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Scott Douglas Jacobsen



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Scott

Parents in UK Removing Children From Lessons About Islam

April 29, 2017

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

According to the Church of England (CofE), “many” parents are electing to remove their children from religious education classes to reduce exposure to Islam and Islamic teachings in the lessons.

It is asserted by some that this is to protect the children from learning about any other faith outside of Christianity, while for others it is simply to avoid their children having exposure to Islamic teachings in particular.

They pointed towards far-right political groups and some minority faith sects as activists who are trying to ‘exploit’ the legal right of parents to withdraw their children from school religious education.

CofE leaders called for the right of withdrawal to be repealed and for RE to become a compulsory part of school timetables to encourage pupils to learn to live with others from different backgrounds.

This is against a background of intense arguments over the future of Religious Education. The lesson is not currently a mandatory section of the National Curriculum and, along with sex education, is an optional lesson for children to take which their parents have the right to withdraw them from.

Derek Holloway, school inspection chief for the Church of England (C of E), said, “...I am aware that some parents have sought to exploit the right to withdraw children from RE lessons. This is seemingly because they do not want their children exposed to other faiths and world views, in particular Islam.”

Holloway described the need to live well together, and that education should be provided to students from all walks of life. However, “sadly,” he remarks, the allowance of withdrawal from religious education is being exploited through “dubious interpretation of human rights legislation.”

“Parents have a legal right to remove their children from RE under a 1998 education law. The CofE, which has 4,700 schools including 200 secondary schools, aims to promote ‘deep respect for the integrity of other traditions’ in RE.”

Religious education lessons are meant to teach about every religion, rather than just Christianity, even in schools that belong to a religious domination such as Church of England. Schools are required to provide a general background in the beliefs and histories of the major faiths and religions in the world today.

There are no figures on how many parents remove their children from RE classes, although C of E officials suggested the figure is small. The subject is popular at GCSE, with more than 250,000 children taking the exam at 16.

National Secular Society representative, Keith Porteous Wood, said, “If the subject was reformed to be genuinely educational and non-partisan study of religious and non-religious worldviews, the right to withdraw may no longer be necessary. But until such time, the right of withdrawal is required to protect parental rights and freedoms.’

Assisted Death 2016 in Canada – Facts and Figures

April 29, 2017

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

The Globe and Mail reports that “at least 970 people in Canada received an assisted death last year, according to a new federal report that provides the first official snapshot of how medical aid in dying is playing out in hospitals and homes across the country.”

Of the total deaths in all of Canada, the assisted death numbers amounted to about 0.6%. This is based on a **Health Canada report**. ½ of the assisted deaths occurred in Quebec at 463. In Quebec, a separate “end-of-life law took effect” circa December 10, 2015.

This happened 6 months before the federal law related to assisted death took hold. The remaining 507 assisted deaths – medically so – happened between June 17 and December 31 of 2016. Patients wanting assisted death signed on for a variety of reasons.

“Cancer was the illness cited most often by patients granted an assisted death (in 56.8 per cent of cases), followed by neuro-degenerative conditions such as multiple sclerosis and amyotrophic lateral sclerosis (23.2 per cent) and cardiovascular and respiratory diseases (10.5 per cent).”

The average patient age was aged 72, with an almost even split between women and men. Health Canada is making new regulations for dealing with assisted dying. “The formal-monitoring regime is expected to include a broader set of indicators, including how well the eligibility criteria and safeguards in the law are working.”

Nurse practitioners, pharmacists, and physicians will be given this data when helping a patient with assisted death. Data from provinces is now public mostly public.

The chief executive officer of Dying with Dignity Canada, Shanaaz Gokool, said, “How many people who’ve asked [for an assisted death] have a mental illness where they’re not imminently dying and don’t qualify?” Gokool emphasised the possibility of those losing capacities due to Alzheimer’s. She wanted quantitative data on the answers to these questions to inform the Council of Canadian Academies.

“Right now, medical aid in dying is limited to consenting adults who are suffering a grievous and irredeemable physical illness and whose natural death is ‘reasonably foreseeable.’ Some provinces are already collecting richer data that hint at the level of interest in hastening death with the help of a doctor.”

In 2015, the Canada Supreme Court struck down the Criminal Code provision against assisted suicide, which made assisted death/suicide illegal. In that act, it joined only a few other countries such as Belgium and the Netherlands.

‘Coooooooooal!’ A Score in the UK for Sustainable and Renewable Energy

April 24, 2017

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

BBC News reports that the United Kingdom might be spending its first day without generation of electricity from coal based energy, from a statement by the National Grid. The previous time for a no coal-generation of electricity was in May, 2016, for a total of 19 hours. The goal this time, however is to sustain that for a full 24 hours.

This is based on an increased demand and need for sustainable and renewable energy including natural gas. In addition, the power used for the United Kingdom tends to be low on Fridays.

The use of coal has declined since the 1990’s, with the advent of greater access to alternative fuels such as biomass. As of 2016, coal made up only 9% of electricity generation. In 2015, this number was much higher at 23%. The United Kingdom government wants to phase out the final plants of coal energy by 2025. This is in large part due to efforts for carbon emission reduction.

Professor of resources and environment policy at University College London, Paul Ekin, described the effects of the day without coal power as “enormously significant.” “As recently as the late 1980’s coal was supplying as much as 70% of UK electricity... We then had the dash for gas in the 1990;s, with nuclear roughly contributing around 25%, and coal dropped below 50%.” Not only is this an important landmark in the history of the United Kingdom for the reduction of coal energy, but it is also a symbolic gesture as to the eventual elimination of coal power plants.

Ekin described that the “current thrust was to replace coal with gas, but that renewables like wind and solar were also playing a bigger role – accounting for 25% of supply in 2015.” A large part of this reduction in coal based power is down to solar panels and wind turbines being used to generate electricity from factories and homes. In addition, the energy need has decreased.

Hannah Martin, head of energy at Greenpeace UK, said the first day without coal in Britain since the Industrial Revolution “would mark a watershed in the energy transition.”

An Interview with Amanda Poppei

April 24, 2017

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

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

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

I was raised in upstate New York, in a white family grounded in academia—my mother was a college professor, and my father had been studying for his PhD in Biology before leaving to make furniture.

He worked out of a barn in our backyard, crafting beautiful pieces—really an artist. In my earliest years I didn't attend any congregation, but in 4th grade I went on a sleepover to a friend's house and attended church with her the next day.

I came home and promptly announced that I wanted to go to that church! My mother was a little worried—we were a humanist family—but quickly relieved to discover it was Unitarian Universalist congregation.

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

My family raised me with a strong sense of social justice; my mother in particular followed in her own mother's footsteps, building her life around making the world a better place. I knew I was raised with a lot of privilege (white, formally educated) and that part of the rent I needed to pay in the world was making sure that others had similar opportunities.

My mother took me to Washington, DC for my first national march when I was in 3rd grade, supporting the Equal Rights Amendment. For his part, my father instilled a curiosity about how the world works, from the planets to the atoms, and a love of the outdoors.

Both my parents raised me to challenge racism, misogyny, and homophobia. I feel incredibly lucky to have been raised with those values and to have the opportunity now to live them out in my work and home life.

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

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

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

In many ways, I think the justice work we do is the best advertisement for both movements. We have always had an influence in the world that's larger than our size, as we have fought for equal rights, fairness, kindness, and mercy.

UUs and Ethical Culturists show up at rallies, marches, organising meetings, and town halls all across the country. Although we may have different beliefs (Unitarian Universalist is a pluralistic religious movement, and Ethical Culture welcomes people of all beliefs), we share a strong commitment to justice and a belief that every single person is worthy.

I think we also have a special appeal to families. More and more parents are choosing to raise their children outside of traditional religion—but they are still seeking a grounding in values, and a community to support their family. Both UU congregations and Ethical Societies offer that.

Our education for children is based on encouraging questions and exploration, and creating a safe and nurturing space for children to spread their wings. We incorporate study of world religions, comprehensive sexuality education, and ethics education into almost every age group.

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

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

8th grade! I was on a Coming of Age trip to Boston with my Unitarian Universalist congregation, and had been visiting some of the sites around the city where famous Unitarians and Universalists had lived and wrote and worked.

We went to visit the headquarters of the Unitarian Universalist Association, and as I stood in the bookstore and looked around at the titles I suddenly thought: I want to spend my life thinking about these things!

As time went on, I continued to think about ministry. In high school, I would have said that congregations seemed like the best way to organise people to do good in the world (and I still think that).

In college, I was a Religious Studies major and began to learn more about the role of religion in American life. And then of course in seminary—which I entered a few years after graduating college—I deepened my understanding of the values, theology, and philosophy that ground my life's work.

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

We are not alone in the world—we are connected to each other. We need to practice what it means to be human together, to be in relationship as a way of supporting our own growth and as a way of working for justice in the world.

Both Unitarian Universalism and Ethical Culture remind us of these core truths, and give us a place to practice, learn, and transform.

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

I think it's a bit of all of those things. Most people who come to the Washington Ethical Society—the congregation I serve—have done a lot of thinking about what they believe. Whether they were raised in a traditional religion or raised secular, they've been thoughtful about their beliefs and worldview.

Almost all of them share an essentially naturalistic worldview, and a sense that they want to be grounded in the here-and-now. What they're looking for when they come to us is a community in which they can live out those values, where they can have the benefits of a congregation but without dogma that no longer works for them.

They are looking for a place to support their family, or to care for them if they have a crisis, or just to provide a set aside time each week to be thoughtful and introspective. They often choose our community because they like our commitment to justice work. Ultimately, I think they are searching for a sense of belonging and a chance to make a difference in the world.

What tasks and responsibilities come with the senior leadership position?

I am responsible for our Sunday morning gatherings—I speak 2-3 times a month, and support guest speakers for the other Sundays. I provide pastoral care, visiting people in the hospital and offering counselling as needed (and I also work with a great group of members who do that work too).

I serve as head of staff, and am responsible for managing the day to day operations of the congregation, everything from creating and tracking the budget to overseeing programming—although in all of that work I collaborate with a wonderful staff.

And I work with the Board and the entire membership on setting vision and strategy for the congregation. Finally, I work out in the world, outside the walls of the congregation, fighting for what is right. That's very often done in coalition, with interfaith groups or with secular groups.

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

We are a majority white, yet generationally diverse membership. We have slightly more women than men. Most WES members are progressive, ranging from pretty liberal to quite radical! We have Millennials, Gen X-ers, Boomers, and Silent Generation, plus of course children and teens who are the newest generational cohort.

The number of people of colour in our community is small but growing. Most (but not all) WES members have a college degree, and many have a Masters or other advanced degree. They work in many different fields, but the helping professions (teaching, social work, etc) and public service and nonprofit work are highly represented.

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

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

I offer pastoral counselling as well, to people who are struggling with hard choices or just having a hard time in life.

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

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

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

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

How fulfilling is this recognition?

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

What extra responsibility to the public comes with the recognition?

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

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

Adolescence is a time of incredible transition. Having the support of a community bigger than one's family can be so important—knowing adults beside your parents who care about you and want to see you thrive.

Our LGBTQ teens know that they are supported and welcome in this community, as well. And in general our teens get to connect with others who support their values, who want to make a difference in the world. I am always blown away by their thoughtfulness and passion; we learn a great deal from them.

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

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

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

Like any community, we have conflict—that comes from people being in relationship with each other! We are a diverse community, with many backgrounds and beliefs represented, which means we don't always like the same music or styles of speaking. But that also is part of the richness in our community, and most folks really love the opportunity to learn from each other.

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

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

Thank you for your time, Minister Poppei.

Women's Rights in the Philippines – An Overview

April 25, 2017

Danielle Erika Hill and Scott Douglas Jacobsen

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

campaigns by the government, Filipinas are still affected by gender-based violence, which is **not limited to socioeconomic or educational status**.

This includes, but is not limited to, sex trafficking, forced prostitution, and sexual harassment in schools, the workplace, and on the street. Instances of this last one can be seen in *Catcalled in the Philippines*, a Facebook page where people can anonymously submit personal accounts of harassment.

Great challenges in implementing reproductive health laws and pursuing solutions to sexual health-related issues also exist.

Abortion remains illegal and punishable by law (except when necessary to save the mother's life), even as **Human Rights Watch** calls equitable access to abortion "first and foremost a human right," and even access to birth control remains a testy subject, with the Supreme Court having issued a **TRO on the sale of female contraceptives**.

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

Neither does a culture of having serious conversations about sexual health in public exist in the Philippines. Organisations, however, that would rather see the education around it (e.g. the proper use of condoms) not taught in the schools, do.

Such groups would like to see the education left to the parents, but in a culture where it is taboo to talk about sex, how does this encourage healthy education around the use of condoms at home? The answer: it does not.

The two "acceptable" methods advocated by the Catholic Church are abstinence and the rhythm method. Of course, both fail to deliver on their purported ends, and contribute to a high rate of teenage pregnancy.

Added to this, is a stigma against unwed mothers (if pregnant, the man whodunit is expected to marry her) and the nonexistence of divorce, leaves a woman nominally empowered and oppressed by a deeply patriarchal society where even the notion of childlessness is seen as questionable.

The expectation being that women naturally gravitate towards the desire to have biological children in their future, and furthermore have a duty to further the family line.

The taboos around sex do not help Filipino women, or society and culture in the Philippines. A proper sexual education curriculum (which includes safe sex practices, consent, and the variety of contraceptives on offer for men and women) would improve the situation for women in the Philippines.

Universal access to evidence-based sexual and reproductive health education for children would be a great first step in this direction.

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

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

And Article 16:

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

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

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

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

Philosophy News in Brief – April 25th, 2017

April 25, 2017

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

The “Trump Doctrine” still has no consistent philosophy

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

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

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

Silicon Valley hires philosophers to teach them

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

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

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

Tech bros and Ancient Greek parallels

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

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

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

An Interview with Simon Ørregaard – Chairman, Eftertro

April 25, 2017

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

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

How did you first become involved in the faithless community?

My first contact was via YouTube as shy and vulnerable as I was at the time. I found Christopher Hitchens and Richard Dawkins and others in all these great debates, which was a breath of fresh air to listen to.

I spent countless hours at nights being encouraged in my own process of leaving faith, being assured that I was on the right way, and that I was not alone. Then I reached out to several people on Facebook and got together with Anders Stjernholm from the Danish Atheistic Society. Since then, there has been no turning back.

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

That is a big and complicated question. Homosexuals are obviously likely to leave. But then again some live in restraint denying their own nature. I guess that everyone's story is very individual.

For me personally, it is a tale of 30 years of doubt, fear and insecurity. I do think that the younger you are, the easier it is to break out. That sounds obvious, but I did not succeed in getting out before I wasted the main part of my life in a sect.

What I am referring to here is all the existential questions you have to deal with. On top of that, you have the social control and the sanctions that go with it. So it is crucial which background you are dealing with.

For example, it is often a direct physical danger to break out of Islam. In my case, which was about escaping from Jehovah's Witnesses, the shunning is worse than almost anything else. There are actually a lot of similarities between JW and Islam in that way.

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

Eftertro (or post-faith) is a small but still growing network of people who are in trouble because of doubt, fear, loneliness, or existential crisis in leaving or dealing with a religious background.

We welcome people from all kinds of faiths.

We have Muslims, JW's, Mormons, Scientologists, New Age, various Pentecostal churches etc – even a Buddhist. All exes of course, even though we are not an atheistic organisation.

What we do is to provide a safe place where people can meet and exchange their feelings and experiences, in order to help them in making the right decision for themselves. It is a very powerful thing to listen to all these fates and to realise that we all have the same universal problems regardless of our backgrounds.

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

My main purpose is to ensure everyone that the individual is the single most important. To make people comfortable in a difficult situation. To ensure everyone in that any feeling is legal. To be open, to listen and to share my own experience.

I am fortunate to have a whole team to back this movement up. We have meetings in various places in Denmark. The big task now is how to make Eftertro more visible in the public because we see a large potential.

That needs funding and we have not come across that yet. So I have a big task in front of me, but luckily I also have some great people who have become some of my best friends to work with.

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

Well, there is the whole issue of how to dissect a certain problem. Sometimes the problem lies elsewhere, and needs attending by professionals or the authorities. If a person is a minor, what do we do?

If a person is in danger, where goes the line between our responsibility as citizens and activists? We have a social worker connected as well as a few psychologists. We do attempt to be very aware; that we do not cross any legal or ethical lines.

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

First and foremost, it is a mutual process of getting out. Some people only come to one meeting, some stick around. For those of us who are working on this project the meetings are also very powerful.

In that way, we heal ourselves trying to heal others. It is a community, which is often exactly what people like us miss the most.

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

You can write books about that, but the core thing here is cognitive dissonance. It is a struggle of trying to push doubt aside, while at the same time being in doubt. You are, in a way, fighting for survival on two levels.

That is a very troublesome and indeed lonesome process. Not least because you don't know what lies ahead. What is out there? I believe that lots of people lose that battle before they even get started.

When I talked to my family and friends, I got the notion that they knew they believed in something wrong or at least that they understood me. But that recognition is very difficult, because in that moment you lose everything you have believed in.

It is basically based in fear of the unknown. The fear of death.

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

From my own experience, and from others, it is a faith system that makes you feel sinful, guilty, in order to make you want to do good. And when the scale you compare yourself to is "perfection", you will always have a bad conscience, which will make you try even harder.

In that way you feel guilty and afraid before you even get to consider whether your belief is right or wrong (which is a sin in it self!). Then you get to the sanctions and punishment. I can hardly think of a task more difficult than going against that.

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

Some are too afraid and vulnerable even to go to a coffee meeting. It is heartbreaking every time. In the Muslim field, it is very hard to witness young, intelligent, powerful, women, who can not move away from their home because of the religion/culture.

Even though, their family are not practicing Islam it is dangerous for them to live their own lives. My own family is totally separated now, as if I was dead, which is very hard for my children (and me).

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

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

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

Thus far we have concentrated on coffee meetings and counselling and also talking with students from both high schools and universities. From now on we will focus on more campaigning and

lectures. But it is a big task for a small organisation like ours without any funding. But I sincerely believe that Eftertro has great potential, so we will do our best still.

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

Well as far as unexpected allies, we had a priest from the Danish National Church at a certain point. But we agreed that it would interfere too much with the meetings if we had a Christian priest sitting there.

But we do get a lot of recognition of our purpose. As far as allies go, the Atheist Society helped this project to get off the ground. In fact, it was their chairman, Anders Stjernholm who got the idea in the first place.

He was never religious though, so he was clear on the fact that he would never participate in any meetings. He is still a very important part of the project, and a member of the board. Politically, I am also engaged in a newly started party, The Progressive which works for a secular society based on knowledge and cleansed of all religious bias.

What are their ways of helping out?

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

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

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

Any closing thoughts or feelings based on the discussion today?

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

Thank you for your time, Simon.

An Interview with Dan Arel – Secular Activist and Godless Parent

April 27, 2017

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

Scott Jacobsen interviews Dan Arel who is a secular activist, author, blogger and Godless parent. In this interview, they discuss secular activism, Dan's blogging and parenting methods, as well as his favourite topics to write on.

You are a godless parent. You wrote a book on the subject. How does someone parent secularly in the 21st century?

Buy my book and find out!

Also, it's evidence based, and it's about fostering your child to think for themselves, and giving them the tools to question everything and find the truth on their own. They need to learn from their mistakes, but also trust you and know they can come to you with questions, and be mentored.

You are a secular activist. As someone working for secularism and against the encroachment of religion on the 'public sphere,' what seem like the perennial battles for the separation of religion and government?

It seems today the biggest issues we face are religious attacks against the LGBTQ community and women's rights. They are using their bible and "personally held beliefs" to find ways to discriminate, legally, against people they feel are "living in sin."

This seems to be the focus right now, especially against the transgender community. I think they know they lost the battle against the LGB community and won't be able to do as much damage, so now they are focused on the T and hoping they gain some ground they lost.

One does not need to be godless to be secular. One does not need to believe in gods, or God, to share rituals (e.g. rites of passage), sentiments (e.g. feelings of transcendence and awe), and values (e.g. the Golden Rule) important in the upbringing, experience, and raising of well-rounded children—barring some specific gift, talent, or interest of the child needing targeted care and nurturing to the detriment of being 'well-rounded'.

Who are unexpected allies in the battle for secularism in public life and godlessness in parenting?

Some of the biggest allies are simply anyone, religious or not, that allows their kids to be themselves and do not dictate their beliefs. Religious parents, like my own, brought me to church, but allowed me to ask questions.

I asked enough to become an atheist, and they never tried to stop me. I know many parents like this who are more concerned with their children being smart and kind, rather than obsessing about what they believe.

You blog, too. As Seinfeld might say, what's the deal? What are your favourite topics to write on?

Politics. Atheism is important, but not as important as politics are on everyone's lives. This includes church and state separation, but also healthcare, education, etc. These issues are important regardless of what someone believes.

I am a far-leftist and I think I have an important role of using my voice to make sure people understand what the left wants and what we stand for.

What have been the most moving moments in your parental life?

Honestly, any time one of my kids accomplishes something they have been working hard on - from potty training, to reading, to my son learning to ice skate, play hockey, and then score his first goal. Each and every moment like that is just awe-inspiring.

Another important part seems to be the creation of a community; a parental culture. How do you build relationships, associations, and bonds of mutual solidarity for, not only a secular family, but a secular community; someone else to babysit, coach the Little League game, take out the trash for the elderly widow or divorcee next door; to give parenting lessons to the younger couples with newborns on the way, and so on.

I started coaching youth hockey and found a community here. Another coach knew my work and we hit it off. For me it's easy because people in our community know me from my work, so I didn't have to seek out much, it was just there.

However, just joining community events, volunteering at my kid's school, coaching, all of those things build community. I don't ask for people's beliefs up front, and only if they bring up negative beliefs is there a problem, but overall, I find people are just amazing and want community too, regardless of their beliefs.

You can be found on your blog, the website, Twitter, and Facebook. How else can people connect with you?

I have a new podcast called Danthropology and you can find out more by visiting www.danthropology.com

It's mostly a political podcast with a lot of atheism and intersectionality.

Also, head over to Amazon and check out my books!

Also, any upcoming projects?

Drafting up some ideas for book number three, and working on some summer speaking gigs about how to mount a secular resistance to Trump.

Any closing thoughts or feelings based on the discussion today?

Thank you for taking the time to interview me.

Thank you for your time, Dan.

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

April 28, 2017

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

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

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

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

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

Pope's position on birth control became more and more unrealistic but I accepted it because I was told the pope was infallible. Finally "saw the light" when church authorities could not answer my logical questions about the morality (or not) of birth control.

It became very clear that the pope was not infallible and if wrong on that how did I know he was right about existences of God. Gave that some thought and saw zero evidence for a god and I was out of there. I realized I was an atheist and it felt SO good to have my mind feel so clear at last.

You are an atheist activist/activist atheist. How does one be an activist for atheism? It seems counterintuitive. That is, why be an activist for the lack of belief in something, in gods and God?

A humanist activist seems more intuitive because it affirms beliefs, traditionally speaking, more than atheism.

Atheism is not a belief, it's a conclusion. I became an activist when I realized all the harm irrational religious beliefs caused. It's like realizing how harmful slavery is and becoming an abolitionist to put a stop to that harm.

Being an activist atheist is like scraping the barnacles off of the boat – get rid of them and the boat (humanity) sails along much better. Being a humanist just means dropping religious beliefs based on irrational doctrines.

Liberal religionists who want to be moral do it by abandoning traditional religious beliefs so they can be moral and allow their basic human decency to come through. I get along fine with liberal religionists.

They do good because they think it's what their god wants. Fair enough. I do good because it needs to be done.

What have been the lesser known misconceptions about atheism?

Far as I can tell, all the misconceptions about atheism focus on our supposed lack of a moral compass. One of my old Catholic books says the only reason a person would become an atheist is "to be free to live a depraved life."

But what kind of morality it is that needs directions from an imaginary god? I prefer my atheist morality because it's based on simple human decency and compassion. I don't give a rat's patoot what some imaginary god wants.

Most gods seem to want us to harm those who prefer other or no gods. I just want to stop that.

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

I always wanted to learn things. I envied those who could afford to go to university. I read a lot and thought a lot and finally decided to get a college degree. My education background was pretty sparse.

The Univ. of Minn. thought I would have a problem but let me enrol anyway. I was working 40 hours a week in a factory, managing a family of 5 kids, dealing with a husband who couldn't understand why a woman would want an education – and being politically active at the same time.

I did it piecemeal, partly correspondence, mostly summer sessions, some night classes, some day classes. Took 8 years. Graduated with a B.A. in journalism and a B+ average. Mission accomplished and it felt good.

What were the main values that came from it?

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

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

I already knew how to write. It was something that came to me naturally. I wrote a news item based on random info for a class assignment. The instructor posted it on the board as the best example he had ever seen.

He said I must have had some experience. I said it was the first time in my life I'd done that. I got A's in some classes where math was involved (which I knew almost zero about) because the exams included an essay question.

My turf! I could write all kinds of B.S. and make it sound intellectual. (Doesn't knowing that tell you something about how people perceive things? Reminds me of how I was so hooked on Catholicism when growing up.

The Church was great at using big words and sounding oh so intellectual! Hooked me good!!) As to how I persisted, I just did, just kept plodding along. Besides, it was good for my kids to see me involved in life.

I always did by best to show them as much of life and the world as I could. Never babied them or talked down to them. My oldest daughter was a straight A student all the way through from first grade to her masters' degree.

She loved what I was doing and wrote little essays for grade school about how great it was to have a mother doing all that and leaving her in charge (at age 9) during short periods when neither I nor my husband were home.

She just LOVED it, she said, because it made her feel so responsible! And she was. And still is. All my kids turned out to be great adults. And they are atheists!!!!

You have been involved with the Hemlock Society. In what capacity have you been involved in the dying with dignity movement through them, what's a better argument for dying with dignity than for, say, those that harbour antithetical notions of death and ways to evaluate human worth, so come to conclusions in contradistinction to the dying with dignity movement?

I got involved because getting involved is what I do. I had a sweatshirt that said, "Stress is what happens when your gut says No but your mouth says, Yes, I'd be glad to do it." I really hate it when people try to run other people's lives when it's none of their business. Everyone dies.

Some want to do it on their own terms to avoid whatever assorted miseries afflict them. They should be free to take about it, get info on self-deliverance, and help in carrying it out.

The government should be involved only to ensure their diagnosis of incurability is accurate, there is no coercion, the decision is obviously well thought out and rational. For people who disagree I say they should feel free to suffer all they want and hang on to life as long as possible, but not insist that others should do the same.

Mother Teresa said "Suffering is the kiss of Jesus," but that is religious B.S. Ok for those who buy into it but ONLY for those who buy into it.

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

1. Try to avoid the “big tent” approach where anyone who ID’s as an atheist is encouraged to join. Too hard to get agreement on how to deal with religion. A tent doesn’t move.

2. Start with a definite stated position on what the group will do. “Support state-church separation” is meaningless. I have seen too many groups fall apart because they had no specific goal in mind. Spell out that goal in the bylaws.

Atheists For Human Rights has the specific goal of supporting victims of religion based laws through our Moral High Ground project. We focus on that and our members understand and support that as well as our opposition to racist/sexist/homophobia views.

When we first organized AFHR I would get calls from potential members. When a little conversation uncovered any racist/sexist/homophobia I told them they might be more comfortable joining MN Atheists and directed them there. (They have a big tent, which led to the breakup and the formation of AFHR.)

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

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

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

It’s pretty simple. For one thing we don’t have a hierarchal structure. People volunteer to be on the board and we operate by consensus. Everyone takes on a task they are able and willing to do. There is no president.

If we need one for signing some legal paper we just appoint one pro-tem for the purpose. I take care of all the communications stuff, edit our magazine, publish our booklets, write letters to the editor, etc.

Other board members take care of the treasurer and secretarial work, Internet functions, graphics, events, video distribution and the new position of wrangling the USPS bulk mail requirements (big headache, long story).

Our signature activity is our Moral High Ground project. I send out the grants every December.

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

People just gravitate to things. They show some interest or are asked to do something and involvement happens. Our magazine contributors come from all over the country. They offer to send stuff and we pretty much always take it.

I don't have any tips for new writers. Either they can write or they can't. They just have to stick to religion/atheism related topics because we don't bother much with issues outside of those areas.

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

I grew up with Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal. I know what poverty is like and what a politically left government can do about it. Churches were no help and the Republicans were of the opinion that the problem with the country was that the rich didn't have enough money and the poor had too much.

Very hard to miss where the decent humane stuff was coming from and it was New Deal stuff. I saw what was going on. I lived it. Those left/right worldviews haven't changed. There is nothing in the right wing worldview that I can find appealing.

Too much greed there. "If the Haves gave half of what they have to the Have-Nots, the Halves would still be the Halves but the Halve-Nots would be the Halve-Somethings."

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

I didn't build anything. I am what I am and pretty much what I always was. I do what I do because I really can't not do it. it makes me question whether we have free will. It's like that sweatshirt I had.

Someone says we need someone to do something and my damned hand goes up. It just goes up. That doesn't happen as much any more because I'm 90 years old and running out of gas. And my arm hurts too much.

But still I can't help but keep going as best I can – which is still better than those who do nothing. "Those who wait until they can do a whole lot of good all at one time never do any good at all." Right now I'm starting to write an updated version of my 2013 book, "Culture Wars." My publisher wants it ready by August so I have work to do.

You wrote *Culture Wars: The Threat to Your Family and Your Freedom* (2013). The ideal of the constitution is separation of church and state in the US. How are laws justified within

religious apparatuses to control the lives of the general population—most of whom are religious, but some of whom are irreligious—without secular justification?

No one seems to realize those laws are religion based and have no secular justification. Death with dignity and abortion and faith healing exemptions and stem cell research restrictions are clear examples.

The media refer to the restrictions as socially conservative, never as fully based on religious dogma. We have a major problem too in that when those laws are challenged they are based on things like equal treatment or free speech.

FEN has never defended itself by noting the religious basis for imposing a duty to suffer on hopelessly ill people. They lost the most recent case and are appealing. We wrote an amicus, noting the very clear religious basis for the government restrictions.

But the FEN lawyer can't use that in the appeal because the issue of religious doctrine was not part of the original case. All we can hope for is that a decency minded judge might read the amicus and decide to use that to rule in our favor.

What do you consider one of the more interesting findings that came from researching for the text? For example, the religious basis for prohibitions, in law, of “both contraception and abortions, limits on reality-based sex education in schools and bans against stem-cell research...Bible readings and prayers sessions held in public schools and Creationism is taught in many places as a legitimate alternative to Evolution...[and] laws against same-sex marriage and laws actually criminalizing homosexuality.”

Not to mention the banning of specific books with tax privilege/preference for organizations that happen to be religion-based. I'm just trying to target something under the surface, not really thought about, but pervasive, affecting everyone, and pernicious in its effects on the young or upcoming generations.

What impressed me was how pervasive this religious control is, reaching from federal to state to local government, and how tied to religion it is. Further, how totally involved the Catholic bishops have been in keeping these restrictions embedded in our laws and using the Protestant fundamentalists as a front.

Almost all of the Christian Coalition leaders have been Catholic and put there by the Catholic bishops, starting with Jerry Falwell. Their reach is impressive, helped by their monolithic structure.

But I can say this for sure: the religious right would disappear overnight if Roe v Wade were overturned. Abortion is the bottom line litmus test driving force keeping this dystopian political populism going. I'll deal with that in my updated book.

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

Mostly they think the book is great but almost none grasp the thesis that we have major laws that are totally religion-based. They can't relate state-church separation to that – only to the trivial stuff like school prayers.

Maybe this is because no lawsuits are ever filed that challenge the religious basis. (More about that in my updated book.) Otherwise, the negative comments have mainly expressed discomfort with my saying unkind things about the Catholic Church.

Thank you for your time, Marie.

Saudi Arabia Sentences Atheist to Death for Renouncing Islam

April 28, 2017

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

Members of Magic Movement, a group of young Bangladeshis, stage a mock execution scene in protest of Saudi Arabia beheading of eight Bangladeshi workers in front of National Museum in Dhaka in 2011.

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

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

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

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

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

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

The kingdom has a track record of being questionable regarding human rights and women's rights, and in this case the freedom of belief (or non-belief) in one religion or another, which has been put under the spotlight multiple times.

Some of the strict Islamic legal code restrictions are on drug trafficking, and bribery, rape, and apostasy. All punishable by the death penalty. As in the case with the 20-year-old, Ahmad Al Shamri, this was shown to be true.

Islamist Pleads Guilty to Planned Bomb Attacks in London

April 28, 2017

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

He had done extensive research into locations, prior terrorist incidents, and the Islamic State. On September 8, the police moved in, seized Syed’s phone, and acquired the password for the phone from him. Syed was arrested in September 2016 and when detained by officers said ‘alright’. He told an undercover officer of his desire to get bomb-making material and was inspired by Isis.

Q&A on Life in London with Pamela Machado

April 29, 2017

Scott Douglas Jacobsen and Pamela Machado

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

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

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

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

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

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

PM: For a good part of my time here I lived with the excitement. I was excited about all the different things and people I am surrounded by. It felt as if I could never get bored or get disappointed because it would always be a new place, a new person.

Probably around after the first year, a new feeling started to grow. I suddenly came to realise that I was getting used to life in London and London felt as much as any other place. The normal frustrations of life hit me, along with longing from home.

Coping with the high cost of life, working on pubs and cafes on weekends, leaving with strangers... all that add up to my starting to feel overwhelmed.

SJ: It must be stressful without someone to reach out to, being away from home without too many contacts, especially being an introvert. Also, how tenuous can friendships in London be?

Is there fast turnover of friendships? Are there lasting relationships more often than not?

PM: As a foreigner in London, most of my interpersonal relationships are with other foreigners. It is just as enriching as it is fragile. I don't have any official numbers here, but most foreigners leave London at some point.

They go back to their home country or go somewhere else, in many cases because they are tired of life in the city. Most of the friends I made are not here anymore. We eventually keep in touch but it is not the same. A true, lasting friendship takes years to be built.

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

PM: I discovered it is important to keep things under perspective, always remember myself how much I have conquered and grown by being here. However, for most of the time, I find myself stuck in a mental spin, lost in the thought of things I need to do.

People walking around London are usually so busy, rushing somewhere and it is contagious. Anxiety can be a really big problem over here and it definitely is to me. Competition is tough and the pressure one puts on oneself to succeed in London can be insane.

No wonder London is the city with the highest mental illness rate in the UK.

SJ: A not common, but more frequent, phenomenon of women outpacing male peers in education and work, then hitting 25-35 and thinking, "Uh oh, what will I do from 40-80?"

For many, not all, people, it becomes family – possibly children – and friends rather than work and hobbies. It can be a tough dynamic, which, reproductively and professionally speaking, can make women's lives more complicated and difficult than men.

PM: I understand your point and even though I haven't figured out exactly what I want for my later life, I do appreciate the presence of friends and family in life. Relationships and work life shouldn't oppose each other – like happens in many cases, unfortunately.

They should act together. A professional achievement has a lot more sense when it is shared with the ones will love. Coming from a tiring day of work to an empty home is not exactly a happy goal but it is what happens to many.

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

PM: As someone from a small town in the south of Brazil, and as a eighteen year-old, I wanted to travel and be part of a world that was unknown to me. I came here, left my family, my friends, university and came here.

I wanted to study Journalism – which I'm now doing, I wanted to be here and grow but somehow it is not as good as I thought it would be – like everything in life, I guess?

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

The ultimate question is, how can I feel fulfilled?

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

Open Speculation on Alien Life and the Durability of Religion

April 29, 2017

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

New Robot Can Ask for Clarification

April 29, 2017

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

April 29, 2017

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

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

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

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

Marie Alena Castle: It's actually at least the last 40 years. In the U.S., control of women is no longer about the right to vote or pursue careers. Those battles have been won.

What is left is the religious right's last stand: women's right to abortion and the ultimate control over their own bodies. An anti-women legislative agenda began and has been going on ever since the Supreme Court's 1973 *Roe v Wade* decision.

Almost immediately, the U.S. Catholic Bishops established a Pastoral Plan for Pro-Life Activities that reached down to every Catholic parish in the country. The bishops recruited Catholic academics, journalists, and political commentators to disseminate "pro-life" propaganda.

They drew in Protestant fundamentalists and provided them with leaders such as Jerry Falwell. They organized to get "pro-life" politicians elected at every political level and eventually took over the Republican party.

I was there and watched it happen. We Democratic feminists worked almost non-stop to prevent a similar takeover of the Democratic party and, thankfully, were successful. The "pro-life" campaign has never stopped.

Over a thousand bills have been, and are, proposed at the state and federal level to restrict women's access to contraceptives and abortion, as well as advantageous reproductive technologies that don't conform to irrational religious doctrines.

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

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

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

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

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

Sanger opened a path to that Promised Land by fighting to make contraceptives legal and available. The ability to control the time and circumstances of one's childbearing has made the fight for women's rights achievable in practical – not just philosophical – terms.

She founded Planned Parenthood and we see how threatening that has been to the theocratic religious right. They can't seem to pass – or try to pass – enough laws to hinder women's ability to control their own bodies.

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

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

Castle: It's that atheists have no moral compass and therefore cannot be trusted to behave in a civilized manner. No one ever comes up with any evidence for that. Most people in prison identify themselves as religious.

Studies that rank levels of prejudice for racism, sexism, and homophobia show nonbelievers at the lowest end of the graph – generally below 10% – and evangelicals at the very highest – almost off the chart.

I've had religious people tell me it is religious beliefs that keep people, including themselves, from committing violent crimes. I tell them I hope they hang onto their beliefs because otherwise they would be a threat to public safety.

As physicist Steven Weinberg said, "Good people will do good and evil people will do evil, but for good people to do evil, that takes religion." I have known good and evil atheists and good and evil religionists, but the only time I have seen a good person do evil, it was due to a religious belief.

I have also observed that liberal religionists generally share the same humanitarian values as most atheists, but to have that moral sense they had to abandon traditional religious beliefs.

There is a lot of evil in religious doctrines. The 10 Commandments are almost totally evil. Read them and the descriptions of the penalties that follow. Read the part about what you are to sacrifice to Yahweh – the firstborn of your livestock, your firstborn son... Yup, that's what it says.

So they include don't kill, steal or bear false witness. There is nothing new about that. It's common civic virtue any community needs to function effectively. So religion promises a blissful afterlife.

Ever stop to think what that might be like, forever and ever and ever and ever and ever? People believe that!? I so hope they're wrong.

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

Castle: We all are what we are. I'm an activist because I can't help myself. It's who I am. Others would rather hang by their thumbs than do what I do. They like to get out in the yard and do gardening.

You couldn't pay me enough or threaten me enough to get me to do that. We should just try to be honest and compassionate and cut everyone some slack as long as no one is getting hurt. Live and let live.

We are a fragile species, making the best of our short life spans, stuck here on this hunk of rock circling a ball of flaming gas that could eject a solar flare at any time that wipes us out. Life is, as Shakespeare said, "full of sound and fury, signifying nothing."

Just accept that. It's reality. Just be decent and helpful and try not to hurt anyone. If that's the limit of your activism, it's still pretty good.

If you think it would be great to be able to do more and to be politically active but that is just not in your DNA, then settle for the next best thing: Find a political activist whose views you agree with and vote the way they tell you.

That is the smallest thing you can do. If you did not vote in the last election you made yourself part of the problem and you see what we got. From now on, try to be part of the solution.

Assisted Death 2016 in Canada – Facts and Figures

April 29, 2017

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

The Globe and Mail reports that “at least 970 people in Canada received an assisted death last year, according to a new federal report that provides the first official snapshot of how medical aid in dying is playing out in hospitals and homes across the country.”

Of the total deaths in all of Canada, the assisted death numbers amounted to about 0.6%. This is based on a **Health Canada report**. ½ of the assisted deaths occurred in Quebec at 463. In Quebec, a separate “end-of-life law took effect” circa December 10, 2015.

This happened 6 months before the federal law related to assisted death took hold. The remaining 507 assisted deaths – medically so – happened between June 17 and December 31 of 2016. Patients wanting assisted death signed on for a variety of reasons.

“Cancer was the illness cited most often by patients granted an assisted death (in 56.8 per cent of cases), followed by neuro-degenerative conditions such as multiple sclerosis and amyotrophic lateral sclerosis (23.2 per cent) and cardiovascular and respiratory diseases (10.5 per cent).”

The average patient age was aged 72, with an almost even split between women and men. Health Canada is making new regulations for dealing with assisted dying. “The formal-monitoring regime is expected to include a broader set of indicators, including how well the eligibility criteria and safeguards in the law are working.”

Nurse practitioners, pharmacists, and physicians will be given this data when helping a patient with assisted death. Data from provinces is now public mostly public. The chief executive officer of Dying with Dignity Canada, Shanaaz Gokool, said, “How many people who’ve asked [for an assisted death] have a mental illness where they’re not imminently dying and don’t qualify?”

Gokool emphasised the possibility of those losing capacities due to Alzheimer’s. She wanted quantitative data on the answers to these questions to inform the Council of Canadian Academies.

“Right now, medical aid in dying is limited to consenting adults who are suffering a grievous and irredeemable physical illness and whose natural death is ‘reasonably foreseeable.’ Some provinces are already collecting richer data that hint at the level of interest in hastening death with the help of a doctor.”

In 2015, the Canada Supreme Court struck down the Criminal Code provision against assisted suicide, which made assisted death/suicide illegal. In that act, it joined only a few other countries such as Belgium and the Netherlands.

An Interview with Ajomuzu Collette Bekaku – Founder and Executive Director of the Cameroon Association for the Protection and Education of the Child

May 1, 2017

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

What was the original interest in the protection and education of children?

I grew up in a community where child labour was perceived as “normal”. It was a time in Africa, especially in Cameroon, when it was normal for children to help parents at home with little household chores like sweeping the compound, selling fruits to raise income for the family, etc., just to name a few.

However, it was also a time when it was normal for children to work on banana and rubber plantations. It was also normal for them to carry very heavy loads on their heads (which impairs their health and growth), and it was normal for them to work under hazardous conditions full of dangerous chemicals and insecticides (which also impairs their education, health and growth).

As a result of seeing this situation in my community i.e. child labour, I became motivated and pushed myself to become an advocate for children’s protection and education.

I personally believe that children should be educated, offered opportunities for their development and not used as labourers.

What was the inspiration for the foundation of the Cameroon Association for the Protection and Education of the Child (CAPEC)?

I grew up with a single parent (my mum), in Mambanda Village, who was a primary school teacher. The majority of people leaving in this village were peasant farmers who were working in Banana and Rubber plantations for the Cameroon Development Cooperation (CDC), who were paid according to their daily productivity.

In order for them to increase productivity and make more money at the end of the month, parents were obliged to use their children as labourers in the plantations. Children worked under hazardous conditions.

As a 10-year-old girl, I went through this hardship and pain like other children in my situation. During this phase of my life, I organised storytelling events among fellow children aiming to focus our respective visions on life.

This enabled me to understand that children, even while poor and living in hard conditions, all had so much potential and vision. This motivated me to promote the rights of children in poor, rural communities like where I grew up.

This story and history lives in me, and my actions are still guided by my passion for a community where child rights are promoted and respected.

Immediately I graduated from university, and in conjunction with my work within various communities, I thought of formalising and sustaining the response to challenges faced by children by creating CAPEC, which is a growing, reputable and non-profit organisation. I started CAPEC in order to protect and educate underprivileged children living in various communities across Cameroon.

What tasks and responsibilities come with being the executive director of the CAPEC?
As the executive director and vision bearer, I am in charge of the overall supervision of the organisation.

I manage the relationships between the technical team and the Board within the organisation, as well as the relationship between the organisations and its partners. I also oversee the heads of each department of CAPEC, including fundraising, program development, HR management and accounting.

I also oversee the public relation the organisation maintains outside office and normal business hours. Furthermore, I attend and also host a range of fundraising events, new program inaugurations and public-relations events.

I often speak directly with reporters, donors, government representatives and members of the community at these events (spending a good deal of time acting as the public face of the organisation).

What is the current size of the staff and those cared for by CAPEC?

We have twenty-four staff in Kumba and Yaoundé office, five outreach officers, fifteen in the CAPEC Education Project (Teachers/Administrative staff), and four work in the office on CAPEC-related projects.

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

CAPEC carry out a lot of projects in rural communities ranging from HIV/AIDS, wealth creations, education, gender/capacity building.

Apart from the individual challenges we faced during executing these various projects, there are other general challenges and difficulties we face as a grassroots organisation, such as:

- Difficult terrain: Most project areas are very difficult to assess during mid raining season, and thus needing a four-wheel drive vehicle to be able to reach these areas – which we cannot afford.

- Social challenges: Weak community leadership and a difficult mindset rooted in the people living here, especially concerning the HIV/AIDS Program. A lot of people living in rural areas believe HIV/AIDS don't exist, and consider it witchcraft. It's difficult to convince them to get tested and actually get a sustained buy-in from community leaders.
- Money: CAPEC need money for operations. We face difficulty in raising adequate funding to support our programmes and operations. There is no direct correlation between increased work and increased income; unlike a for-profit company where the work you do is directly sold for revenue.

So NGOs have to put a lot of its resources into creating successful media campaigns, getting the right connections, filling in tons of forms and paperwork for grants, aid and taxation. Not to forget, of course, the hassle of getting an NGO recognised as an NGO, and finding a secure way of getting tax-exempt donations.

What all this results in is a lack of focus. The people created the NGO to solve a problem and now the focus is on doing things that get attention to help raise money. This leads to disconnect between vision and work.

The funding environment for Cameroon is getting more and more challenging with more donors reducing funding interest for the country. NGOs struggle to mobilise resources in response to community needs and CAPEC is also faced with this challenge.

What are some of the eventual emotional difficulties and rewards?

NGOs like CAPEC are typically mission-driven advocacy or service organisations in the non-profit sector. Currently, NGOs are critical contributors in global efforts to achieve the UN's Sustainable Development Goals.

However, the growth in the number of local and international NGOs in this sector has made it very difficult to secure funding to maintain staff and meeting our organisation objectives. Competition has become extensively stiff, especially with the presence of international organisations everywhere.

This has made local NGOs engage in more and more fundraising activities to sustain their activities. The members of staff often work long hours and yet the works itself has proven exhilarating and exceptionally rewarding as it is critically important to causes served.

CAPEC is not governmental and is a non-profit organisation. You founded the organisation in 2002. You work with young people, parents, and various governmental and intergovernmental bodies, and your main aims are the promotion of community welfare. What values and principles inform community welfare for CAPEC?

CAPEC operates with a primary focus on and responsibility for the providing of a higher, broader, and more public level of help for vulnerable children, adolescents, girls and women.

This principle is further attached to the integral values of the organisation that includes but is not limited to: i) respect for human rights; ii) the maintenance of our vision; iii) cooperation beyond borders; iv) public mindedness; v) accountability; vi) truthfulness; vii) transparency; and viii) non-profit integrity.

CAPEC's vision is to allow children to realise their full-potential. What other sub-visions stem from this?

Other sub-visions include increasing the impact of activities centred on the promotion of child rights. This is achieved through a high-level advocacy in conjunction with a coalition of associations and NGOs with a similar vision.

In this regard, I have contacted a host of leaders of associations and NGOs who have accepted and are motivated to be co-founders of such a coalition. It is hoped that this initiative will have an influence on programming from individual association and NGO perspective so that child-right programming will become a reality.

What are the main activities, campaigns, and initiatives of CAPEC?

The gender and Capacity Building Department:

1. Gender awareness/Human Rights training.
2. Training in group dynamics and leadership.
3. Skill training for women/youth groups (e.g, soap making, tie & dye, production of bakery products, mushrooms, nutrition, etc.)
4. Training in starting and managing small business for affiliated groups.
5. In-house training for both national and international volunteers.

Health/HIV/OVCs:

1. Ongoing basic health training focusing on hygiene, sanitation and nutrition.
2. Provision of care and support to OVCs and PLWHAs
3. HIV/AIDS awareness and prevention sensitisation working alongside community-based groups, young people and schools.

Education Project:

1. Elementary, Primary and Secondary Education:

Under our Education Projects there are several subprograms that seek to develop children and surrounding communities as part of CAPEC's primary mission. Currently, CAPEC has the following schools: Bitame Lucia Nursery and Primary School (BLIS) and Bitame Lucia Secondary School (BLIC).

Your targeted objectives utilise the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child without regard to tribe, sex, religion, or origin to protect children of sexual exploitation, forced

child marriage, and child labour. Your work focuses on centres for the disabled and street children, orphanages, and prisons and the prevention of HIV/AIDS. How do these look on-the-ground?

It's not an easy task, considering that they look upon themselves as *not acceptable* in their society. It makes it difficult to approach them. Lots of talking and sensitisation needs to be done in order to get them participating in those important activities that concern their well-being.

It is very difficult working with people with different religions and traditions. They have their entrenched way of thinking and their own entrenched lifestyle. However, we have been able to get some of them listen to us. Our long commitment to hard work and the determination of our dedicated team is proving to be fruitful.

Some of the activities we do to get street children and orphans to listen to us include: arts and crafts; painting; dancing and music – which are activities that can distract their minds from their present predicaments. With such simple and interactive activities, we have been able to get them interested in our activities.

What are your future hopes for growth, expansion of initiatives, and implementation of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child?

Children in different parts of Cameroon suffer from different forms of abuse, violence and torture. For example, in Akwaya sub-division there's a lot of children being forced into child marriage at a tender age of 10.

This is because of the impoverished state that their parents are usually in. My intention is to expand our programs nationwide and to target other forms of abuse suffers by children; not just child labour.

In 2009, CAPEC started a school for orphans and children from low income families to provide them with quality and affordable education. According to CAPEC, education is not only the main solution to poverty but it also stands at the heart of sustainable human development.

However, the present formal education system in Cameroon is not functioning properly and is a serious contributory factor to dropout and failure. The current curriculum in government schools lacks relevance.

The child-teacher ratio is too high (80-100 children per class), and slow children are never taken care of: "once you fail, you have failed." CAPEC school offer youngsters in Cameroon from 4 until 12 years and adolescents from 13 till 18 years old a high-quality education.

CAPEC intend to expand this child-centred education to other regions in Cameroon. With high-quality education and the holistic development of children, we believe that their dreams can be realised.

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

For those who would like to volunteer in CAPEC's Projects or work in partnership on specific programs can contact us via

BP 20646 Yaoundé-Cameroon

Tel: (+237) 242030163

Mobile: (+237) 677751606 / 675036025

Email: info@capecam.org / cbekaku@yahoo.com

Website: www.capecam.org

<https://www.facebook.com/CAPEC20/?fref=ts>

<https://www.facebook.com/Nkolfoulou/>

Thank you for your time, Ajomuzu.

Moroccan Converts to Christianity Demand Right to Live Openly

May 2, 2017

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

Those who secretly converted to **Christianity in Morocco** have emerged from the shadows. They are demanding to live their faith publicly because Islam is the state religion and any apostasy is condemned.

Those converts to Christianity are a super-minority within Morocco. There are no formal statistics, but the U.S. State Department estimates the range as 2,000-6,000.

Within Moroccan society, the proselytising of a religion is punishable by law. Those who are found guilty of the attempt to undermine a Muslim's faith, or attempt to convert another Muslim to different religion will go to jail.

The term for the jailing will be 3 years. "Islam is the state faith of Morocco but the country's 2011 constitution, drafted after it was rocked by Arab Spring-inspired demonstrations, guarantees freedom of religion."

Those non-Moroccan Christians, and the other small Jewish-Moroccan population of about 2,500, are able to practice their religion openly.

"Moroccan authorities boast of promoting religious tolerance and a 'moderate' form of Islam, and the country's penal code does not explicitly prohibit apostasy — the act of rejecting Islam or any of its main tenets."

The history of Morocco is sensitivity to Christianity because of the country's history with colonisation. The majority of converted-to-Christianity Moroccans live in Agadir and the central city of Marrakesh.

"With the exception of local Jews, Moroccans are automatically considered Muslims and King Mohamed VI holds the official title of Commander of the Faithful."

An Interview with Michael Cluff – President of South Jersey Humanists

May 3, 2017

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

How did you become a humanist?

The story I usually tell is that I stopped believing in a soul the more I read about human cognition in college (I was a psych major). But that over-emphasises the intellect, a habit we atheists are prone to.

I also saw how religion was failing so many people and not living up to how it is advertised. I saw very little bliss and contentment, but lots and lots of guilt, torment, fear, and judgment. Perhaps the point where I truly became an atheist was during a high-school religious retreat.

At the end of our retreat, our pastor suggested we walk out to the woods to pray. I scrambled to find a prayer-worthy spot — *only the best for you, God!* — and had to settle for an unremarkable log. As I struggled to come up with a prayer, my inner voice noted, “you’re trying really HARD to do this, aren’t you?”

It took a few years, but that doubtful voice got louder and louder, and finally I stopped suppressing it (Wait, maybe that voice was *Satan*).

What seems like the main reason for people becoming secular humanists in your experience, e.g. arguments from logic and philosophy, evidence from mainstream science, or experience within traditional religious structures?

I honestly can’t pinpoint one reason! Whenever a new person comes to a meeting, they’re given a chance to describe their belief history. We’ve met everything from life-long atheists to people who lost their faith weeks before.

If I had to pick, I’d say that science is the primary reason. But as my history shows, citing reason or “science” as the cause risks oversimplifying.

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

The universe makes more sense to me if you don’t try to fit a personal God into your explanation. The problem of evil — why bad things happen to good people — simply vanishes without God. And the more modern views of God — god as energy or as the “ground of being” — strike me as truthy word games designed to protect a cherished belief.

So without a God, where do we go from there? What do we do with our one life while respecting the one life that others have? That’s the challenge of humanism. Our ethics should derive from

the fact that we evolved as beings who feel pain and pleasure seeking to connect with other beings who also feel pain and pleasure.

What is the best argument for humanism you, personally, have ever come across?

I'm not sure if this is an argument. Perhaps it's an observation:

Even the most religious people cannot be certain of the existence of God, much less know what that God would want from us. So a humanistic perspective, really, is the only *honest* one. I guess you could call that a flipped version of Pascal's Wager?

You are the president of South Jersey Humanists. What tasks and responsibilities come with the position?

When we were smaller, being president meant preparing meetings and leading them, getting ideas for discussion topics, and keeping an eye out for battles we should fight. Now that we've grown, we have a (wonderful) board where we can share responsibilities and trade ideas.

I also connect with other group leaders and keep current with issues in the larger humanist, atheist, and sceptic movements.

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

Growth is a sign of success but it can bring dangerous crises. When you're small, it's easy to work by consensus. When you get bigger, it's harder to make everyone happy. Imagine setting a meeting date and time for five people. Easy-peasy.

Now imagine doing it for 35. No matter when you schedule it, someone will be left out. So when you grow, you have to formalise your decisions, create rules for managing money, and more. It's a tough but important process!

We faced a different challenge at the same time: our membership hit a tipping point. The American Humanist Association was the first national atheist organisation to explicitly adopt a social justice agenda.

Most of our members were happy with this, as our group was already heading in that direction. However, we lost some of our conservative and libertarian members, some who were uncomfortable with supporting Black Lives Matter, and some who feared losing focus on "atheist issues."

There's a natural push and pull for a group to take action versus running an intellectual salon and debating society. Remembering that we're primarily a humanist group, and not an anti-theism group, helps us stay true to our purpose.

With Trump's election, it was clear that there's a big need for humanist social justice. We've had an influx of eager, capable people saying that they felt it was time to act on their humanist beliefs.

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

We're probably more diverse than most humanist groups, but we're still not diverse enough. Of our 33 paid members, about 40% are women, and only 12% are persons of colour. (Attendance at meetings and actions seems more diverse than these figures suggest, but I don't have any numbers).

We don't have data on LGBTQ membership or participation, but we are fully welcoming to all.

What are some activities of the provided by the South Jersey Humanists?

One of our chartered goals is to provide a welcoming community for those who disbelieve in the supernatural.

Each month we discuss a specific topic, article, or book club selection. We've had speakers (most recently ,vaccine expert Paul Offit, American Atheists president David Silverman, Death With Dignity activist Barbara Mancini, AHA president Roy Speckhardt, and "Soul Fallacy" author Julien Musolino). We also do potlucks and have a monthly "Drinking Skeptically" event where we always seem to wind up talking about movies.

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

Another goal in our charter is to promote social justice (not just for atheists).

For social justice, we try to do what a small group like ours can. We've raised funds for the AIDS Alliance's AIDS Walk (Third Place Fundraising Team in 2016) and the Leukemia / Lymphoma foundation.

We volunteer quarterly at the local Food Bank, and we've also given them fresh vegetables we grew in our community garden.

Each year, we help students write letters for political prisoners on behalf of Amnesty International. This is at the local university as part of their Martin Luther King Day of Service.

While we did that this year, we met someone who is active in Syrian refugee relief (the Narenj Tree Foundation), so we're hoping to help them soon. We've visited prisons, too, and participated in a prison pen-pal program.

What were their outcomes?

I wish I could say we've eliminated poverty, racism, and other forms of ignorance in our area, but there's always next year. (Kidding, of course). I really admire what groups like Atheists Helping the Homeless have done in Texas, and I'd love for us to have that kind of success at some point.

Beyond the obvious benefits of our actions, taking action has gotten us together with other organisations and activists, which will make us better connected and more effective. And the more we do, the better at it we get.

What is the public perception of humanism in South Jersey?

It's mixed. We live in a blue state, so we don't face the same fights other humanist groups have, such as creationism in schools. But our part of South Jersey (near Atlantic City) is a patch of red buried within a blue state.

The church-state issues we see here are quasi-legal, such as non-sectarian prayers at town councils or "Good News Clubs" operating within local schools. But we see lots of reminders that this is a religious area.

Just down the road from me there's a huge "One Nation Under God and Proud of It" sign at the local Catholic School. (That one doesn't get vandalised like the "Black Lives Matter" one put up by the Unitarians).

What are the main impediments to the practice and advocacy of humanism in the local South Jersey area? Who/what are the main threats to humanism as a movement in general?

Sometimes, I wonder if apathy among atheists and humanists is our biggest problem. I know it took me a long time before I felt it was important to fight for the rights of atheists. When you live in a blue state, it's easy to get by without thinking about your disbelief.

But perhaps the biggest impediment (locally and globally) might be the stereotype of atheists as amoral killjoys seeking to smash every Christmas display they see. The biggest compliment I ever got came from a co-worker who found out I was an atheist.

"If someone like you is an atheist then I have no problem with it at all." The more 'out' we are, the less threatening we seem. It humanises Humanists.

How can people get involved with South Jersey Humanists?

Check our **Facebook** and **Meetup** pages to find an event you like.

Thank you for your time, Michael.

And thank you, Scott! I appreciate your interest in a group like ours.

An Interview with Narendra Nayak – President of Federation of Indian Rationalist Associations & Founder of Aid Without Religion

May 3, 2017

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

You are one of the more famous unknowns. Your name should be more internationally recognised, I feel. You have done plenty of work in the sceptic movement and for reason. Your father bought a lottery ticket on the advice of an astrologer. This was a turning point for you.

Why? What other personal/educational background assisted with the development of rationalist perspectives and tools?

As for me being an unknown, I do not mind that! But you have to remember that ours is a country of 1.20 billion people, and among them I am quite known as one of the most visible faces in the field. We would rather do the work than seek publicity.

The international scene is replete with those who make orations at international seminars, and I have attended only a few. The IHEU had awarded me for outstanding services to Humanism at their Oslo conference.

Thanks for your feeling that I should be more recognised internationally!

One of the reasons for my turning a sceptic was my father's obsession with astrology. But there are more reasons. They can be read here. <http://nirmukta.com/2010/12/26/a-twice-born-atheist/> and here too <http://nirmukta.com/2009/12/11/am-i-a-hindu/>.

It was that I first became an atheist and remained one for quite some time. Atheism is just a conclusion. Later on, I should say may be at the age of 21 or so I became a rationalist who investigates things and looks for evidence before accepting something.

At the age of 25 or so I joined the movement. My undergraduate training as a chemist and later on my post graduate training as a medical biochemist made me more and more methodical in investigating claims of the paranormal.

The choice of a life without succumbing to any of the irrational practices thrust upon one by the society was a challenging task but I have managed to live up to it. You could read more here <http://nirmukta.com/2010/11/26/practicing-atheism-in-ones-life-under-all-circumstances/>.

The easy availability of literature and references was another plus point as I was teaching at a Medical College. Again we had many colleagues with such inclinations and would cooperate when needed.

Later on about three decades back, when I came in touch with Humanism, I realised that that was what I have been doing all my life. So, can now say that I am a Humanist!

In your experience and transition, rationalism is not only a scientific and philosophical stance. It is an ethical stance derived from personal, likely emotional, experience within the family. How do you maintain high ethical standards in this professional work over decades?

This was probably because I was working at a university where there was very little interference in the personal lives of the faculty unless their stands were a threat to the commercial interests of the set up. Even in such situations I have stuck to my stand, and attempts were made to 'put me on the proper track'. These did not succeed.

When punitive action was taken in 1989, I approached the courts and won my battle, and it was technically held to be termination from service which could be done only after a due process of law which had not been followed as there were no grounds at all for such an action.

Of course, due to the slow moving Indian judicial system it took nearly five and a half years for the courts to decide in my favour.

But I had made my point and after that, there has been absolutely no interference in my activities! In my personal life, I have always stuck to my stand about ethics; no active participation in any religious ceremonies, no treatment from quacks etc.

This has been followed even in my business which is run on totally ethical lines.

To you, what is a rationalist, or makes a good rationalist?

According to me, I would define a rationalist as one who puts things to the test of reason before accepting them. Leading a life by one's convictions makes a good rationalist. Though this looks almost impossible in a country like ours, many of us have done it.

You are the president of the Federation of Indian Rationalist Associations(FIRA). What tasks and responsibilities come with this position?

My responsibilities as the President of FIRA are to hold the movement together on common points of action. I also work to promote the movement by going to places all over the country to speak to our member organisations, conducting workshops for developing rational thinking, representing our points of view at seminars, TV discussions, media and anywhere else needed.

I write regularly for the printed media through press handouts, web site publications and a regular column for a monthly magazine called Mangalore Today.

For a long, long time I have been conducting workshops for teachers at the national children's and teachers' science congresses. Of course, it has been stopped after the present government has come into power.

The responsibilities are difficult to perform as there are too many languages in this country and we have to communicate to people in their regional language which is possible for me as I can speak nine of them.

Perhaps that may be the reason I keep getting re-elected repeatedly! The last one happened a few days ago on the 26th of February.

In July 2011, you founded Aid Without Religion. What was the inspiration for it? How did you identify this niche needing services?

The religious organisations try to justify their collection of funds from the public citing that they are needed for charitable purposes. They also directly or indirectly force the beneficiaries to sing praises of the head of the sect promoting these.

Their photographs are posted all over the place which receives their charity and many time paeans to them are sung. They also promote quackery in the name of medical care. So, it was very much needed to do some work without these.

So, I started this trust for the specific purpose. Again, when I pass away I want my personal assets to be put to use to promote such work. My idea is to see that my work goes on after me and a charity with such specific aims and objectives would help in that.

You put godmen and frauds to the test. They fail. What are godmen? What is the most common trick of godmen and frauds in India?

The term 'godmen' is a specifically Indian usage. Some of these gurus call themselves Bhagawan XYZ where the term Bhagawan or god is a prefix to their name. They also change their given names to high-sounding ones having a meaning like 'a great one', 'a realised one' and so on.

Some of them even add a number of 'mistres' to their title like Sri Sri, Sri Sri Sri etc., the number of sris quantifying their greatness.

In order to bamboozle their gullible followers, they perform tasks apparently impossible for a normal person say something like 'materialising' an object from thin air, walking on embers, dipping hands into boiling oil are a few such examples.

There are also Jesus Christ-like moments multiplying food, converting one liquid into another, reviving the dead, healing disease etc.

Who was a particularly notable story in your professional career so far?

If you mean my profession as a medical biochemist, my involvement in the work about lead poisoning particularly in school children has been the most satisfying. As a consumer activist, we succeeded in bringing about a Consumer Protection Act for the country in 1986.

As a rationalist putting a stop to a fraud called as midbrain activation, which was allegedly conferring supernatural powers on children to see even when blindfolded, was one of our major achievements. Check this- <http://nirmukta.com/2015/04/26/midbrain-activation-challenge-an-update/>

What is the overall state of rationalism in India?

We are diverse nation with a huge population. We need a lot of activists to make the people think rationally. We have a program which appeals to the people directly which is called the 'miracle exposure program'.

In this, we go to the people and show them the so-called God man tricks and explain how it is possible for anyone to do them. This helps as a starting point to make the people think about them. The newer generation of godmen have given them up and have started other things.

This would give an idea about some of the attitudes. <http://nirmukta.com/2011/01/03/the-super-intelligent-superstitious/>. This too- <http://nirmukta.com/2010/04/22/yogi-in-politics-a-rationalists-thoughts-on-baba-ramdev/>, which pertains to a so called yogi who has built up a marketing empire selling things like noodles and biscuits in the name of promoting yoga!

On one hand, we have the economically weaker sections who have been ruthlessly exploited by the religious system while on the other we have the more affluent the so called middle class <http://nirmukta.com/2016/03/14/hypocrisies-of-the-great-indian-middle-class/>, whose icons are again an example of irrationality many times- <http://nirmukta.com/2011/05/26/icons-of-the-middle-class/>.

How does one present the rationalist worldview in a respectful and positive light in various sectors of Indian culture, and subculture?

The rationalist world view is nothing new to India. Gautam Buddha taught about it 2500 years back. Charvaka was one of earliest materialist philosophers. Two religions, Buddhism and Jainism, have originated in India which are basically atheistic.

The Upanishads and Darshans encourage questioning. The Shad Darshanas are an example of this. Again the term 'Hindu' is a vague one with a legal definition as 'one who is not a Christian, Muslim, Jew or a Parsi' which means that all rationalist/atheists come under that ambit!

So, it is quite difficult for the rightist forces to attack us on logic and reason. So, they tend to label us as 'sickulars' (mockery of secular), 'Commies', 'anti-nationals' etc. But the common people are remarkably receptive to our point of view when properly presented.

What have been the most emotionally moving experiences in your professional rationalist work?

They are too many to be cited here. We have supported inter-caste, inter-religious marriages, helped the so-called untouchables, HIV-positive children shunned by the society and so on. One of these is here <http://indianatheists.org/2011/04/07/children-of-a-lesser-god/>

What are some of the demographics of FIRA? Who is most likely to join it?

FIRA does not take memberships from individuals. We are a federation who affiliates organisations who have members. We have organisations with thousands of members who are registered societies and trusts having a few members.

One of the strongest is Punjab Tarksheel Society with thousands of members. Kerala Yuktivadi Sangham has a very systematic setup with an organised membership. Maharashtra Andhashraddha Nirmulan Samiti has hundreds of branches in villages.

As already said, we do not take individuals as members. Those likely to join us are like-minded organisations – atheist, rationalist, secular, humanist- all are welcome who are interested in development of rational thinking.

What have been the largest activist and educational initiatives provided by FIRA (and you, individually)? Out of these, what have been honest failures and successes?

We have made a systematic effort to have activists in every district of the country and organised national and state level programs which were funded by the government of India. Some of them worked. Many did not.

Two times we have organised marches to the parliament to demand the enactment of a bill to separate religion from politics but nothing has happened on that front.

We have tried for anti-superstition acts in many states but have succeeded in only one state. Another of our failures has been our inability to attract younger people to join us actively. The younger generation has no significant presence in our movement.

Though many of them agree with our point of view, they do not want to take an active part. We have to work hard to bring them in.

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

The religious bigots, who now have the official support from the government ruling at the centre. The so-called minority pressure groups also target us. We are attacked from every side. Three of our people have been murdered so far.

Dr. Narendra Dhabolkar was the first one to be killed, and he was a very active member of FIRA. I am forced to go around with an armed bodyguard appointed by the government because threats to my life have been perceived.

How can people get involved with FIRA, even donate to it? How can people further rationalism in India?

We are more in need of participation than funds. My appeal to people is start an organisation of rationalists in your locality and join us as a member. We shall provide resources in terms of inputs and training.

Thank you for your time, Mr. Nayak.

Q&A on the Philosophy of Economics with Dr. Alexander Douglas – Session 2

May 5, 2017

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

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

Scott Jacobsen: With the words such as “capital,” “debt,” “money,” and “wealth,” what creates moderate levels of confusion over use in public discussion?

Dr. Alexander Douglas: Take “debt,” for instance, the subject of my last book. We apply one word to a wide diversity of cases: my debt to a friend, a household’s debt to a bank, a government’s debt to its bondholders.

These cases have important differences, which are ignored if we assume the word to be perfectly univocal. I won’t say more about this example here, since I’ve written about it elsewhere.

Another example is “money.” We know that cash is money, but are bank deposits “money”? Some say yes, some say no, leading to unhelpful debates about whether or not banks can “create money” by making new loans.

Many people don’t count UK Treasury Bills and Gilts as “money,” but traders do: they call them “securities accounts” and treat them just like term deposits at a bank. The ambiguity in the concept leads to confusion.

But worse, if we restrict it to mean a certain class of financial assets, it loses almost all its explanatory power. In elementary textbooks, you find something called the *Quantity Theory of Money*, which tells you (among other things) that changes in the total amount of money, other things being equal, change prices.

But the theory breaks down if you restrict the definition of “money” to a certain class of assets while people make payments by creating and circulating *different* sorts of assets. Thus, the term “money” is either imprecise or of no real explanatory value.

How about “capital?” An economics textbook might tell you that it refers to the various physical equipment that can be combined with labour to produce output. But can we quantify it? In what units?

Weight, for instance, isn’t the relevant measure, since a lighter tool can be more productive than a heavier one – some sharp chainsaws weigh less than some blunt axes.

We can measure capital by its monetary value, but then we can't distinguish between, e.g., the loss or physical destruction of £100,000 worth of capital and a drop of £100,000 in the market value of existing capital.

Meanwhile, Marx defined capital as *power* – the power of the capitalist to command labour and resources. Is Marx presenting a revision to the meaning of the term “capital,” or is he advancing a theory about what we all agree to call “capital?”

As for “wealth,” well – just what is it, and how should we measure it? Ruskin said there is no wealth but life. Was he obviously wrong?

Jacobsen: What have economists *really* tested against the data? What are some more established findings?

Douglas: There are lots of important recent developments in empirical economics. In the 80's and 90's, Alexander Rosenberg pushed a fairly critical line against economics. Drawing on some research by Wassily Leontief, he argued that economists had made almost no reliable precise predictions.

Prediction is the gold standard of explanation in science: if you can't predict it, how do you know you've properly explained it?

But recently, economists have developed new techniques for gathering data and testing theories – they no longer depend only on time-series data, which is notoriously inconclusive.

They now design controlled laboratory experiments, which can be as simple as giving people choices with different parameters and seeing how they react – the growing field of *behavioural economics* uses techniques like this.

They are also starting to employ the research of sociologists and others to study how different sorts of institutional contexts affect human behaviour. They have developed new ways of measuring crucial macroeconomic variables like rates of inflation and growth.

But there is still much room for criticism. Many core theories are still almost impossible to test.

For example, if you try to measure the ‘price-elasticity of demand’ by seeing how the quantities purchased of some commodity change when prices change, you need to assume that the preferences of the relevant consumers are stable over time.

You also need to abstract away from interactions between the market for that commodity with all the other markets in which the consumers participate.

Although I'm not an expert, I think that many macroeconomic models use variables whose values can't be tested – the rate of technological change, the degree of institutional trust: since these floating variables can absorb any error margin between the predictions of the theory and what shows up in the data, they put an opaque screen between the theory and the data.

Since these are the sorts of models that get used to guide economic policy, this should be of concern to society in general, not just to economists.

Jacobsen: You mentioned many names. From Jevons, Keynes, Smith, and Aristotle to Hausman, Rosenberg, Cartwright, Laws, Sen, Robinson, and Hicks. Logic, to an extent, forms the foundation for the ideas and thought processes. Here's a general question, what is the logic below economics? The logic that gives rise to terms, which, as noted earlier, are used, even abused.

I ask because philosophies have logic. Thus, the philosophy of economics, seems to, at root, look at the logic of economics.

Douglas: One way to think of the theory of choice that underlies standard economics is as a sort of normative theory: it studies the choices that people *should* make, given their preferences, just as logic studies the sorts of inferences that people *should* make, given certain premises.

The fact that people often make irrational choices or bad inferences is simply not relevant to the aims of the discipline in either case.

I think there is still some confusion in economics around this: there is a lot of slippage between a purely logical theory of choice, given some formal definition of rationality, and a predictively powerful theory capable of explaining what actually happens in the world.

Sometimes the slippage is covered up by an appeal to 'the long run:' people might make irrational decisions in some cases, but if they repeat the choice-problem many times they will wise up and converge towards the formally rational outcome. I don't buy it.

Jacobsen: Two questions for you: "Are economists justified in using abstract mathematical models?" and "Is Rational Choice Theory, which forms the basis of much economics, empirically unfalsifiable?"

Douglas: On mathematical models, it's hard to say, since there are so many different sorts of mathematical models. Tony Lawson, whom I mentioned before, has come out very strongly against the use of mathematical models in economics.

He thinks it just gets the 'ontology' wrong: neither individual people nor economic systems as a whole are elementary particles operating according to fixed laws. I think there is a lot in his argument.

One issue I have with mathematical models in economics is that they sometimes assume an optimum exists, with no solid mathematical argument for this. To give a simple example: suppose I set you the problem of choosing the greatest real number that is less than 5.

There is no *optimum* solution – for any answer you give, there are an infinite number of *better* answers. If, on the other hand, I set you the problem of choosing the greatest real number that is *less than or equal to 5*, then there is an optimum answer: 5.

Economic models sometimes assume that the optimisation problems they describe are like the second example without proving that they aren't in fact like the first example.

On the other hand, the difficulty with non-mathematical theories is in testing them. I like to think of this in terms of René Girard, an anthropologist whose writing I admire.

He has a single theory for explaining all human mythology and institutions, based on the centrality of what he calls the 'scapegoating mechanism.' He finds hints of this mechanism in the Upanishads, the plays of Shakespeare, and the phenomenon of global terrorism.

I find his work profound and illuminating, but would I bet my life on its truth? No, because there's no way to measure just how accurate, and therefore, just how predictively robust the theory is. It's easy to find hints of the scapegoating mechanism in any story, but there's no way to quantify just how much any story really conforms to the model.

With Rational Choice Theory, I can be briefer. Yes, in its standard form, it is empirically unfalsifiable. The problem is simple: the theory claims that people make the choices that maximise their preferences subject to constraints.

But all we observe are the choices people make. If we take "preferences" simply to mean people's patterns of choice – this is recommended in Paul Samuelson's famous economics textbook – then the RCT is trivial: it just tells us that people choose what they choose. It can't be refuted by any observation of choice behaviour.

But if preferences are something other than patterns of choice, we can't observe them directly, and again the theory can't be falsified (nor verified) empirically.

Gay Men at Risk of Torture in Indonesia

May 5, 2017

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

The government of Indonesia has been attempting, repeatedly, to threaten the rights and safety of LGBT citizens of the country. There have been a number of comments with regards to it and a call on the Indonesian authorities to release **2 gay men** from the Aceh province. The local ordinance at the moment criminalises homosexuality.

On the night of March 28, 2017, unidentified vigilantes forcibly entered a home and brought two men found there to the police for having alleged same-sex relations. The two men, in their twenties, have been detained at a Wilayatul Hisbah, a Sharia (Islamic law) police facility in Banda Aceh, the provincial capital.

The chief inspector stated the 2 gay men confessed to being gay and would be detained for being male homosexuals. In the Aceh **Islamic Criminal Code** (Qanun Jinayah), the men may face 100 public lashings.

Under international law, this section of the Islamic Criminal Code constitutes torture. There is disagreement between international law and the Aceh Islamic Criminal Code and was noted by the deputy Asia division director of HRW, Phelim Kine, that these two cases exemplify the embedded anti-LGBT discrimination in the Qanun Jinayah.

“These men had their privacy invaded in a frightening and humiliating manner and now face public torture for the ‘crime’ of their alleged sexual orientation,” Kine said.

There was cell phone **footage** of the raid. The ordinances in the Qanun Jinayah against gays is said to empower the public and the special Sharia police force in the public identification and detainment of someone in violation of the rules.

The Aceh authorities detained LGBT individuals in the past, including an 18-year-old and a 19-year-old pair of young women who were assumed to be lesbians. The charge was “embracing in public” with detainment for 3 nights.

Over the past 10 years, the Aceh parliament has begun to adopt various Sharia-inspired ordinances, which have criminalised non-hijab-wearing women, and other activities such as the consumption of alcohol, gambling, and extramarital relations. These can be enforced onto non-Muslims.

In 2016, 339 people received lashings – a Sharia-based punishment. Out of the 34 provinces in Indonesia, Aceh is the main one that can adopt, by law, the Sharia-based bylaws. The Human Rights Watch openly opposes all discriminatory laws and policies; especially those that violate the most basic human rights.

HRW said, in June, that the Minister of Home Affairs Tjahjo Kumolo **backtracked** on an announced commitment for the abolishment of abusive Sharia regulations in the nation. The government officials in Aceh province have worked to actively stoke the homophobia.

Trump Signs Executive Order in Favour of Religious Right

May 6, 2017

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

US President, Donald Trump, has signed an **executive order**, which provides the basis for the easier political manoeuvring of the religious in America as opposed to the non-religious. There was a weakening of the enforcement of a rule that prevented churches and tax-exempt groups from the endorsement of American political candidates.

There were steps towards resolution of the dispute over Obama-era healthcare care plan rules, which moved in the favour of the religious Right by the opposition to birth control. More or less, Trump's inner circle mostly belongs to the religious Right.

To faith leaders at the White House Rose Garden, Trump said, "We will not allow people of faith to be targeted, bullied or silenced any more and we will never ever stand for religious discrimination... With this executive order, we are ending the attacks on your religious liberty."

Evangelical leaders and scholars consider this to be a watered down version of a drafted executive order that was leaked earlier in 2017. Even so, the executive order is highly in favour of the religious Right.

It was filled with religious exemptions and language that could give millions of Americans "a licence to discriminate" against parents that were unwed, some rights advocates, and the lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender community.

This will possibly result in a new policy for the Health Department. The accommodation will be for religious institutions or groups that can tell the federal government that they were after the amendment "to provide employees with contraceptive coverage."

The Centre for Reproductive Rights has an opening that is ready to block the order in court. The order seems to have gone far, but not as far as the refusal of services to individuals and organisations based on religious beliefs.

For example, if an individual was a Christian and did not want to provide a service to a Muslim, a homosexual, or a nonreligious individual, then the Christian owner of the business would be able to deny them the service based on their religious 'superiority;' being Christian.

There have been rumours about the Trump administration and their preparation of a sweeping executive order that would allow any government worker or organisation receiving federal funding the right to target LGBT people.

The president of Nara Pro-Choice America, Ilyse Hogue, said, "Americans did not vote to have their healthcare taken away or to have their access to birth control cut off."

As well, Trevor Potter, the president of the Campaign Legal Center, said, “For decades, the charitable political activities prohibition has kept tax-exempt religious institutions focused on their religious missions, freeing them from the pressures associated with partisan political campaigns.”

Boy Beaten to Death at Islamic School for ‘Making Noise’

May 6, 2017

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

A Malaysian school boy aged 11 has died in hospital after being severely **beaten** at an Islamic school. Mohamed Thaqif Amin Mohd Gaddafi's beatings were so bad that his legs, which were whipped with a water hose, were amputated to prevent the spread of infection. Bernama, the state news agency, reported on the death.

The boy's death has sparked outrage in the Muslim-majority country. He, and other pupils, were whipped with a water hose. An assistant warden gave the whippings at the Johor Islamic school, which is north of Singapore.

There have been circulated photos of the boy with blackened legs, which were swollen from infection. After admittance to the hospital 2 weeks later, the doctors had to amputate the 11-year-old's legs while he was in a coma.

The amputations were to prevent the spread of infection. The district police chief, Rahmat Othman, said, "We are now waiting for the medical and autopsy reports from the hospital before taking further action."

Noor Azimah Abdul Rahim, chairman of the Parent Action Group for Education, said, "To this day, we do not know who are actually in charge of regulating tahfiz schools." Many of the Islamic educational schools are privately operate and have registration in a government/state religious department.

They tend not to be with the education ministry. The education ministry has "strict guidelines" on corporal punishment, whereas the private Islamic schools do not. This particular case has prompted many to demand more scrutiny of the "tahfiz" educational institutions.

Students memorise the Quran there. Prime Minister Najib Razak has announced a 5.4 million British pound fund for the development of tahfiz education, but has expressed condolences for the loss of the boy.

The death of Mohamed Thaqif Amin Mohd Gaddafi has focused a lot of public attention on a new bill being discussed in the Malaysian Parliament, a bill that would impose more stringent forms of the Islamic penal code. This could include whipping.

Technological Innovations – Opportunities and Challenges

May 6, 2017

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

The **International Labour Organisation**, as the putative authority and overseer of labour and industry trends has had frequent occasion to comment on the difficulties with new technological innovations disrupting industry, but has also highlighted the opportunities they present.

Clearly, development of new technologies permit new modes of production. With new modes of production based on such innovations the landscape of work changes significantly and this has lead to disruptions in both blue-collar work and at some of the simpler levels in the sphere of white-collar work.

These disruptions can clearly upset lifestyles and lives and necessitate the need for further retraining. Those with the desire for work-life balance might be able to get it based on retraining and the ability to find a new job in the new market made by the new technologies.

With these disruptions, occasioned particularly when the pace of innovation outpaces society capacity to retrain, the job market collapses in some areas and reduces in some others, but expands in different ways.

This entails the creation and sustaining of new industries, which, in turn creates new jobs – however, an insufficiently prepared workforce may not be able to reap the benefits of such advanced. Technology is changing the landscape, and society, as well as authorities, have to gear up to address the challenges and opportunities associated with new technologies.

In a sample of 15 countries, those highly involved in telework and ICT-mobile work (T/ICTM) had a higher level of work intensity. This is regardless of the place that they have been working.

However, they have also managed to attain higher levels of work-life balance, which may be considered an overall social good, and therefore one of the more obvious benefits of technological disruption.

Some of the increased work-life balance can come from the reduction in the amount of time necessary to travel to work in addition to the flexibility of one's own working time. However, this has led to longer work hours and ambiguity between work and personal time.

Some have found that the constant and consistent need to be on call has produced higher levels of stress. The ILO's research has noted that the new forms of work will intensify within the era of large-scale electronics.

So, “working time regulations” will have to adapt to this, which should take advantage of the positives and mitigate the negatives, and ensure that technologies remain a force for good.

Technological innovations have always been profoundly dependent on the use to which they are put, and the manner in which they are utilised.

In much the same way that the industrial revolution set human society on a period of rapid advancement, the current leaps and bounds in industrial evolution due to information technology will have significant effects on society.

Their impact therefore, will depend largely on how they are received and managed. Ultimately, as the ILO's research reflects, innovations such as automation represent both opportunities and challenges. What they end up being depends on how they are used by human beings.

The UK Air Quality Plan – A Weak, Half-Hearted Attempt?

May 6, 2017

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

The government of the United Kingdom, after much rebuke from European Union institutions, has finally drafted a strategy for the improvement of air quality. The improvement of the air quality in the United Kingdom is based on the reduction of nitrogen dioxide in the atmosphere.

Recalling that the UK was reprimanded by the European Commission for being one of five countries that persistently contravened EU regulations regarding the amount of nitrogen dioxide in the atmosphere and it was after the threat of legal sanction that this initiative has come to pass.

Air pollution is a serious problem in the UK. The exposure to outdoor pollution of air is associated with about 40,000 deaths per year in the UK.

This damage to the body can be inflicted across the lifespan, starting from some of the first weeks in the womb all the way to the older years of an individual. In addition, it has been linked with cancer, heart disease, asthma, and diabetes.

Therefore, **the plan's** stated objective was to reduce pollution to such an extent as to bring the UK into the ranks of some of the cleaner and healthier areas. Vehicle manufacturers have an important part to play within the framework of the quality of air, according to the UK government.

The government has signalled that the options are open for consultation, which could run from now until June 15. The final plan for the publication will be at the end of July.

However, the lawyers and activists who pushed for the plan and hoped that it would be designed in a manner to encourage or insist on the weakening of the impact of diesel vehicles in addition to the rapid transition into cleaner forms of transport seem to have been disappointed.

The plan allows for discussion around the possibility for a tax treatment for diesel vehicle drivers. However, the government has refrained from imposing any specific charges; there will need to be an engagement with stakeholders before any formal tax changes, circa the Autumn Budget 2017.

Even with the plan in place and the consultation in preparation, however, some have criticised the air quality plan as insufficient.

Some environmental lawyers have seen **the plan** as “much weaker than hoped for.” Chief executive of ClientEarth, James Thornton, described the government as removing personal responsibility, and shirking it to the local authorities.

Activists and politicians in favour of a more stringent plan point out that this plan was the result of Ministers facing a series of defeats in the courts, where the prior plans were viewed as illegal.

“The plan looks much weaker than we had hoped for,” said Thornton. “The court ordered the government to take this public health issue seriously and while the government says that pollution is the largest environmental risk to public health, we will still be faced with illegal air quality for years to come under these proposals.”

It remains to be seen whether the present plan will be approved of as being in line with public health requirements and the consequent obligations of the government.

UN Intercultural Dialogue on Peace and Human Security

May 6, 2017

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

The government of Azerbaijan hosted the **Fourth World Forum on Intercultural Dialogue** in coordination with the United Nations Alliance of Civilizations, United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural organisation (UNESCO) and others.

One modern issue is the integration of migrants and refugees into large cities. Associated with this is the rise in extremism and how it has turned violent, as well as, the radicalisation of youth via extremist context on the Internet.

It was reported that this will provide an opportunity for the examination of potential effective responses to the various issues surrounding human security, mass migration, and violent extremism.

Numerous government heads and ministers, private sector individuals, policy makers, journalists, civil society activists, intergovernmental organisation representatives, and others gathered at the forum.

It was themed with ‘Advancing Intercultural Dialogue – New avenues for human security, peace and sustainable development.’ The UNESCO assistant director general for social and human sciences, Nadia Al-Nashif, said, “[The forum has a] very strong vision and resonates deeply with UNESCO’s mandate to build peace in the minds of men and women.”

Al-Nashif described the modern world as a complicated place with massive innovations in technology, increased tensions, and a lack of general trust based on insecurity. However, she noted in a UN forum UN dialogue is an important platform.

It allows for global citizens to debate coexistence with regards to the “**2030 Agenda** for Sustainable Development.” It is an agenda for acceptance, integration, social inclusion, and tolerance plus empathy.

UNESCO will host 13 sessions at the forum. As an international forum through the UN, it is not simply academic, as noted by Ms. Al-Nashif, but there are cities and local authorities coming too.

UNESCO has been working to help with the increased influx of migrants into major city centres. Many of the products from the forum will be turned into a research publication entitled, “Interculturalism at a crossroads, comparative perspectives on concepts, policies and practices.”

Al-Nashif said, “What the Baku Forum and UNESCO is doing is finding a common access where we continue to engage, to inform scientific evidence for why it doesn’t make sense to be racist, [and] why discrimination hurts socially and economically as well.”

The Ecumenical Patriarch of Constantinople on a “Post-Secular Age”

May 6, 2017

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

The Archbishop and Ecumenical Patriarch of Constantinople, **Bartholomew I**, from the Eastern Orthodox Church, and Sheik Ahmad el-Tayeb, who is the Grand Imam of al-Azhur University, **attended** the opening of the al-Azhar International Peace Conference in Cairo, Egypt on April 27, 2017.

The Head of the Roman Catholic church, Pope Francis, attended on April 28th. The focus of the event however was to be the Ecumenical Patriarch of Constantinople Bartholomew who used the opportunity to provide a blueprint for interreligious dialogue in the future with a central role for religion in people's lives.

It has been speculated before, that the spotlight on the Holy See, Pope Francis may possibly result in reducing the spotlight on Ecumenical Patriarch of Constantinople, Bartholomew I within the global Christian community. With the trip to Cairo, Egypt, by Pope Francis, Patriarch Bartholomew should have been, according to conventional thought, unseen or at the very least in the background.

But religious spheres of influence also appear to be shifting, and old realms of power are no longer as strongly held. With the retirement of Benedict XVI, observers of religious trends have asserted that some of the heavy lifting for Christianity has been done by Ecumenical Patriarch of Constantinople, Bartholomew I.

In particular, the intellectual and religious heavy lifting in association with Islam, or rather in relation to Christianity's relationship with Islam appears to have been taken on by Patriarch Bartholomew I. The reasons for this are not hard to surmise.

While the Eastern Orthodox Church has had a longer and deeper interrelationship with Islam in the past than the Roman Catholics, in addition to doctrinal Christology, this is one other major difference between the Roman Catholic Church and the Eastern Orthodox Church.

The religious head of the Eastern Orthodox Church, the Ecumenical Patriarch of Constantinople, Bartholomew I, lives in Istanbul. It is a mostly Muslim city, but one that has the historical distinction of having been a “bridge” for the Muslim and Christian religions for several centuries.

In Cairo, Egypt, he spoke to the future of interreligious dialogue and a post-secular world, exhorting the return to a religious way of life, and heralding a time when more people would return to religion.

Patriarch Bartholomew said, “[The] modernistic expectation is of a post-religious secular age...[however, it is] becoming a post-secular period, or even [an epoch] of religious explosion.”

He argued for religion as a core factor to human life, individually and socially. He listed four main reasons for religion affecting humanity. One, he explained that faith and religion connects and taps into some of the greatest concerns of people while providing answers to existential questions and thereby affording meaning and orientation in life.

Two, he pointed out that religion was inextricably related to the identity of civilizations and groups. Three, religion, he argued, has been the creator and preserver of some of the great achievements of culture in addition to the compassion, and ethics, and solidarity seen today.

Four, Patriarch Bartholomew I underlined his conviction that religion remained a vital factor in the peace process. Adverting to an extremely well-known quote by the famed St. Paul, he recalled that God was not the author of confusion but of peace.

The Patriarch acknowledged that while religion could, of course divide by causing intolerance and violence – the causation of such chaos was a symptom of its failure, and cannot be said to be its essence which, the Patriarch reiterated, was the protection of human dignity.”

He sees relativism and fundamentalism as extremes in the modern era and secularism as a reaction to the extremes that relativism and fundamentalism have been taken to.

Patriarch Bartholomew views the religious fundamentalist “outbursts” as ammunition for the critics of religious faith and called on the faithful to resist such influences, but rather remain true to their religious calling.

Memorably, The Ecumenical Patriarch of Constantinople, Bartholomew I closed with these words – “True faith does not release humans from being responsible for the world, from respecting human dignity, and from struggling for justice and peace.

On the contrary, it strengthens the commitment of human action, enlarges our witness for freedom and human core values.”

Al-Azhar, where the speaking engagement took place, is seen as a major institution of Sunni Islam. Patriarch Bartholomew denounced terrorism and disassociated it with any religion, which was received with applause from the crowd.

“This is the biggest challenge for religions, to develop their own potential of love, solidarity, and compassion...this is what humanity deeply expects from religion today,” Patriarch Bartholomew said.

The event at Al-Azhar is certainly interesting for its unifying of three of the most influential religious figures in the world today. Their uniform message of the role of religion in today’s world, its necessity, and their disavowal of religion as the cause of any of the extremist violence follows an old and well worn script. Whether the followers of these religions find new meaning within the words of Patriarch Bartholomew I and will become champions of a tectonic social change remains to be seen.

Two Men in India Killed by Mob for Stealing “Sacred” Cows

May 7, 2017

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

Indian villagers beat a pair of Muslims to death. The two **Muslim men** were claimed to have been stealing cows and were asserted suspects, according to the police. Cattle are considered sacred by Hindus, who are the religious-majority in India.

In the Nagaon district, the police of Assam state registered the cases of Abu Hanifa and Riyazuddin as murderers. Two people were detained and questioned over the murders.

Nagaon’s chief police officer, Debaraj Upadhyay, said, “They were chased and beaten with sticks by villagers who said the two boys were trying to steal cows from their grazing field...By the time we took them to the hospital at night they had succumbed to their injuries.”

There was footage taken by a local witness, which was aired by the broadcasters in India. In the recordings, the two Muslim men were being beaten with their hands tied and the villagers surrounding them, beating them.

There have been killings and smugglings of cows, recently, and it has become a recent tension with regards to the religious and holy significance of cattle to the Hindu majority in India. The slaughter of cattle is a punishable offense in many states in India.

Various vigilante groups have been talking about “cow protection” in the early months up to the present of 2017. Another Muslim man was beaten to death in Rajasthan. Why? The mob discovered cows in his truck.

The vigilante groups, or mobs, have been inspecting transportation for cattle. The man beaten to death in Rajasthan was a dairy farmer and was in the middle of transporting milk cows. There were accusations hurled at the police. That they didn’t act in enough haste for the dairy farmer.

Some critics argue that the Narendra Modi victory has emboldened the vigilantes. Modi is the leader of the Bharatiya Janada party, known for being a Hindu nationalist party. Modi won the position of prime minister in 2014.

In 2016, Modi criticised the “cow protection vigilantes,” especially urging a “crackdown” on those that would use religion to cover their crimes. Across India, 10 Muslim men, at least, have been killed by these types of incidents with Hindu mobs descending to protect cattle and kill Muslims.

Not for being Muslims necessarily, but for suspecting the consumption of beef or the smuggling of cattle. To protect against smuggling, the government will be issuing millions of identification numbers for cows in a national database – linking the cows and the national database – in an effort to protect them from future smuggles in India.

Education News in Brief – May 11th, 2017

May 11, 2017

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

Preventing cuts on school spending means more money on income tax

The protection of England schools from “**real-term cuts**” will mean an equivalent increase in spending. This money is to come from raising the basic rate of the income tax according to the Institute for Fiscal Studies.

The Institute is a financial think-tank. Based on its team’s analysis, the maintenance of current funding levels for England schools will mean an increase in spending of 3.7 billion British pounds.

Luke Sibieta of the Institute for Fiscal Studies said, “A promise to protect schools from cuts will not come cheap.” The funding for schools has become an election battleground with opposition parties pointing out the funding shortages.

UK and Australian academic life is more stressful than Iran and Uganda

Stress runs high in the United Kingdom (UK) and Australia for academics in contrast to Iran and Uganda. Academics in these areas of the world report fairly high and low levels of stress, respectively, in a study that is the first of its kind.

The global first is the global comparison of stress levels in higher education. The research found Germany’s researchers are the happiest; China’s are those reporting the “greatest strain.” Germany’s greater success comes from the high levels of staff morale and the strong job satisfaction.

Professor of educational psychology at Jönköping University, Roland Persson, made the ranking list. Persson analysed 91 articles, literature reviews, and national surveys in order to arrive at his conclusions. According to his study it seems that a significant reason for Germany’s success comes from the lack of management culture.

Prescription drug use by kids a concern for British parents

There is an **increasing trend of prescription** drug use by Britain teens, which appears to have been a more common and long-term trend in the United States. It can be a worry for parents, who have been urged to warn their kids about the issues around it.

The problems have come out after the Wiltshire police pointed out that over 20 kids either age 15 or 16, school age kids, needed treatment after increased use of Xanax, a drug to help with anxiety and panic disorders.

This casual or recreational drug use while increasingly common in North America now appears to be seeping into Britain. In the United States of America, in the state of New Mexico, 16 pupils have been hospitalised in 2017 alone with the year not even reaching its halfway point.

Religion News in Brief – May 12th, 2017

May 12, 2017

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

Brain damage could be linked to extreme religious beliefs

New research by scientists seems to indicate that damage in a certain part of the brain is linked to an increase in religious fundamentalism. **Reportedly, in particular, lesions in the [ventromedial prefrontal cortex](#) reduced cognitive flexibility – the ability to challenge our beliefs based on new evidence.**

Scientists involved in these research studies have found that people with brain injuries are more likely to be extremely religious. This has led to speculation about the human brain having a God spot, which might be responsible for religious belief.

Experts have begun to think that the God spot may be the cause of – or have a high positive correlation to – extreme religious belief. **As it turns out**, more and more research is pointing to brain trauma as the ‘cause’ of extreme religious belief.

The damage to the brain is indicative of people being less able to critically evaluate their most fundamental religious beliefs. Thus, this inability, which in turn fuels their unwillingness to examine or challenge their most fundamental religious beliefs results in such individuals holding on ever stronger to such beliefs, and therefore being increasingly extreme in their adherence to such belief systems.

Texan Republican proposes bill designed to restrict adoption by minority groups.

Texas is making the headlines again over religion. A **bill** has been proposed by a Republican James Frank over whether to have adoption agencies ban Jews, Muslims, and gay people from taking children in from these adoption agencies. The bill is due to be debated this week

It would probably amount to one of the most “sweeping” bills to differentiate entitled to services to certain groups based on the concept of freedom of religion bills in the United States. The bill, if passed would amount to a denial of adoption services, based on religious beliefs.

The bill has been proposed by the Republican-controlled legislature to protect faith-based adoption agencies. In addition, this would permit state-run agencies the ability to decline services based on the sincerely held religious beliefs of the providers’, and the adoption services’.

Some of the other objections, on the basis of which applicants could be rejected would be if there single, an atheist, or an interfaith couple.

Ban on distribution of Qurans by campaign liked to jihadists proposed in Zurich

Zurich’s Public Safety Office has **recommended** that the country’s most populous canton ban a campaign called the READ! campaign that distributes Qurans in public space. The Office believes the campaign is a front for incitement and recruitment relating to radical activities, and to jihadist movements.

This, however, is in contrast to the opinion of the Federal intelligence Services, which opined 3 days prior to the recommendation that such a ban could lead to strong conflict with regards to freedom of religion.

However, Zurich's Public Safety Office has referred to its own legal opinion, and stated that it was under no obligation to provide public spaces to be used as a platform from which views that were irreconcilable to the country's basic values could be spread.

The READ! campaign could not be reached for comment. The campaign was initiated by Germany's DWR "True Religion" Group, formed in 2011 with the intention of distributing 25 million Qurans in Europe.

However, DWR was banned last year for being instrumental in recruitment of jihadists. Swiss authorities, citing the more than 80 people who have left Switzerland to fight with jihadist movements, point to the trend as allowing for obvious justification for such a ban.

The Association of Islamic Organisations did not expect a widespread negative consequence from the ban, since it was only to a particular campaign.

Philosophy News in Brief – May 12th, 2017

May 12, 2017

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

The official stances of the Eastern Orthodox Church on LGBTQ

The world's second largest Christian sect has is the Eastern Orthodox Church, which is composed of autocephalous or independent churches, or multiple patriarchates such as those found in Constantinople, Russia, and Greece.

Thus, all patriarchs all hold equal authority in the Church and there is no centralized headquarters or ultimate authority, which can sometimes make it difficult to ascertain the Church's exact position on something.

The Church however does appear to have some consensus **an official policy** on LGBTQ. Thus, a few dioceses have unequivocally listed homosexuality alongside fornication, adultery, abortion and abusive sexual behavior and describe them as "immoral and inappropriate forms of behavior in and of themselves, and also because they attack the institution of marriage and the family."

Therefore, it believes "homosexual behaviour is a sin". On the topic of trans people, the dioceses mostly believe gender reassignment is condemned as an affront to God's design for each individual.

The Eastern Orthodox Church is clear that it does not perform or recognize same-sex marriages. A statement by the Assembly of Canonical Orthodox Bishops, has categorically refused to bless same-sex unions. The church also does not ordain LGBTQ people. However, alternative organizations such as the Orthodox-Catholic Church of America do ordain both women and LGBTQ people.

Gaps remain. The Church has no statement on the Employment Non-Discrimination Act (ENDA). In general, it is fairly unwelcoming, but some report that individual congregations may follow a "don't ask, don't tell" policy.

Feminist associate professor publishes controversial philosophy article

A journal of feminist philosophy, *Hypatia*, **published a controversial article**, recently, by Rebecca Tuvel, entitled "In Defense of Transracialism". Essentially, Tuval cited the argument about 'identifying as a certain group', that is used to validate and legitimise transgender people and bring them into mainstream society and argued that Transracialism could be defended on the same grounds. Predictably, Tuvel, assistant professor of philosophy at Rhodes College, has generated considerable controversy.

The editors of the journal drew "opprobrium" shortly after the publication because of its controversial subject matter. The article was widely criticized as a product of white and cisgender privilege.

An open letter called on the journal to retract the article, which was signed by 100s of academics. The article was accused of ignoring the work of transgender and black scholars, and using harmful language.

The editor of the journal now disagrees with the article, and Tuvel has been subjected to an academic witch hunt – with some even comparing her to Rachel Dolezal, who a former leader of an NAACP chapter, who claimed she “identified as black,” although her racial markers identified her as white, and home Tuvel had defended in her article.

‘An eye for an eye’ principle in punishment making a comeback?

Frustrated community leaders are exploring whether punishments that essentially epitomize the ‘eye for an eye’ principle **should be used** for petty crimes such as vandalism. The destruction, defacement, and disrespect of the material goods of an individual in a community caused by vandalism, they feel is lost on the perpetrators, who never know or care about the effects of their actions.

Someone vandalized a part of a streetscape with a cost of \$4,500 to the taxpayers, in Lake Weeroona. The perpetrator, if caught would likely face a lighter fine. The author questions if that is fair to the masses of people in a community at the same time.

He, therefore, wonders about the efficacy of light penalties where the consequences may not be quite sufficient in some cases, and where heavier hands might do the trick – such as a punishment that would extract ‘an eye for an eye’.

Science News in Brief – May 12th, 2017

May 12, 2017

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

Astronomy is one of the few winners in Australia science budget

The new science budget for Australia is reportedly quite ‘bland’ and hardly remarkable. Les Field, the science policy secretary for the Australian Academy of Science in Canberra, **said**, “There are no big spending initiatives but no major cuts.”

The CEO of Science and Technology Australia in Canberra, Kylie Walker, agreed and said that this budget reflects a ‘business as usual for science and technology) approach.

Since the release of the budget on May 9, it has been seen as rather weak in its support of publicly funded science research, especially in terms of the allotment to the Commonwealth scientific and industry research organization which recently suffered major cuts.

The budget does not also allow for private investment to take up the slack, slashing a tax incentive that was designed to stimulate innovation in the public sector. However, that seems to be counterbalanced by an investment in innovation in manufacturing.

Higher education will also not see a boost. While one needs forward estimates to determine how much will be lost or gained, it is clear that the budget favours one branch – Astronomy. Astronomy has received \$19 million to take part in major initiatives around the world and has a guarantee for a few more years.

Scientists name dinosaur after “Ghostbusters” villain

Royal Ontario Museum scientists have discovered the fossil of a 75-million-year-old species of armoured dinosaur which was unusually well preserved. It has been termed the ankylosaur in taxonomical, formal biological, classification and will be covered in the prestigious Royal Society Open Science Journal.

However, it has **also been named** the Zuuul crurivastator, also known as the destroyer of shins. The *destroyer of shins* title comes from the movie *Ghostbusters* – the name is sure to delight many a movie fan.

A palaeontologist, Victoria Arbour, who is a postdoctoral fellow at the ROM and the University of Toronto, said, “Me and my co-author David Evans were batting around for ideas for what to name it, and I just half-jokingly said, ‘It looks like Zuul from *Ghostbusters*’...Once we put that out there we couldn’t not name it that.”

Big Bang celebration from the Vatican

The Vatican has put on a celebration of standard Big Bang cosmology through the Vatican Observatory. The Vatican invited some of the best cosmologists and scientists to discuss gravitational waves, space-time singularities, and black holes.

It is an event honouring the legacy of one of the great Jesuit scientists ever to have lived named George Lemaitre. The Vatican Observatory was founded by Pope Leo XIII in 1891 to correct the false notion that the Catholic Church is in some way hostile to science.

This has been a consistent motif of derogatory commentary on the receptivity and acceptance of science by the Catholic Church since the heresy trial of Galileo 400 years or so ago.

The current position of the Vatican however, is that science and its explanations can quite harmoniously co-exist with religion. The head of the observatory, Brother Guy Consolmagno emphasised that belief in God and the Big Bang are reconcilable and not necessarily in conflict.

Exclusive Interview with Aron Ra – Public Speaker, Atheist Vlogger, and Activist

May 13, 2017

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

Mr. Aron Ra was born in Kingman, Arizona. He was baptised as a Mormon. He is the ex-President of Atheist Alliance of America. He is a public speaker, secular activist, and an advocate for reason in education. He hosts the Ra-Men podcast with Dan Arel and Mark Nebo of BeSecular. Now, he is running for Texas State Senate. Here is his story.

This interview edited for clarity and readability.

Scott Jacobsen: To begin, you were born in Kingman, Arizona. You were baptized as a Mormon. What was the family background surrounding your growing up? What was a moment of realisation, or a series of them, in becoming a non-believer, in becoming an atheist?

Aron Ra: Well, my family background largely identified as Mormon. Although, most don't know what that means. We have some people in the family that do the whole magic underwear thing. Some even to the point of not drinking coffee or eating cinnamon, but those are very, very rare. Most Mormons are disciplined for the most part. And most of my family are (way) not.

Jacobsen: Okay [Laughing].

Jacobsen: I would say the better part of my family identifies as Mormon or they identify as Christian – not that that's a different thing because all of them identify as Christian because they all think that Mormon is Christian, just like every Mormon seemingly does.

It is just other denominations that don't think Mormons are Christians, just like they don't think Catholics are Christian. This was an advantage for me growing up. I got to see the interdenominational bigotry within Christianity.

When we lived in places like New Mexico, Arizona, Nevada, and Colorado that were Mormon dominant, they were places that the Mormons controlled everything. And if you were not a Mormon, you were not employed, at least not if you were white.

There were places that were like that. Utah is rife with them. When we moved to other places, and I moved a lot as a kid, I moved an awful lot – up to 8 times a year.

Jacobsen: Oh wow.

Ra: Both of my parents – I would be with one parent, then another. They would always be living at a different place, and then the last time I saw them and so forth.

When we moved to places like Los Angeles area, for example, where the Mormons didn't own and control everything, then anytime somebody asked, "What is my religion?" I know there is going to be a problem, well two problems.

They care what my religion is. And that's always indicative of an issue right there. We are about to have an argument and the fault of the argument is going to be your assumptions. I would say, "My family is Mormon." There's obviously a "but..." coming, but I didn't usually get to that.

Jacobsen: [Laughing].

Ra: Right away, I would start hearing all of these ridiculous things Mormons believe. Now, I do not argue. Mormons do believe ridiculous things.

Jacobsen: [Laughing].

Ra: Every religion does, to be completely honest. But the Mormons have their own collection of ridiculous things that are exclusively Mormon that are not the same ridiculous things that other Christian denominations believe, but the accusations these people were making were ridiculous things that my family, so far as I could tell, did not believe – none of them.

So my mum was always the most devout of all of the Mormons in my family that I could talk to. I would invite these people in, "Hey, you want to come in and tell my mother that she believes all of the things that you tell me Mormons believe?"

They would always refuse the invitation. The refusal of the invitation seemed telling. It shows that they know what they are telling me is not true. They knew how quickly it is that I could refute all of that. I have been involved in the religion versus anti-religion argument unknowingly my entire life.

As a little child, I remember having conflicts with other people over religion at 5-years-old, at 8-years-old, and without realising it. Certainly, not realising my whole life would be this whole argument.

I would ask simple questions to my babysitter when I was a little boy, like, "How does Jesus turn water into wine? I know water is H₂O. I know that wine is alcohol and fruit juice, and I don't know what the chemical components of that are."

But as it turned out, when I grew up I looked it up. It is only the difference of a carbon atom. The molecules are much more complex. But they involve oxygen, hydrogen, and some additional carbons. That's it.

But all I knew at the time, water is H₂O, and alcohol and fruit juice are something else. How does Jesus turn water from H₂O into H₂O and whatever else? I thought someone would give me some kind of intelligible answer.

Like how Jesus does that, whether he uses telekinesis or whatever he does.

Jacobsen: [Laughing].

Ra: But they don't come up with explanations like that, they didn't want explanations. They didn't even want to believe people had explanations. When I was growing up, I found believers not only hated accurate scientific answers, but they hated any answer that sounded scientific.

It was a funny thing. I was told all of the time that "sceptics were cynics" because we miss out on the big picture that only the believers can see.

They should've paraphrased this: People that make up stuff and call it truth have the power to imagine all kinds of nonsense. But that's what it is all about. It really is make believe, and it took me the longest time to figure that out.

I thought, honestly, naively, even into middle age. I was in my 30s before I realised there were some people who do not believe what they do for a reason.

If you ask anybody, "Why do you believe X?" They are going to give you a reason why they think X is true. I thought this was true for everyone. I thought that you couldn't believe something for no reason because that's stupid.

You wouldn't believe something against all reason. I have had people tell me exactly that. I get into more and more arguments moving into my 30s. I would identify as an activist since then, since around Y2K. I got into these arguments heavily on the internet, on Usenet.

I found myself in a position where I had unrestricted browsing and unlimited overtime. This was my first internet experience up to 12 hours a day in a job that doesn't require really anything of me. So I am on Usenet while monitoring other things and not being interrupted.

And I get into these discussions, in-depth discussions with professional scientists and professional theologians on both sides.

They are both giving me references to look into. So I did for a number of years. It was almost obsessive the amount of time that I dedicated to this subject, this argument. When I came across people and asked them, "Why do you believe this?"

I had never really bothered to ask them this. The answers people give are, "I believe this because I want to. I believe this because it makes me happy." You piece it together eventually.

People would be criticising me for the reasons that whatever they believe cannot be true. They'd say, "Why can't I believe what I want to believe?" Why would you say that about something that I just proved is not true?

Why would you want to believe something after finding out it is not even possibly or even probably true, in either case? It is not possibly true. It is not probably true. It is not indicated by anything. It is disputed by everything.

There is no possibility here. This did not happen. There are no two ways about it. What the hell are you going on about? “But I want to believe that.” Why [Laughing]?!

Jacobsen: [Laughing] that’s hysterical.

Ra: [Laughing] I want to believe I’m a multimillionaire. I do. I want to believe that I have time travel capabilities. Great! But that doesn’t make anything real. And it is insane to imagine that. It took me forever to realise that. I actually said this myself ahead of Peter Boghossian.

He famously did a video on ‘faith is pretending to know what you don’t know.’ As if people know they don’t know it, and they’re pretending on purpose. But yes, I said something similar on video prior to that.

I said, “But faith is often a matter of pretending to know what you know you really don’t know, and that no one even can know, and which you merely believe – often for no good reason at all.” That was the way I phrased it.

I didn’t quite make as much money out of mine as he did the way he phrased his. This is actually true. That’s what faith is. Faith is literally make-believe. If people tell you that they want to believe something, even after they know that it’s not true, and people have told me that they want to continue believing, and that they will continue believing, even after they know that it is not true, that it’s not possibly true.

There’s no way in hell that this happened. If you believe in God, if you believe in miracles, then you believe in magic. You believe in magic. People argue against that all of the time, but that’s actually true.

If you look up a collection of dictionaries, online it is easy to do. Open up a bunch of them, and see where they all agree, find the points in the context where all of the dictionaries agree.

You will discover that if you compare the definitions between a miracle and magic, you will see that they are both the ‘evocation of supernatural forces or entities to control or forecast natural events in ways which are inexplicable by science because they defy the laws of physics, meaning they are physically impossible.’

That’s what both miracle and magic mean. So miracle is the same things as magic in the same way a boat is a yacht is if it is big enough.

Jacobsen: [Laughing].

Ra: A murder becomes an assassination if it is a VIP. A miracle is magic in that way. So people were making things up. “Let’s think hypothetically”, I said to someone, which is another thing the believers can’t really do, because that is kind of what they’re already doing.

It destroys the self-made illusion to step in and jack that up with another illusion, even for a moment. Let’s imagine that there’s some form of technology sometime in the future that can detect the essence of God and can measure it.

We can confirm God exists, and importantly whose God it is. All of these people are making claims about this personal God and calling it Allah, or Krishna, but failing to call it Jesus. Jesus isn’t the only personal saviour out there.

There’s a bunch. All of these people making absolute statements about what they know for absolute certain about this absolute God. They are all mutually exclusive. They can’t be all right. They can all be wrong, but at most only one of them can be right.

So we have the device that can prove God exists and can show the qualities or the properties of God, and can verify who is right about God. Everybody was against that idea. “No, there can never be such a device because God must always be personal. God is always in your heart” ... as opposed to reality?

God is something a lot of believers – and I realise a lot of people have not given this any thought, and a lot of people believe things for rational-logical reasons—that they have been misinformed all of their lives or been duped by the propaganda, or believe everybody believes it and so there must be some truth to it.

When you look in-depth and start talking to non-believers, when you start talking to people who know what they’re talking about, people have named this “Aron Ra’s Fork.”

Jacobsen: [Laughing].

Ra: When you’re talking to someone who, like me, knows both sides of the argument, when you start talking to someone like this about why they don’t believe, you have to make a choice whether to remain honest or whether to remain creationist, because it is no longer possible to be both.

You will either have to concede that the claims of creationism – absolutely all of them – are unsubstantiated and fallacious or you’re going to have to start lying to preserve and defend that faith.

And that’s the choice they all have to make at some point. I have seen them come to that point and go the wrong way. “These may be what the facts are, but I prefer to believe this.” There is one that is the easiest to demonstrate. I can tell all of these anecdotes.

There was a movie that came out a couple of years back I happen to have been in, which was in called “My Week in Atheism.” It was made by a Christian named John Christy who was only pretending to be an atheist for a week.

He goes to an atheist conference and he lets the atheist speak. The whole game is, and I have seen this done many times, I have seen where churches will host an atheist to talk to their congregation.

They’ll have the whole thing where everyone seems to be on equal sides, but the obligatory statement at the end for the guy who has had his fingers figuratively in his ears the entire evening comes up and says, “And he didn’t change my mind at all. I’m still just as convinced. My faith is even stronger.”

Jacobsen: [Laughing].

Ra: This is pretend! That was the game in the first place! That it doesn’t matter what anybody says. You’re going to continue to believe. This is what I bring up in my book. If you look up any of the leading creationist organisations – **creation.com**, Creation Moments, Answers in Genesis, Institute for Creation research.

Almost all of them post most prominently on their website. Sometimes, it takes a little work to find it. Generally, they will have a “Statement of Faith.” They might phrase it differently, but they will say there is no evidence that they will ever accept, acknowledge, or consider (!) that shows that they are wrong.

They simply reject it outright. One of them put it that “wherever science and the Bible conflict, the science is wrong. The Bible is right.” Another one says, ‘Whether it is archaeology, history, or any fact at all. If it refutes the Bible, it can’t. The Bible is always right.’

The leading apologetic debater makes the same argument. That whenever there is an obvious conflict between theology and science that science is wrong. It is like Ken Ham of Answers and Genesis said when they asked him and Bill Nye, ‘What would it take to change your mind?’ Bill Nye said, “Evidence.” Ken Ham said, “Nothing.” He’s going to believe what he wants to believe no matter what.

He’s going to keep on believing. There are so many people who tell me, “if I had a time machine and could prove that Jesus never rose from the dead”, with the admission that “I hope my faith and I are strong enough that I can keep on believing, even when my eyes tell me otherwise.” That’s make-believe! That’s lying to yourself. That’s the entirety of what religion is.

So I started making a challenge to people: “Can you show me anything in your religious belief that you can show to be more accurate than any other religious belief?” I would stress for people not just to show me where other religions are wrong, but to show me where theirs is right!

So I have to define my terms very rigidly all the time. If I look at the definition of truth, it took me a long time to figure out what people meant by “truth” when they were talking about it.

They are not being philosophically deep as I thought they were.

Truth is really whatever can be shown to correspond to reality. Truth is what the facts are essentially. Facts are after all points of data that you can verify to be accurate. A lot of people hate these definitions because it completely undermines their theology.

They can't make the assertions that they want to by saying anything is the absolute truth, because under the definition of either word no you don't! That's the problem. People want to say what they know only what they believe. They pretend. There's not a part of it that is honest.

My biggest sticking point is that the only value that any information can have is however accurate you can show it to be, and if you can't show that it is accurate at all then that information has no value at all.

So it is just an empty assertion. You can tell me whatever you believe all day and night, and I won't care, until you can show me what you believe is actually true.

That it has some truth in it – when you show me something actually true in your belief. I can show you the truth of evolution. I can show you the facts of evolution. I can show you the positively indicative and physical evidence that is exclusively concordant with one conclusion over any other.

I can do that all day, but religion can't. No religion can because they're all just made up. They don't have any truth at all in them, none of them. The best that you can get out of people is that they can give anecdotal nonsense or will cite logical fallacies or they will say, "Somebody wrote once that there were Christians back in the 1st century and that means Jesus existed."

Jacobsen: [Laughing].

Ra: Well, that doesn't give you any more evidence than it does for Krishna or Mohammed.

Jacobsen: [Laughing].

Ra: We also know by the way that there was a Joseph Smith. Mormons can point to exactly who that guy was, and when he died and why. There is no question on whether the prophets existed. We are talking about whether the religions they invented were true.

Can you show me the truth of that? Of course, they can't. None of them can. They don't want to. They don't need to. I have seen people make that admission too.

Eric Hovind, son of the famous fraudster Kent Hovind, said that he will believe whatever the Bible says. Basically, if God said it, I believe it. That's it. You just closed your mind to reality. He said that we don't need science to back us up.

Wow! That's a hell of an admission. I do need science to back me up. They have to do this reversal of the burden of proof. If I don't believe that claim that you're making, that positive claims require positive evidence and the burden of proof is always on the person making the positive claim.

If you want to posit some preposterous thing, then you want to do it for no reason at all. And I say, "I don't believe you." They challenge me to prove that they're lying. No!

It is not my job to prove that you're lying. It is your job to prove that there is a THERE there. That there is justification for the horse-shit that just fell out of your face. But there never is! It is a completely emotional lack of justification for anything. I say this all of the time.

If you use religion for your reason for any action or a position, then you still haven't given a reason because religion isn't one. It is as far against and away from reason as one can possibly be. When people use religion as their only reason for whatever laws they want to impose of people or on other things, these are always mostly unjust.

Think about every example, every time someone comes up with religion as the reason why they want to impose it. It is always stupid. It is always imposing bigotry or limitations against somebody else's freedom because you want to pretend in your special brand of pixie dust that is different from the gods and monsters other people want to make up.

That's what it is all about. There is simply no true religion because literally none of it is true. Does that answer the question?

Jacobsen: [Laughing] Yes!

Ra: [Laughing].

Jacobsen: In association with the independent intellectual work that you've done on both the religious and the scientific sides from a very young age, you also have an activist side, which you did touch on briefly with regards to creationism and evolution and the teaching of proper science via evolution.

You are the former president of the Atheist Alliance America. As well, you were the Texas state-director of American Atheists. So without defining what those obviously are – collectives of atheists, what platform does that give for the unified voice for atheists in the country?

And what have been some prominent initiatives and campaigns? For instance, the creationist-evolution—I don't want to call it debate.

Ra: [Laughing] what do you call it?

Jacobsen: Maybe, propaganda vs. science wars – creationism vs. science wars – respectively. What is the importance of a unified voice for non-believers in the country, at least under the banner of atheism?

Ra: I am running for Texas state senate. That has proved to be a lot more demanding, and will be. So when the job of president of Atheist Alliance America became more demanding my campaign would be a lot more demanding because they'd be at the same time.

At that point, I realised it would be a lot worse. So I realised that I'll have to do one over another. Atheist Alliance of America and American Atheists have pretty much the same goal. They were trying to achieve them in different ways.

Obviously, Atheist Alliance of America wanted to develop an alliance of atheists. American Atheists was all about putting money together for court challenges on various grounds. There are a lot of atheist organisations that do that sort of thing.

There are a number of atheist organisations focused on charity and helping people get out of Muslim countries. They focus on helping those people who come from countries which put atheists in danger, just because such people have, say, blogged something like "I don't believe this anymore," and now their lives are threatened.

Pakistan **demand**ed that Twitter and Facebook give the name of anyone that speaks out against God so that people can go out and kill those people.

I don't know if I am allowed to use harsh language on Conatus News. Blasphemy is not a crime. It's a right. It needs to be exercised. We have the right not to believe lies. That's important. Freedom of religion means freedom from religion as well.

You can't have freedom to practice your religion if you're not free from the dominant religion. It is basic sense.

If there's one religion that owns and controls everything, and you have to bow in obeisance to that, then how do you practice your own religion which you believe to be true if you don't believe that other one is true yet you still have to pay homage and acknowledge it, and pray to that God five times a day, for example, or give homage every morning with your hand over your heart with all of the other kids in the classroom where you're swearing to defend this country "One nation under God"?

No matter what it does, you are going to support this country. No matter how evil it degenerates. No, we shouldn't be doing that. The pledges come from a believers' standpoint. The country needs to earn the support of its citizenry.

You can't extort it. You can't get people indoctrinated by always saying every morning before class where they'll never question what you'll do.

That's what religion is all about. It is about controlling the masses. That's why the powerful consider it useful and the lesser people consider it real.

Jacobsen: As side statement, please use any language you feel that you need to express your thoughts.

Ra: [Laughing] I am sorry to do that to you!

Jacobsen: [Laughing] it's fine. Okay, so, that provides background. That provides your thoughts and the development of your thoughts. This includes your work in Atheist Alliance of America as well as American Atheists.

Now, you're transitioning from the intellectual work and the activist work, social activist work, to political work. What was the inspiration for getting more involved in politics, and why now?

Ra: The biggest problem I've had with people as activists, whether they're organisations or individuals, is the great deal of apathy. People who don't follow things the way believers follow things. The infidels, or the atheists, have been categorised as a herd of cats.

Jacobsen: [Laughing].

Ra: Everyone is an independent freethinker. They won't be one-issue voters. You can't find anything in the atheist collective upon which everyone would be a one-issue voter. I found atheists vote against their own interests in favour of things they care about more.

On the Republican side, they are very much one-issue voters at times. They will vote the exact way their leaders tell them too because of the authority.

Consequently, what happens any time there is low voter turnout? The Republicans win. The Republicans are predominantly the Right-wing religious types. They congregate on that side. What is called "the Left" is far away from what people say the Left is.

The Left is not the extremist communists. There are extremists; there are communists, but the vast majority, of what is called "the Left," are reasonable people. But we don't vote often. Many people are apathetic about the system.

They are critical of capitalism and socialism. It is a sad. In this last election, people didn't vote for lack of interest. In the previous elections, there was simply disinterest. They think, "This is a broken system. Why would you contribute to a broken system?"

I find that bewildering that people think it. Now, we've seen the product of it. The worst of all imaginable options will happen if you don't do something about it – if you don't choose the lesser evil.

If you want to choose the greater good, then you need to work from the grassroots. When I became an activist 20 years ago, it was primarily because people that I was talking to were bragging to me that they had positioned all these senators and judges at various levels because their church pastor told them to do it.

This is the way the church votes in order to replace the entire political sphere with Right-wing believers, which is what they've done. That was 20 years ago. So this is a plan that has been enacted for a long time.

Now, we have every member of the presidential cabinet who is a Right-wing science denier. One says the earth is 5,500-years-old. They deny climate change. They're all anti-science. They are all advocating Noah's Flood among other things.

Of course, they are denouncing evolution as well. So we have all three areas of the federal government governed by Right-wing religious dominionists for the most part. I think there is also 38 out of 50 states governed by religious Right-wing conservatives.

Every level of Texas government is run by Right-wing religious conservatives. So I am taking the impossible odds. I am running in an election, in a district, where I know it is heavily Republican. You can't win.

I could win every democratic vote and still not win. Given my obvious lack of charisma, I am going to hope to sway votes from republicans who may see the imbalance of what's going on and how little they care about the platform issues.

For example, the bathroom bill: we want to prevent trans-people from being able to pee? Really?

Jacobsen: [Laughing].

Ra: So they'll all be on their moral high ground saying, "Yes, we don't like men in dresses." Or however they want to paint that. While that is going on, they don't even recognise that they've had their Medicare and Medicaid and Social Security, and Health Benefits stripped from them.

Veterans' Benefits, all of that, because they were fighting the good fight against what they see as pervers, which is that which they don't understand or deviant and outside of their immediate family.

It is a frustrating thing, but I am thinking most people really probably would value their health care and their job, and how well they can sustain themselves and their family more than they do about where Trans people pee. I am just making a guess.

Jacobsen: [Laughing].

Ra: I am thinking that if we can improve the quality of life and the way people get around and do things the way that it used to be. You know? Maybe, that would have a greater impact than being terrified of foreigners.

So we don't have to become Russia by building a wall and keeping the foreigners out, and where we become disgustingly monochromatic and even more ethnocentric than we already were. When I was a little boy, it was people who were proud that this was a "Melting Pot."

Remember when Donald Trump said the “American Dream” was dead?

Jacobsen: [Laughing].

Ra: In a sense, the American Dream was foreigners could come to this country and, through hard work, they could be successful, make a new start, and realise and fulfil their dream despite their caste or their religion in their homelands.

So Trump erected a system that denies them all of that. A system that sets castes, restricts religion, prohibits foreigners, and breaks all of the groundwork for small business, and for them to be able to do anything.

The American Dream is being destroyed by the current administration and also to a degree by the previous administration. I am no fool. I understand what has gone wrong on both sides. A lot of people don't seem to realise it.

They want to see it in a false dichotomy. They want to see everybody as either far-Right, or far-Left. They don't understand what any of the labels are. You have to express exactly what it is you believe in.

They won't understand. They'll think it means something else. I am supportive of people. I am supportive of the American Dream Trump is trying to destroy. I want them to understand. Regardless of your religion, you don't get special privileges because you claim to believe something different from everybody else.

You don't get special privileges because you get to claim that you believe the same things as the majority. It doesn't matter what you want to make believe. You don't special privileges for that. You aren't restricted from it. No one should restrict your belief.

If someone says, “You are not allowed to believe that.” That's ridiculous. It goes on in other countries, but it shouldn't go on here. But that's exactly what they're trying to enact, where everybody has to pay homage to a Christian God. This is the last stronghold of that Christian God.

Everything that we set up for legislation that will promote Christianity will only pave the way for Islam later on because it is the fastest growing religion while Christianity is in a state of decline. Demographics change; you can't fight religion with religion.

What will happen is Islam will eventually dominate Christianity; there won't be any Christians left. Fortunately, secularists, atheists, and nonbelievers are on the rise faster than even the fastest growing religion. You can't fight religion with religion, but you can fight it with *reason*. That's what the atheist groups are really all about.

Jacobsen: Thank you for your time, Mr. Ra.

Interview with Armin Navabi – Founder of Atheist Republic

May 13, 2017

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

Armin Navabi is the Founder of the Atheist Republic. One of the most popular pages on Facebook for atheists that has faced repeated censorship and shutdown from Facebook authorities. He was born in Tehran and raised as a Muslim. Now, he is an ex-Muslim and an atheist living in Vancouver, British Columbia. Here is his story.

Interview edited for clarity and readability.

Scott Jacobsen: So, to begin, let's talk about your background to set the framework. You were a practising Muslim. Now, you're an ex-Muslim. What is the story there?

Armin Navabi: I was born in Tehran into a very Liberal family that was Muslim by name, but not so much in terms of devout practice. But I took it seriously when I started going to school. What happened is that from a very early age, I was very worried about ending up in hell.

Hell is really terrifying. Right? Most people didn't take it seriously. I took it very seriously. Most people around me also didn't really practice it. But I really, really wanted to make sure that I never ended up in hell. It was eternal torture.

Most people were worried about their careers, their grades, their next party, and so on. Nobody seemed to worry about the real possibility of burning forever. Even though, they all thought this was a real thing. So it seemed to me like it should be the highest priority to avoid. Right?

Our teachers in school taught us that children are innocent. This is different from what Christians are taught, for instance. In Islam, you are not born with sin as a baby. You are innocent until you reach the age of reason. For girls, that's 9. For boys, that's 15.

That means you're completely pure and sinless before age 15 as a boy, right? So I thought to myself, "What about suicide? Suicide is a sin as well, but there is no sin before age 15 for boys?"

So based on what I was taught, I concluded that if you commit suicide before age 15, you have not committed a sin as a boy. So you can make sure you go to heaven. To me, it seemed like a loop-hole! Right? In the system.

[Laughing] I felt like I found a loophole. I was surprised that more people weren't taking advantage of the loophole. I asked the religious teachers to make sure I am not missing anything. If I kill myself before 15, am I going to heaven?

The only reason they gave me not to do that was to say, if you earn heaven then you can go to a higher-level heaven. But I thought, who cares if upper or lower heaven/elite heaven? You can escape hell. At age 12, I jumped out of my high school window.

Jacobsen: Oh my goodness.

Navabi: Yeah. I was not successful. For 7 months, I was in a wheelchair. I broke my left hand and fractured my back. The only reason that I never tried it again was because I saw what it did to my parents. I saw my dad cry for the first time in my life.

I saw my mom in the hospital. I was like, “Okay, I am not going to do that again.” So when I became 15, I decided, “Okay, I will take this seriously. No more sinning. I will pray.” Now, I started fasting at Ramadan. I didn’t look at girls. This was the most difficult part.

Even though I was practising everything, I saw my parents as un-Islamic. They weren’t praying. I kept on trying to get them to take things seriously. I was annoyed with them. In Iran, I – like many others – watched a lot of American movies. All these people on TV– I thought – they would all go to hell. It seemed so unfair to me.

Jacobsen: Would you say the ‘unfairness’ of the ‘hell’ concept led you down this path?

Navabi: I wanted to study other religions to see what’s wrong with them. Maybe, they’re like Islam-ish – and actually had the same rules? Why were they doing all these sinful things? Maybe, I thought, they are not going to hell.

I started studying the history of religions.

When I started studying religions, it became very obvious they were all changing and evolving through history. Increasingly, it started to look like they were made up. It seemed like they were political tools and that it was all strategic.

One religion looked like another religion plus a mix of local culture. So I thought, “What if it is all made up?” Everything made sense as to why they would make these things up.

I started panicking and believed I would go to hell. So I prayed to God. I never questioned it before. I just accepted it. “Why? Why do I just accept it?” I asked myself. I prayed and prayed, and cried and cried. I kept going like this.

“God, I don’t want to be an atheist. I don’t want to go to hell. Anything. Anything!” But eventually, I became an atheist. When I did, I didn’t know any other atheists and thought to myself. That maybe I was just crazy, and that they were seeing something that I am not seeing.

By then, I was in university. So I told two of my friends, the first people I talked to about why I thought this is all made up. They became sceptics themselves after I talked to them about it. I felt that perhaps I was not crazy and so I made an online group.

Before then, I did not know many atheists. So I made a group before Facebook for Persian atheists. A bunch of people joined! I couldn’t believe! There were so many of us! That made me make it more international with Atheist Republic.

Now, it is the largest atheist page in the world with 1,600,000+ followers worldwide. I was very surprised. I thought we were alone.

It has been almost 12 years now, but even now, in the Age of Social Media, we have many atheists coming to our online groups and saying something like, “Hey! I am an atheist from Manila. Any atheists in Manila?”

They are always surprised by how many atheists are in their area. Now, they are supporting each other. It is a good community.

Jacobsen: What are things people can do to help atheists be open active citizens who could also happen to be ex-Muslims?

Navabi: By giving them a voice. Right now, especially with the anti-Muslim bigotry, people think that we shouldn’t bring attention to anything, anybody, who is against Islam. They shy away from that because they don’t want to be labelled a “bigot.”

But by doing that, they talk about shutting down a ex-Muslim voices. Just like Muslims, ex-Muslims also could use support. And they are often targeted from both anti-Muslim bigots and Muslims themselves. They are shutting down a minority group within a minority.

Jacobsen: I heard that from Maryam Namazie before. It is very descriptive as a phrase. Would you say then, that it is a form of double-persecution?

Navabi: We are all people. Just because we are ex-Muslim, it doesn’t mean supporting us is anti-Muslim. If Muslims are being prosecuted by non-Muslims, they need support. If non-Muslims are being prosecuted by Muslims, they need support too. Right?

Ex-Muslims who are here believe that this is the land of liberty and that they will find liberals here to support them. The thing is that here they are being shunned and silenced. We want to show that these people need support without being seen as anti-Muslims.

The easy way to do that is by just letting them speak, sharing their stories. Even if they are criticising Islam, that is not bigotry.

Jacobsen: How do you think liberals can extend support to the atheist community, especially the ex-muslims community?

Navabi: Invites them to your podcast, blog, YouTube channel, event, let them come on and share their stories, let others see them for the human choices they made. When you say, “Islam is oppressing people.” They might think it is a lie.

But when people tell their story, they can connect the dots. Some ex-Muslims have to come here because they were activists in an Islamic country.

They are putting their lives at risk. It is important to recognize that. They are rejected by the Left because it believes they should condemn anyone who speaks against Islam. But the funny thing is that real racists and bigots target all the people who come from Islamic countries no matter what they believe, and may not have a problem with Islam as an ideology.

They don't like you because of where you come from. So you get rejected from the extreme Left and the extreme Right. It is very important to note this – when we talk about Islam, we are not talking about people. We are talking about the ideology.

When we go to somebody and don't agree with them on economics or a scientific topic, they don't think about it as a personal attack, but when it comes to religion, and especially Islam, then for some reason it becomes bigotry.

It is taken as a personal attack. Firstly that means they are not recognizing people who are actual bigots, whose views then become louder. Secondly, if you can't challenge people's ideology, the only voice against it will come from people who are actual bigots.

You are removing the discussion out of the equation. You are removing people who don't hate Muslims but just want to have civil debates with them. I hope this changes and I hope we can start to have better discussions about the religion itself.

Jacobsen: Thank you very much for your time, Armin.

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