADEM) and the Ministry of Family and Social Policies. It will "start on the International Day for the Elimination of Violence Against Women."

Two foci exist: "Women in Peace Processes" and "Syrian Refugee Women and Their Problems." The hope is to raise awareness of women's issues. There will be "workshops on cultural codes and manhood, women and peace, domestic violence and women refugees from Syria."

Mike Pence's Record On Women's Rights Barely Came Up At The Debate & That's A Problem

According to the Romper, During the first and only vice presidential debate of 2016, Indiana Gov. Mike Pence and Virginia Sen. Tim Kaine took the stage to discuss, and essentially defend, their respective presidential nominees and the important issues their campaigns plan to address in the hopes of currying favour with potential and would-be voters come November.

But while the debate was flooded with information, Pence's record on women's rights barely came up at the vice presidential debate — which is an utter failure, as over half of voters are women, an estimated 53 percent.

Pence's political track record on reproductive rights and women's health care is not only disturbing, it's something that should have been highlighted on a national stage at great length, as Donald Trump has claimed Pence will be the "most powerful vice president in the history of the United States."

Bid to ban abortion in Poland sparks heated Strasbourg debate

Radio Poland reports that Left-wing European Parliament deputies on Wednesday slammed a "medieval" bid to ban abortion in Poland, while conservative MEPs stressed the controversial measure is not a government initiative.

But in a move that surprised many, a Polish parliamentary committee on Wednesday rejected the bill, which has triggered street protests and fierce criticism on social media.

Malin Björk, a Swedish politician for the Left Party, said in the European Parliament debate in

Strasbourg: “This new [proposed] law is a huge blow against women’s rights.”. Gianni Pittella, president of the Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats, the second largest political group in the European Parliament, said: “The Polish proposal to toughen abortion [laws] goes against the EU's values and threatens the right to health of women.”

But Jadwiga Wiśniewska, who hails from Poland’s ruling conservative Law and Justice party, told fellow MEPs: “You are trying to debate [a measure] in Poland that doesn’t exist yet and you are talking about something on which you don’t have the right to legislate.”

Women's Rights News in Brief

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

October 9, 2016

Tunisian women fight for their rights

According to CBC New: World, Tunisia had a revolution in 2011 that ended a 22-year long dictatorship, which created a series of “popular uprisings” across the Middle East. This was the Arab Spring.

Tunisians overthrew President Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali. That “spurred a jubilant sense of unity.” However, women, in general, developed “dread” post-revolution over the status, or potential non-status, of their rights. What if an Islamist conservatism swept the country?

President Ben Ali’s reign for over two decades had rampant “corruption, human rights abuses and tight restrictions on free speech and political opposition.” 1957 marked the instantiation of women’s rights, and 2014 the re-affirmation, in Tunisia.

Polish abortion law debated in European parliament

According to European Parliament News, the recent events in Poland, the protests over the proposed abortion law called Black Monday, “sparked a heated debate in the Parliament on Wednesday.”

Poland has the most regressive abortion policies in the continent of Europe. The proposed bill or law would make them even more regressive with respect to women’s rights, which means even more “stringent sexual and reproductive health laws.”

The European Parliament is in a contested moment over the debate of the subject matter. Justice Commissioner, Věra Jourová, opened the debate with a declaration that “the European Union has no powers over abortion policy and cannot interfere in member states' policies in this area.”

Saudi male-guardianship laws treat women as second-class citizens

According to The Guardian, Saudi Arabia’s male guardianship system imposed on women is a “set of bylaws and state-sanctioned discriminatory policies and practices that restrict a woman’s ability to have a wide range of choices unless permitted by her male guardian.”

That male can include the son, brother, husband, or father of the woman in question, or simply women in general. Women lack full recognition as “full legal adults” by this standard. That is, women in Saudi Arabia are not recognized as adults by the state.

Female activists have joined forces in the country to abolish the system through “a petition and massive online support. “Women activists submitted a letter to the Royal Advisory Council” during 2014 in the hopes that there would be change, but the council members expressed no support for “significant change.”

Interview with Terry Sanderson - President, National Secular Society

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

September 15, 2016

Terry Sanderson, the President of the National Secular Society - a British campaigning organisation that promotes secularism and separation of Church and State.

How'd you become an activist?

I became an activist entirely by circumstance, by accident even. My recently published autobiography The Adventures of a Happy Homosexual is subtitled *Memoirs of an Unlikely Activist* tells how, in the late 1960s and early 1970s, I became involved in the burgeoning gay rights movement.

But I was not part of the Gay Liberation Front that flourished in London and provided all the ideas and ideology for the movement at the time. No, I lived in a small mining village in South Yorkshire, a centre of severe social deprivation. It still is extremely poor, even more so since the coal mines and the steel works closed. London was not just another country, but another planet.

I had a sheltered childhood, where the concept of social mobility was unheard of.

As was homosexuality.

And yet, I knew I was gay from a very early age, and became increasingly frustrated at the prospect of a life of loneliness and isolation, which is what many gay people of that period endured. I hated the contempt and cruelty that was shown to anyone 'found out' to be gay, and I became increasingly determined to do my bit to change things. It took a long time for me to realise that you don't have to believe everything that you're told, even when you're told it by your teacher or your parent.

And so, I started a gay group in the nearby town of Rotherham, which caused a sensation there in 1972. Although most of the people who joined were simply looking for a social life, I was more interested in changing the attitudes and injustices that created their isolation in the first place.

This was my training ground in activism. I came to understand how politics work, how the media can be used to foment campaigns, how to enlist allies and wrong-foot opponents.

It was a very different time, of course, there was no internet or social media so campaigning had to be done in a long and time-consuming way - especially so when, like us, you had no resources. This period of almost frenetic activism lasted for about fifteen years and gave me the grounding that I needed.

Eventually I moved to London and pursued some of my journalistic ambitions. I wrote a series of self-help books for gay people, hoping that the next generation could learn from the mistakes of the previous one and perhaps lead a happier life. My book How to be a Happy Homosexual went

through five editions and sold tens of thousands of copies. Even now, older gay people still come up to me and tell me how that book helped them to make positive changes in the way they regarded themselves. It brought many people out of the closet and helped in the raising of gay people's self-esteem. It is one of my proudest achievements in that it gave the tools for people to think about themselves in a different, more constructive way and therefore progress in their lives.

The present generation of gay youngsters take much of this for granted, but all the reforms were the result of hard, persistent work.

My other area of activism was in trying to change media images of gay people from entirely negative to - at least occasionally - sympathetic. I wrote a column called "Mediawatch" for Gay Times magazine. It appeared through the whole period that the greatest battles in the gay struggle took place. The column ran for twenty-five years and I believe it made a difference to the way gay people were portrayed in the media.

As gay rights flourished and progress was made in just about all the areas of law that we had struggled so long to reform, I came to realise that the main barrier to complete equality was religion.

In all the reforms that have occurred over the past fifty years, it was the Church that tried hardest to derail them. It was the churches (and other religious organisations and religiously motivated individuals) that continued to portray gay people as evil and undesirable. It was their aggressive and regressive attitudes that needed to be challenged. And so I changed my focus to secularism.

I reasoned that secularism was the only way to keep religion in its proper place – and that place is not in Parliament where laws are made (and unmade) for everyone.

Were parents or siblings an influence on this for you?

Not at all. The environment in which I was raised – working class, poor, accepting of an inferior lot in life – was not conducive to challenging authority. My parents were terrified of authority, particularly the police. I don't know why, they were the most upstanding and honest people I've ever known. They were loving people, but they discouraged my tendency to independent thinking. They were traditionalist in their approach and, in the words of that great champion of the North, Victoria Wood, if there were problems "you kept your gob shut and got on with the ironing."

It took me a long time to shake off that fear of our supposed superiors and realise that authority is often not all it seems – indeed, it can often be corrupt.

But this fear of authority, imbued in me by my parents, and this discouragement of challenging the status quo, made me quite a late starter. It was only when I was in my twenties that I felt that something was severely out of kilter with our society if it thought I was a satanic creature that must be suppressed or even put in jail. It was also an overwhelming desire to experience love and

companionship with another man – something religion was trying to stop, by legal means if possible.

It was this personal sense of persecution, of course, that made the gay rights movement so powerful. Everyone involved had a very personal stake in it, and much to gain from its success.

So, my parents were not my inspiration. I had to operate in an atmosphere of disapproval in order to pursue the activism that I felt was just.

Was university education an asset or a hindrance to your goal of being an activist?

I left school at the age of fifteen without a single qualification to my name – not even a measly GCE. I was expected, like my peers, to start work the day after I left school, which is what I did.

But I was always curious about the world, and anxious to know more about it. I spent most Saturdays in the library reading and exploring the things that interested me. I became an autodidact – just like the first President of the National Secular Society, Charles Bradlaugh, who came from a similarly poverty-stricken background and educated himself into the law, becoming an admired and skilled advocate.

I have felt my lack of education from time to time, and have had to accept my limits. I can always draw on the skills of others, though, and am good at delegation.

Would a university education have made a difference to what I did? No – I was not motivated by intellectual rigour but by a strong sense of injustice. The isolated place where I was born and raised meant that I had no-one to tell me how to do it, but plenty of people telling me I shouldn't do it. Everything I knew about activism, I had gained from reading about it in books.

I was, therefore, obliged to make it up as I went along.

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

The gay group I started in Rotherham was a branch of the Campaign for Homosexual Equality (CHE), which was based in Manchester. CHE was different to the Gay Liberation Front, less radical and more pragmatic in its pursuit of law change. But for those of us in the branches – and there were dozens around the country – we were left to our own devices to proceed as we saw fit.

Some branches were social and some were activists. It all depended on the individuals who ran them.

But the mutual support they provided and the platform from which campaigns could be launched was essential. CHE also brought me my partner of 35 years, Keith.

How did you come to adopt a socially progressive worldview?

Although it was a Labour heartland, the mining town where I was raised was anything but socially progressive. It was conservative (small c) in its approach to social issues. Most of the campaigning I did in those early days was aimed at the Labour local authority which was utterly opposed to homosexual equality.

It was only over a long period that this changed after people like Ken Livingstone in London adopted gay rights – even in the face of relentless attacks in the media and from the Conservative government.

It was only while campaigning in this area that I came to see – through contact with other activists – that there were other areas of glaring injustice, such as women's rights, racism and disregard for the rights of people with disabilities. I like to think of myself as a feminist and want more than anything for women to play a much bigger role in the power structures of our society.

All this activism has been carried out in my spare time – I had to support myself with full-time work and most of my working life has been spent in the area of disabilities. Working with people with disabilities changed my whole approach to life.

Gradually, through all these issues I have come to recognise that all people – no exceptions - have the same rights and should be equal before the law.

Now I'd like to spend much more time helping women in Islam improve their lot. I strongly believe that Islam will never be reformed until women are liberated within it. The ghastly machismo that dominates the religion at the moment gives greatest power to stupid, violent men.

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

If people are unhappy they will eventually try to do something about it. Trying to repress human impulses – which is what religion seeks to do – eventually leads to an explosive reaction. You can see it in Iran, where the mullahs try desperately to control every waking moment of the people – telling them what to wear, what to eat, what to do, when to sleep, what to think.

But young Iranians are filled with that natural exuberance that cannot and should not be dampened. Despite the rulings from the crackpot ayatollahs, these youngsters find ways of expressing themselves as human beings, not as robots impatiently awaiting their place in paradise.

I believe that eventually the Iranians (it is an overwhelmingly youthful population) will rebel against the patriarchy and overthrow those bearded, be-turbaned relics and reclaim their lives.

And that is why I believe in social progress, in inclusion, in equality. I think the issue of women's rights all over the world is the number one issue for this and many other generations to come. Empowering women can save the world. And again it is institutions like the Vatican that keeps women down, stifles their lives and limits their options.

But change will only come through social progress, and the challenges to religious power. That is why I think it is important.

Do you consider yourself a progressive?

I like to think so, if progressive means wanting to challenge injustice and move equality forward.

But like everyone else, I occasionally backslide. I look on in alarm at the refugee crisis and wonder where it is all leading. Is it racist to be worried about that?

I have changed my mind about what is the best way to ensure religion does not dominate the lives of those who don't want it. Trying to persuade people out of their religious beliefs is a hopeless cause, except in very limited ways. Those who have religion as the centre of their lives are not going to be persuaded out of it. And why should they be?

The way forward is to ensure that state and religion are separated. That no religion can take secular power and use it in the way it is used in so many theocracies around the world, as a means of persecuting those who do not share that faith.

It is an ongoing battle – who is to define “religious freedom”? I know how I would define it, but others have different ideas. But a definition that is realistic needs to be made and accepted by all, or the battles over who is entitled to rights and who isn't will continue.

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

I think there have been progressive people of all beliefs and none. There are Christians who want to push their faith in a progressive direction and there are atheists who want to make the world a better place by other means – through environmentalism or poverty-reduction. Nobody has a monopoly on progressivism and it is becoming increasingly clear that unless we break down the barriers that separate us and work together, the whole of humanity could be under threat.

What are your religious/irreligious beliefs?

I'm an atheist. That's all. I don't think it needs any qualification. An atheist simply doesn't believe in the existence of the supernatural in any form, and if you want to define it beyond that, it becomes something else.

In many people's minds – particularly in the USA – atheism has become a 'movement' with all kinds of agendas. It wants to take religious wording off banknotes, remove religious references from the Pledge of Allegiance, remove religious paraphernalia from public buildings. But that is taking atheism into another dimension and making it into something other than just not believing in gods.

Atheism is used as an interchangeable term with secularism, but they aren't the same thing.

Of course, some religious activists of a theocratic disposition, love to conflate atheism and secularism, because they realise that secularism is a real threat to their ambition for religious power and that atheists are supposedly widely despised in America. Ergo: secularism is worthy of dismissal because it is just the same as atheism.

My own atheism is simply a reflection of what I can't accept to be true. Supernatural claims just seem ridiculous. I laughed when the Catholic Church made "Mother Theresa" a saint because she apparently cured someone of brain cancer from beyond the grave. It just seems so primitive.

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

I don't think progressivism should be defined in those terms. Anyone from anywhere can be progressive on some issues and not on others. We can unite on what we agree on and continue to argue about the rest. I like the fact that the NSS has no political affiliation and no religious affiliation – anyone can join so long as they accept the concept of secularism and the NSS's approach to it.

We even have a couple of vicars who have joined recently and some progressive Muslims. They know that separating religion from the state makes things safer for everyone, and we welcome their participation. But the NSS is sharply focused – it won't be starting prayer groups or atheist churches.

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

Religion first and foremost, but also the rise of what has become known as the *Regressive Left*. These are the people who one would usually associate with progressive movements but who have allied themselves with horrendously backward-looking Islamist groups.

They rightly think that they must support Muslims in their efforts to settle in this country. We all want people to be safe and free from discrimination. But the neologism 'Islamophobia' which has been so successfully promulgated by these regressive groups, does not defend Muslims, it defends the philosophies of these awful Islamist groups who shelter under its umbrella. It allows the worst elements to deflect criticism with cries of racism. This is encouraged and applauded by the Regressive Left.

Criticising Islam and the fanatics who use it for political purposes is not the same as defending the rights of individual Muslims. I always say that human rights are for humans, not ideas.

But ordinary Muslims who are doing their best to get on with life in a peaceful and orderly fashion are the ones who suffer when Islamists and theocratic elements within their communities are empowered in this way.

The regressive left really needs to rethink its approach. If anti-Muslim prejudice is what they oppose, they could help things along by saying that and disposing of the term 'Islamophobia'.

How important do you think social movements are?

They can be extraordinarily important. The current crop of activists fighting social injustice are very effectively using social media to promote their campaigns. Democratic governments, too, recognise the value that social movements can have on policy making.

Once suspicion by politicians is allayed, social movements with their wealth of specialised knowledge, can contribute greatly to progressive law-making.

It was only through pressure from interest groups that the great social reforms of the 1960s happened. Governments will not change the status quo unless pressed to do so.

It is through social movements that we ended slavery, that women were emancipated, that gays were released from illegality, that racism came to be seen as undesirable.

What is your current work?

I am President of the National Secular Society and before I retire from that I want to see its activities expanded and intensified. With the resurgence of such a nasty strain of Islam, the NSS has a new relevance and new challenges that we intend to meet head on.

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

My work is almost done. I'm seventy years old this year and I understand that maybe the time is coming for me to hand over the torch to the next generation. I will, of course, continue to contribute where I can, and I hope that my writing career can continue.

Thank you for your time, Mr. Sanderson.

Interview with Professor Anthony Grayling - Philosopher and Master, New College of the Humanities

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

September 29, 2016

How did you become an activist and a philosopher?

I became interested in philosophy at an early age, while living in central Africa, where there was much racism and oppression of the local people by the white colonials, and the conjunction of the two made me interested in ideas and in human rights.

Was university education an asset or a hindrance to this?

I found it a help because I had some interesting tutors who introduced me to interesting books: and discussions with fellow students were stimulating too.

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

Although you can't really call them partners in activism, those with whom I discussed and from I learned different points of view were very helpful to me as I advanced my own thinking about politics, human rights, and the influence of ideologies on individual lives.

How did you come to adopt a socially progressive worldview?

Early experience of witnessing injustice, racism and great inequality were an early spur.

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

Because social justice matters: a fair world is likely to be a more peaceful and co-operative one, and one where more people get a chance to benefit from the goods of life and education.

On the topic of progressivism, do you think that progressivism logically implies other beliefs, or tend to or even not at all?

Yes, a progressive outlook in matters of politics and society has a set of implications which place one broadly on the left in matters of politics and economics and among those with socially liberal views on human life.

What are your religious/irreligious beliefs?

I am an atheist, a secularist, and a humanist.

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

Left of centre, secularist, socially liberal, pro-individual liberties.

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

The political system is flawed, biased in favour of vested interests, manipulated by powerful news media owned by a few very wealthy individuals, and the recent Brexit decision is particularly harmful to progressive causes in general.

How important do you think social movements are?

They are very important and helpful when they are intelligent and well thought out. Populism of the far Right and far Left, many motivated by resentment and frustration, can be very harmful. We need a considered debate about how to make society and its structures work to everyone's benefit.

What is your current work?

I am running a College, lecturing, writing, in particular a book about the causes of war and just war theory.

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

More writing, teaching, and activism.

Thank you for your time, Professor Grayling.

An Interview with Dr. Stephen Law - English Philosopher

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

October 1, 2016

How'd you become an activist and a philosopher?

I have always been very interested in philosophical questions - such as: How can I know other people have minds? Why is there something rather than nothing? What makes things morally right or wrong? However, I was unaware that there was actually a discipline devoted to such questions until I was in my twenties. At the point I knew philosophy is what I wanted to study. I had no A Levels (High School qualifications) and so applied to enter University as a mature student aged 23/4. After that, I just stuck with the subject, passed through Oxford, and am now a Reader in Philosophy at the University of London.

Am I an activist? Well I engage in some activity on behalf of humanism, secularism, etc I suppose, such as debates and some polemics. I just drifted into that, I guess. However, I have always been keen to popularise philosophy and have been active on that front for almost my entire career. I began by writing a children's' philosophy book of the sort that I would have enjoyed when I was young: *The Philosophy Files* (now *The Complete Philosophy Files*). I have been particularly supportive of the British Humanist Association and especially Center for Inquiry in the US. CFI is a great organisation promoting humanism and the application of science and reason - I head up their activities in the UK.

Were parents or siblings an influence on this for you?

In terms of getting into philosophy, very much so. Not by directing me and saying, 'You should do this or that', but by engaging me in conversations about the Big Issues from a young age. That allowed me to discover my own direction and talents. In terms of activism, I guess they are very political and encouraged me to think for myself and take responsibility for my own beliefs and be prepared to discuss them, etc.

Was university education an asset or a hindrance to this?

An asset. I was lucky enough to get into University and was taught by some really excellent people who were very generous with their time. Especially Ardon Lyon.

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

Not really.

How did you come to adopt a socially progressive worldview?

Not sure, other than the parental influence I outlined above. Self-reporting is not reliable when it comes to such things, I suspect. I might *think* I arrived at it through careful rigorous thinking (who doesn't?) when in fact my views are largely a product of the power of suggestion and peer pressure, say. I think we often flatter ourselves on how rational we are, and so should be

particularly vigilant about checking whether what we believe really is reasonable rather than a product of cognitive bias, etc. I wrote a book about that: *Believing Bullshit*.

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

Because I think it's important that we help humans, and other sentient creatures, to lead flourishing lives. And I think a broadly progressive, liberal approach is best able to do that, and that an authoritarian approach, and attitudes and actions that are unjustly discriminatory, is a hindrance to that project.

Do you consider yourself a progressive?

Yes. Though some would not. I am very much in favour of free speech, especially in Universities, and have been concerned by attempts to shut down criticism of religion, including Islam, for example, on the grounds that a University should be a 'safe space' for religious and other minorities. Universities should be free from intimidation and systematic abuse of minorities, but on the other hand they should be places where a wide variety of points of view can be expressed without fear of censorship. I defended the right of atheist Maryam Namazie to speak critically at Goldsmith's College about Islam and its treatment of women etc. for example, when the Islamic Society, supported by Goldsmith's LGBT Soc and Fem Soc, attempted to block her invitation. This, in the eyes of some LGBT and Feminists, probably makes me an enemy of progressivism - certainly their sort of progressivism.

I also believe that class has unfortunately been forgotten about in some 'progressive' circles. I recently gave a talk at a very expensive and exclusive private school where the girls were very politically active, challenging things like male privilege, racial discrimination, and so on. They had several clubs devoted to these progressive causes. But they had not the slightest interest in class. I asked them: who would face the biggest obstacle to a successful prestigious career in law, banking, etc.: a white working class male, a black upper-middle class male, a white upper-middle class female. They just looked blank. It seems pretty obvious to me that class is the biggest obstacle, and yet it has become very unfashionable to say so.

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

Depends how you define it. I consider one key tenet of progressivism to be that the State should be politically secular/neutral on religion (it should show favour neither to religion nor to atheism, by e.g. funding schools, banning the expression of religious or antireligious views, giving certain special rights, privileges and immunities to religious. This obviously entails that the state should not exempt religious folk from equal rights legislation that binds everyone else, such as legislation requiring gay people not be discriminated against. Currently, many socially conservative religious folk are demanding such immunities and exemptions - entirely without justification in my view.

What are your religious/irreligious beliefs?

No. I am an atheist. I believe there is no

Interview with Nicole Orr - Branch Manager at CFI-Portland

Scott Douglas Jacobsen
2016

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Thank you for your time, Nicole.

Thanks for yours Scott.

Interview with Theoretical Physicist, Professor Jim Al-Khalili

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

September 29, 2016

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

How did you become an activist and a scientist, and science communicator?

I think it’s fair to say that my career evolved gradually. When I began my academic life it very much followed the traditional route of PhD, postdoctoral research, at University College London then Surrey, then I secured a five-year research fellowship after which I became a full time (tenured) academic lecturer and moved up the academic ranks to professor by teaching and conducting research in my field of theoretical physics. I did all the usual stuff of publishing my research, attending conferences and applying for grants.

But around the mid-90s I also became active in outreach activities and communicating science more widely to the public. I found I enjoyed this as much as I did my other academic activities. I began to get involved as a contributor to radio and TV programmes and wrote my first popular science book, on black holes, in 1999. From then on, one thing led to another. Over the past decade I have been more involved in public life, but always speaking as a representative of the scientific world.

Were parents or siblings an influence on this for you?

Not particularly. They were encouraging and supportive. But it was my wife who really enabled me to do what I do now.

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

Science is a collaborative endeavour, so over the years I have built up a wide range of colleagues and collaborators, whether in my research fields or in the public arena. The academics in the nuclear physics group at Surrey are scientists I have worked with over the years and published many research papers with. Several senior colleagues were also valuable mentors for me, supporting my development in my early career.

How did you come to adopt a socially progressive worldview?

I don’t feel my worldview is particularly different from the vast majority of people I interact with on a daily basis. First and foremost, I am a scientist and so I try to see the world objectively and demand evidence for views, policies and beliefs. I am also liberal and secular in my politics. I served for three years as president of the British Humanist Association and I feel that my humanist values do indeed shape my worldview to a large extent. Last but not least, I come from a mixed culture and heritage background: born in Iraq to a Muslim Arab father and Christian

English mother, I feel I can have a broader perspective on the world that is not shaped by just one ideology.

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

It depends on how one defines 'socially progressive', since I suspect that people from a wide cross-section of the political and social spectrum might regard themselves as forward-thinking and progressive. I also feel it is important to stress that being socially progressive is meaningless if we do not learn the lessons from the past. We cannot wipe slates clean and move forward without understanding where we have come from.

Do you consider yourself a progressive?

I hope so. I can say that I am an optimist about the future, despite the many challenges that face the world today.

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

I think it is one of those terms that can easily be adopted by many ideologies. Maybe it is a quite clearly defined ideology or worldview in its own right. If so, then I need to learn more about what it implies.

What are your religious/irreligious beliefs?

I am not religious. I guess I am defined as an atheist, which is a strange term since it implies there has to be a supernatural being, a god, in the first place for me not to believe in! Essentially 'atheism' is for me no more a belief system in itself than not collecting stamps is a hobby.

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

Ideologically, I align myself with the liberal left and the social welfare stance of the traditional Labour movement.

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

In the UK, I think the biggest challenge is the disillusionment of many in society, such as those who voted Brexit, which manifests itself in a craving for elements of the past: a return to some perceived utopia when 'things were better'. For me this is the opposite of a social-progressive movement.

How important do you think social movements are?

I find this quite difficult to answer because today social movements can grow so quickly that there is often not enough time to consider carefully what they actually stand for. We live in an

age of post-truth politics, disillusionment with establishment, vast inequalities in society, and social media that can pick up a meme and spread it faster than a virus. In this environment, social movements can thrive. But that does not necessarily mean that all social movements are for the good.

What is your current work?

I am doing many things. My academic career continues, as does my broadcasting, and I am excited about new developments in scientific research. In recent months I have stepped back from a lot of my public work to focus on writing, not least of which is my first novel, which I hope will come out next year.

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

Well, I hope to continue as it is today. I am very happy doing what I do.

Thank you for your time, Professor Al-Khalili.

Keep up-to-date with Professor Al-Khalili's work by following his Twitter account: [@jimalkhalili](https://twitter.com/jimalkhalili)

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