

# Conatus News: Volume VIII

Scott Douglas Jacobsen



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**Scott**

# 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.



# Politics News in Brief – May 15th, 2017

May 15, 2017

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

## UK youth have more power than they think in the election on June 8th

The youth in the UK have **more power** than they might expect in the turnout and the results of the upcoming general election. As such an election rolls around, so do editorials about the low turnout of the young voters. But there are indications this may be changing.

While it is common knowledge that older people might turn out in higher numbers, the 2016 EU referendum showed 64% of people aged 18 to 24 turning out to vote, which was an even higher number than the 1992 general election.

Turnout by young voters could well swing elections in several key areas. Research by the Higher Education Policy Institute and the **Intergenerational Foundation** suggested that between 10 and 83 MPs were vulnerable to surges in turnout among younger constituents.

More recent numbers indicate that young people may well be gearing up for June 8th. Hansard's 2016 **Audit of Political Engagement** states that 39% of young people expressed a certainty of voting, the highest level in the 12 years.

Since the elections were announced, government data indicates that voters in the two youngest age groups have **registered to vote** at dramatically higher rates than their older counterparts. Outside of the political party squabbles and little bitter battles over the youth and old age votes, the young people are beginning to determine the face of the UK with their votes more than ever.

## Tony Blair is possibly back, possibly from Brexit vote

There have been numerous unintended consequences from the Brexit vote. One is a return of the previous prime minister Tony Blair. The conservatives are slated to win the next election, and **Tony Blair** is looking to be back in the political arena, with the stated intention of softening the blow from Brexit. In his own words "This Brexit thing has given me a direct motivation to get more involved in the politics."

Blair does not suffer any illusions about a welcome comeback, and acknowledges he is not widely popular in his party at this point in time, even lesser than he was during his tenure, but defended his record on doing well for the British people.

Blair also clarified that he would not be immediately seeking a leadership role or status as an elected representative in Parliament. He indicated that he hopes to start an anti-brexit movement, the way Farage did without being an MP, but expressed caution, saying "I am not sure I can turn something into a political movement but I think there is a body of ideas out there people would support."

## Trump fires Comey, overseeing the investigation into Trump's relations to Russia

In a tremendous political upset, President Donald Trump fired James Comey, the head of Federal Bureau of Investigation (F.B.I.) who overseeing the investigation into the purported links between the President, his erstwhile campaign, business interests and Russia.

**In the midst of the investigation**, Trump has now fired him, citing dissatisfaction with his performance. The letter of termination states that while Trump “appreciated” Comey’s assurances that the President was not under investigation, he ‘accepted’ the recommendation of the DOJ that he was not able to “effectively lead the bureau”.

The White House Press Secretary, Sean Spicer, said the F.B.I. had been “terminated and removed from office.” Trump stated the recommendations were from Deputy Attorney General Rod Rosenstein and Attorney General Jeff Sessions, although Mr. Rosenstein is later **said to have disputed the extent** of his involvement in the decision making.

The move has shocked Washington and many Democratic senators as well as a few Republicans have expressed concern about the dire constitutional situation resulting from Comey’s firing. Subsequent indications from Trump that he had **‘taped’ Comey** and attempts to subtly intimidate him through such a statement seems to have made the situation worse.

# Interview with Andy Ngo – Formerly at the Vanguard, Portland State University

May 15, 2017

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

*Andy Ngo is a University of California, Los Angeles alumnus. He is a graduate student at Portland State and a freelance journalist. Shortly before this audio interview, he made a recording of a student speaking on Islam at “Unpacking Misconceptions” at Portland State University.*

*Based on his reporting, he was fired by the Portland State University student newspaper, the **Vanguard**. He wrote **an op-ed** in the **National Review** about it. The **Vanguard** wrote a **response** to it after this audio interview. He can be reached through **Twitter**. Here is his recounting of the event and aftermath.*

*\*This audio interview edited for clarity and readability.\**

**Scott Jacobsen: Can you give us an overview of recent events that have landed you in some trouble, and what happened to you as a consequence?**

**Andy Ngo:** On April 26<sup>th</sup>, I attended a public interfaith panel event at my university. The event was organised by students as well as administrators.

I worked as a section editor for the student newspaper called the *Vanguard*. I attended the event, not on assignment however. It was purely out of interest out of what was going to be shared.

For most of the event, it was very uncontroversial, as students presented on their religious worldviews. They also tried to clarify on some misconceptions that they think the media perpetuates.

What was interesting to me was during the question and answer part of the event, where somebody in the audience asked the Muslim student about a verse from the Quran, and whether if the Quran permitted the killing of “infidels.”

I shared the video of his answer and some text summarising what he said on my personal social media accounts. In the video, he says that disbelieving – being an infidel – is not allowed when a country is run exclusively under Islamic law.

He said that people who disbelieve have the choice to leave the country or to face punishment for their crime. The punishment was never made explicitly clear in the actual answer seen in the video clip but in the context of the question he was answering, he was referring to a punishment of death.<sup>[1]</sup>

That night, after I tweeted out the video, I sent it to the editor-in-chief, and also the reporter from the *Vanguard* that was on assignment covering the event. I sent it to both of them because it was

an interesting part of the event and I thought it would be relevant for them to include in the report that they were working on. Neither one expressed concern or outrage at the video tweet.

Four days later, I was called into an emergency meeting with the editor-in-chief, the managing editor, and also a staff advisor for the student media. It was in that meeting that I was informed that I was fired because of what I had shared on my social media. The editor in chief described me as predatory, reckless.

Those were the adjectives she used. She believed that I intentionally targeted another student on campus. She thought that the paper needed to be supportive of him, to protect him, which meant firing me.

They also brought up history they had of me, referring to my affiliations with conservative media in the past. I once did an interview about protests on campus for *Conservative Review* for their online news report. I've also written, at that point, one news contribution to *The College Fix*.

They talked about the reputation and perception of the paper as another reason why they needed to fire me.

**Jacobsen: So they used your history to attack your character rather than target the actual claims and recording that was reported.**

**Ngo:** Yes, that's right. In the meeting, they did say that because I stood strongly by the accuracy of my tweets. What I really wanted to know was were my tweets really accurate or not and if in their independent investigation, did they find the tweets inaccurate? They were very wishy-washy on this. They said, yes, sort of, by virtue of "taking things out of context."

I was trying to ask them what was the context that was omitted that completely changed the meanings of the videos I shared that included this person speaking in his own words? I wasn't given a clear answer on that. They said I should have included that the panellists "weren't experts."

The day after I was fired, they published their report of the event. There was a long editor's note detailing that I was no longer with the organisation. It had my picture and name in it. The context that they added in did not reflect an incongruence with anything I originally tweeted. I was very puzzled when I read the report because much of the report goes on to summarise what was on the video. The meaning didn't change.

**Jacobsen: Do think this was a politically motivated firing?**

**Ngo:** That's an angle or a dimension to the firing that wasn't explicitly clear in the original meeting. In my opinion, the paper had been facing a lot of pressure from student activists for a while based on a lot of reporting that I have done as well as what they think my personal political beliefs are.

I do not know if there were external pressures on the paper or the editor-in-chief. I don't have evidence of how that ultimately could factored into their decision-making in firing me. It is something I think about, but it is just conjecture on my part if I was to speak more on it.

**Jacobsen: Has there been a history of political bias with the *Vanguard* at all?**

**Ngo:** I think for the most part the newspaper, especially the news section, tries to be politically neutral, or at least make an effort for balance in their writing.

But because it is a student publication, the publication also reflects the ethos of the office as made up by its editorial team of students that changes quite frequently. I was one of the longest serving editors by being there for over a year.

Typically, they have a fast turnover rate term-by-term. And with some of the changes that happened, recently things changed a lot in the office. I don't know if that played a role in this decision.

But based on my own experience of being in the office, the political views just reflect the majority view on campus. This meant it was often hostile to nuance on conservative perspectives, I would say.

**Jacobsen: Do you know the official statistics of the ratio between conservative and liberal views, as a simplified view?**

**Ngo:** I don't know the ratio for that at Portland State.

**Jacobsen: Do you think that the student body as well as the faculty – and you don't have to answer this question – lean more heavily to the political Left rather than the political Centre or the political Right?**

**Ngo:** In my time at Portland State, my analysis would be that the political culture on campus is very similar to other large universities all across the country. And that means it leans heavily Left or Far-Left in its student body as well as faculty.

However, as we've seen after the last presidential campaign, and then the results of the elections, it has caused people to become even more reactionary – politically reactionary – and very intolerant of free speech, nuance and ideological diversity.

My firing doesn't affect a lot of things outside of my small Portland State community. However, I think the bigger topics that connects to my firing does have implications for what is happening all over the country. Mainly, the subjects of free speech, journalistic practices, as well as the discourse on religious fundamentalism.

<sup>[1]</sup> The Portland State University Muslim speaker's response at "Unpacking Misconceptions" on April 26<sup>th</sup>, 2017, transcribed from Ngo's recording:

*And some, this, that you're referring to, killing non-Muslims, that [to be a non-believer] is only considered a crime when the country's law, the country is based on Koranic law — that means there is no other law than the Koran. In that case, you're given the liberty to leave the country, you can go in a different country, I'm not gonna sugarcoat it. So you can go in a different country, but in a Muslim country, in a country based on the Koranic laws, disbelieving, or being an infidel, is not allowed so you will be given the choice [to leave].*

Ngo, A. (2017, May 12). Fired for Reporting the Truth. <http://www.nationalreview.com/article/447563/free-speech-islam-portland-state-vanguard-editor-fired-tweets>.

# **Interview with Hugh Taft-Morales – Leader of Philadelphia Ethical Society**

**May 16, 2017**

**Scott Douglas Jacobsen**

*Hugh Taft-Morales is the leader of the Philadelphia Ethical Society and the Baltimore Ethical Society. He is deeply rooted in the Ethical Culture and the Ethical Humanist movement as a leader and a member, and a scholar. He describes his experiences and work in this in-depth interview.*

*\*This interview edited for clarity and readability.\**

## **Tell us your family background – geography, culture, language, and religion.**

I was born in 1957 in New Haven, Connecticut. I am the son of an academic father and an artist mother. I grew up in a secular household and as part of East Coast Liberal culture.

I was loosely part of the Episcopal religious culture around me in terms of general acceptance of Judeo-Christian morals, but I was not taught to believe the metaphysics of religion.

I never thought I'd go into something like Ethical Culture clergy work as a profession, but, after 25 years of teaching history and philosophy, I found myself really wanting to share some of what I learned in teaching and in school in a more inspirational setting in order to make the world a little bit better – not to be too dramatic about it! That's what drew me into Ethical Culture work.

## **And what about your own educational background? How does that play into your own humanistic values, if at all, during your development?**

Yea, it probably did because what I ended up focusing on in college was history; primarily, US history (20<sup>th</sup> century). I was intrigued by post-Civil War history in terms of the ebb and flow in the United States of the power of money versus the power of populism – the tug-of-war between the robber barons and the rise of US populism.

The farmer grain cooperative movement against the railroads. Teddy Roosevelt in the White House fighting the corporations. The rise of business during and after WWI and during the '20s with power swinging back into corporate pockets, then the Depression bringing in more modern Democrats opposing corporate power, to the Welfare State in the '60s, and so on.

I left college wanting to go into politics. I lived in New Haven on the Yale campus where my father was a professor. After graduation, I worked in Capitol Hill for one year.

I enjoyed it. My humanist education focused on real mundane social justice issues, where people are both the ones responsible for the horrors of the world and responsible for making the world better. I never had the desire or the need to look beyond human beings to make this world better. My humanism is grounded there.

My first five years of teaching was at a private school in Washington, DC called St. Alban's. Many sons of the elite went there. I began to appreciate the inspirational side of a religious school. I tried to teach the ideals of the human mind to allow kids to imagine a better world.

If you don't imagine a better world, then you might fall into thinking of the personal acquisition of material riches as the path to a better world so you get as many toys as you can before death.

However, if you believe in the possibility of a better world ethically – and somehow that was part of a meaningful life for you—I thought it would help people, myself included, to live a more ethical life. That began to draw me, initially, into Ethical Culture.

I hadn't heard of Ethical Culture until I was about 13 years into my teaching career. It came late for me.

### **How did you first become involved in The Ethical Society of Philadelphia, in depth?**

Through the Washington Ethical Society. I lived inside the Washington beltway. I joined the Washington Ethical Society in the 1990s when we had two children and a third one on the way.

My wife and I never thought of joining a religion. She calls herself a retired Catholic. She is very disgusted at the wealth and the hypocrisy of the Catholic Church and the misogyny.

We wanted our kids to grow up with some religious literacy. We didn't think about it too much until one day our eldest son said at the table, "Mom, Dad, who is Jesus, again?" He was 7-years-old. [Laughing] We realised he'd be impoverished culturally.

We could have done more of that, but our friend talked about the Ethical Society. They had a Sunday school program, which taught religion from a humanist perspective.

They taught that religions are human creations. This is the history. They had very sensible approaches to sexual education. We used *Our Whole Lives* program, which is our Unitarian program, which is down-to-earth, non-judgemental, and holistic.

We were drawn into it because of our child. After going to the Washington Ethical Society for a year, or two, I began to appreciate a moment in the week apart from the chaos. Teaching and raising children, and the rest of life is chaotic, I began to assess where I was in life.

Ethical Culture began to grow on me. I found myself teaching at the Ethical Society. I decided to run for the board. I served on the board for a number of years. I was a president for one year.

However, it became clear to me that I loved the teaching and preaching aspect – the motivational aspect so I decided after a couple of years on the board to go through the leadership training, which is our version of seminary work. I ended up getting the job in Baltimore at the Ethical Society.



My training took me about four years. I did internships at 3 ethical societies. My first year was in Baltimore. The next year I got a job in Philly. I am now splitting my time between Baltimore and Philadelphia commuting from Washington.

I don't use this term often, but I did use it when I applied for leadership positions. They ask you the same question, "What draws you into Ethical Culture leadership?" I said, "I felt called."

I don't have a drop of superstitious thought in my head, but saying "I felt called" seemed right. It was a way to express my values and admit my limitations with integrity and wholeness.

It was a profession that became more of a vocation and a way of life for me. That was a nice direction. I loved teaching. I could go back tomorrow. I think it is fantastic as a job, but I don't regret the shift.

**With respect to being the current leader of the Philadelphia Ethical Society and the Baltimore Ethical Society, what tasks and responsibilities come along with these positions because I would see the teaching background as relevant to the current work in leadership?**

It is. My teaching background was relevant to my current work in Ethical Culture and Ethical Humanism (I use interchangeably.) Sometimes, I see the term "Ethical Culture" as representing a historical legacy because that's what it was called originally.

But in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, more and more people started to use the term Ethical Humanism because it connected to a broader movement. There are distinctions in humanism generally, but the term Ethical Culture had this Victorian antiquated feel to it.

People didn't get it, necessarily so Ethical Humanism works better in speaking to the general public.

In my job I play the same role as a minister in a small congregation, basically, but take the God aspect out. Both Baltimore and Philadelphia are small, like 80-90 members. Unlike Washington, and New York and St. Louis which are larger (around 300+).

Anybody who goes into ministry knows there's a big difference between running a small, medium, and a large society, what your roles are. Since I am in a small group, I am more of a jack-of-all-trades.

Primarily, my duties are teaching, preaching, counselling. I do adult ed., courses and outreach, events, one-off interviews with humanists, courses on Darwinism, or moral philosophy, or animal and human studies.

Last year, in Philadelphia, we had a year-long series called "Capitalism in Crisis," which was eight evenings with guests from around the country speaking on various aspects of capitalism's limitations and problems.

The counselling, obviously, is there. It takes a lot of time. That's why counselling needs to have boundaries so that it doesn't become long-term counselling. It's more helping people get through crises and helping them secure long-term counselling or psychotherapeutic counselling to help them get what they need.

In both Ethical Societies, my work touches on many aspects of running a small organisation more than I'd like, because it is not what I'm drawn to. It can involve making sure meetings run well, and agendas are set, helping all the volunteer-run committees, helping manage our listservs.

I am basically the only staff person for our programs, and we have an administrator in Philadelphia who looks after the building, finances, and other tasks. I handle our membership.

There are lots of little things that need to get done or congregational development elements. How do you make sure your newsletter is well-produced? How good are your Sunday morning programs? Sunday morning is the hub of the wheel, so to speak. Like other small liberal congregations, our weekly meetings have a liberal lean to them.

But in Ethical Culture we are exclusively non-theist and that's important as a term for me. That means we don't take a position on whether God exists or not.

Ethical Culture has always been non-theist because we believe that what's most important in is how you live your life. If you battle over whether God exists or not, you often miss the point.

Felix Adler, who founded Ethical Culture over 140 years ago, wanted to make sure there was a home for people who wanted inspiration and community without the metaphysical baggage, Ethical Culture doesn't turn away theists either because the core message is that it is more important how you treat each other than your reasoning behind it, theistic or not.

That said, *if* you're theistic and *if* you're looking for a community that meets once a week and supports people and does social justice work, and you believe in God, then you're probably going to go to some form of church, mosque, or synagogue.

Consequently, many of *our* members tend to be atheists, freethinkers, and sceptics. But I have to remind them that there's a distinction between our identity as a group of people and our mission as an organisation.

While many of our members are atheists, our official position is non-theism. That allows us to focus on our mission: to inspire and support people to live closer to their ethical values and ideals.

**What do you see as the main threats to the practice of humanism and Ethical Culture in general within the United States and within Philadelphia, in particular?**

I'd have to say, greed, money. It's a little simplistic, I know. I studied plenty of Marxism in college but I'm not a determinist. I'm not a simplistic materialist. I am basically a naturalist and materialist in one way, but not the way Marx was a determinist.

But I think he got it right in saying that one way to understand oppression is basically to “follow the money.” Often greed and money push people to violate the values of humanism which looks at human beings as having inherent worth and dignity.

Most humanists believe that human beings, including oneself, should be treated well. Reason and compassion are the best tools for us to get along and figure out public policy and so on. All of those values are shared widely in humanism.

I think they’re most challenged when somebody can make a buck by violating those values. I’ll bring up an example of the prison-industrial complex, which is making money off of criminalising the poor, particularly poor people of colour.

It is not just criminalising. It is dehumanising. It is humiliating people who get caught up in the system often due to a system that tries to maximise profit. Private corporations are making money due to the criminalisation of poverty.

Again, a little detail that I think crystallises this. I worked with an organisation in DC that tries to help families and inmates stay connected. They are doing things like making sure phone calls are affordable between the prison and the home.

This organisation facilitated skyping between inmates and their families. But I see how hard the system works against these efforts. The system seems to try to minimise the most powerful thing that could keep an inmate feeling loved and able to love – their family.

The system tends to do everything it can to take that away due to some absurd, retributive approach to criminal justice. Ethically, it’s devastating to me. My tax dollars are going to support this retributive and profit-driven system.

Money works against my faith in the inherent worth of every individual. That faith is not based on a naive idea that everyone is “nice.” No, there are going to be people who are dangerous in the world. But our default is to dehumanise and to incarcerate, and we do it not just individually, but with large systemic, racially-biased systems from the top-down.

And so I think the biggest—and I see more and more humanists agreeing with this. I have a lot of respect for Roy Speckhardt of the American Humanist Association (AHA) for focusing on social justice issues.

I see the Foundation Beyond Belief focusing on how to make the world better interpersonally regarding justice and so on.

**I appreciate that. Thank you. You mention the poor and minorities as the primary victims of what some call the “prison-industrial complex,” where the ability to have a phone call with loved ones or family, or even a Skype call, become difficulties. I mean, the main punishment in prison is isolation. You can be surrounded by, you know, murderers, rapists, but the main punishment is isolation.**

**It goes to show, as a social species, we know the main punishment you can give to people is keeping them alone away from other people in minimal sensory conditions, minimal sensory input conditions. In the industrialised world, the United States leads in fatherlessness. In minority communities, the thing you did not mention, the main thing is lack of fathers, and prisons, mostly, are men, especially poor minority men.**

**So there are tied in, not necessarily “systemic” because the term has lost a bunch of meaning based on overuse in and out of context, socio-cultural sets of factors that come into play to reduce the amount of time innocent people, by which I mean children, have with their primary caregivers, at least one of them in most cases. So I agree with you, and just wanted to take that one more step.**

**There’s a lot of truth in what you say. It’s complicated. You remind me of when Patrick Moynihan wrote his famous report about the deterioration of the black family, which I believe came from a place of compassion based on facts and research, but it got turned into a political weapon that pathologised the black community. Politicians used it to turn the victims of our system into threats to “law and order.”**

**The problem began to be described as the “black problem,” rooted in the pathology of the black family. That was the way it became framed. This type of framing is happening today. I am wary how race issues are being defined and who is defining the problem, and where the problem lies.**

Because it is all part of this pandemic afflicting areas of poverty in our cities. This urban focus is tied to the history of Ethical Culture which took root in the eastern coast in urban centres.

It was involved with empowering the urban poor from the very beginning. It’s part of my focus. But our members all focus on ethical issues that most interest them. We deal with thousands of different issues.

Many are concerned with environmental justice. One of the enemies of humanism is global climate change because if there’s anything likely to reduce people to greater desperation and greed it is environmental collapse.

Look what happens when water supplies are stressed – poverty rises and wars can break out. The ability of anyone to fulfil their potential as a human being decreases if their natural environment is devastated.

Many members have put a lot of time into LGBTQ issues as well.

However, I am a generalist. I know a bit about many things. I try to support many causes, but we are not first and foremost a social justice organisation. One of things I tell our members is, “We are not an advocacy organisation.

We are not experts in advocacy. We are offering people a home to nurture their own commitment through community support and through human inspiration.

This inspiration can be as simple as the reading of Carl Sagan or the reading of poetry or sharing of music.” We get involved in many social justice projects, but we are not experts on the issues.

**Most ethical humanists—those that take part in Ethical Culture—might not care too much about the history, about Felix Adler and how he was Jewish, wasn’t so keen on it, and invented Ethical Culture.**

**They might be more keen on the more immediate concerns you’re pointing out—greed, climate change, and nuclear catastrophe.**

I agree. I am drawn to history. Most members care about how do you live in the world now, meaningfully, in dealing with these issues.

**Also in a smaller context, what are more heart-warming stories that you have had in your time in Philadelphia, as a leader there?**

The testimonials people give about what the Ethical Society means to them. There are some consistent themes. There is the feeling the Society is their communal home. There are fewer opportunities to be part of organisations that speak to the deepest parts of our humanity. I don’t know if you know Putnam’s book, *Bowling Alone*?

**Yes.**

His whole theme of the flattening of culture. the fact that there are fewer deeply meaningful connections. Those that come to society say, “This is what I am looking for.” They discover deeper meaning. I know some people were burned by their religious experience.

It is thinking, “I can’t believe there is a group that is trying to deepen their connection to life in a way many religions do while not requiring a litmus test of belief.”

Another area of heart-warming experiences as a leader is bringing together interfaith coalitions. That includes coalitions of reason with sceptic groups and more traditional interfaith groups in the Baltimore and Philadelphia areas.

The social justice work I am involved with the most is along the more traditional community-organising model.

In Philadelphia, the Ethical Society is a member of POWER, Philadelphians Organized to Witness, Empower and Rebuild. In working with people of traditional faiths, I have worked through my own resistance to traditional religion.

Often, when we start what is called our “clergy caucus,” we start with a prayer. However, POWER invited humanists into the circle. I felt welcomed by those clergy from traditional faith

traditions. In addition, I am so impressed with the civil rights work of POWER. They focus on bread and butter issues affecting marginalised groups.

Being involved with POWER is not about advancing my “denomination,” or increasing our membership, it’s about working in broad coalition. In Baltimore, our interfaith coalition has numerous non-theist organisations involved, like homeowners’ associations and day-care cooperatives too. They tackle tough issues.

They show up time and time again, whether at city hall, the city council meeting, or protesting on the streets. They protest against the proposed youth jail being built or against a large tax giveaway development program, which will create a gentrified neighbourhood in an urban area displacing those currently living in substandard housing.

There are people who put their lives on the line in ways I can’t manage quite to do. I am more sheltered, more comfortable, more scared, less able to take that so-called “leap of faith” into a commitment that is truly inspiring.

I do my best. Those would be two areas I find heart-warming – testimonies from our members, and interfaith work – where I feel the joy and the warmth of work that I do.

**For those that might want to found a humanist organisation or an Ethical Humanist organisation in particular, to build on previous legacies of Ethical Culture in their locale, how might they go about doing that?**

Reach out to the American Ethical Union in New York, or call me at the Philadelphia or Baltimore Ethical Society, I will connect them. One Ethical Society was begun this past year with incredible energy and vibrancy.

They have support from inspirational and historical elements, to practical advice on the various elements of congregational growth best practices in terms of how to get off the ground.

They get advice about routines that seem to work, which help groups craft intellectually satisfying and aesthetically pleasing events. I don’t think Ethical Culture is at its best when it is intellectual alone.

We have a long history of that. Some deep thinking and talks offered, but more and more it’s necessary to create a sense of belonging and a rhythm of shared living. You can learn about that by studying successful congregations.

In Ethical Culture, we even have a sort of informal liturgical calendar. We celebrate the solstices, the equinoxes, the harvests, and the Spring festival. There’s a focus on the cycle of life. There’s a focus on various transition moments in life.

We have coming of age programs. We perform weddings and memorial services. Different societies have different levels of programs and things to offer. My kids went through the Washington Ethical Society coming of age program.

It was one of the most moving experiences in my life, when I saw what it gave not to my children, and to many families. Ethical Culture is described by some people as “a religion of relationships.”

Whether you use the term “religion” or not, Ethical Culture is about relationships so the coming of age program in Ethical Culture is not about the kids coming to a point in their life. It is about how parents and children negotiate the transition from childhood, to adolescence, to adulthood in a respectful way to nurture their relationships.

The broader society does not help teens become responsible adults. It tends to label kids, teenagers, as problems or difficult creatures, when they are in fact incredibly joyous human beings.

We need to do better in building relationships between teens and adults. Parents have to be supported so that they avoid being both oppressively dictatorial or overly permissive. Ethical Societies can help build relationships and deepen communities.

It does this by speaking to the heart and the head. It uses rhythms, rituals, and programs that can have an aesthetic beauty to them in addition to wonderful speakers and social justice causes.

**Do you have any feelings or thoughts in conclusion about what we have talked about today?**

There are so many different areas I could go into, but here are two things I’d want to add: First, there is a pragmatic streak in Ethical Culture. We are what we are by virtue of our history and communities together.

There’s a rich interchange there. We don’t hand down rules and say, “This is how we are.” We come together as a community and say, “What do we agree on what we value? What about our history do we draw forward?” I like it.

We are open to change. Sometimes, it is as if herding cats. [Laughing] But that’s what comes with respecting the integrity of individuals and being open to conversation and pragmatic testing and change.

But there are some values that we tend to agree upon, at least in Philadelphia and Baltimore where I serve. There is a lot of agreement.

One value we generally agree upon is the inherent value in every individual. That means respecting the individual as unique and irreplaceable. Every person has infinite worth that is not determined from the outside. It is part of who they are as a person.

It is not necessarily proven by reason or given by human nature or divinely provided by God. But we agree to try to live as if all people have inherent worth so we are choosing to act towards people as if they are all unique and irreplaceable. That’s one value: inherent worth.

Second, the application of inherent worth universally, believing that everyone is of worth. To me, that leads to social justice work against systems that deny the worth of so many. Systemic injustice must be confronted.

Finally, the third value would be true relationships. We respect that relationships are organic. They evolve. They're respectful. They're open. They're compassionate. They're candid. It's about being compassionate and open, not on being superficially "nice."

I don't think being superficially "nice" is respecting the other person. Respect includes being open and sensitive to reason and facts. A second point I will leave you with is part of my personal journey.

It focuses on the Masters thesis in philosophy that I wrote after my first 5 years of teaching. I was intrigued about how people in ethical conversations often seem to be talking past each other. And I keep using this following example.

Imagine somebody going into a burning house to save their child, and they run out of the house with it. Quite often, in western philosophical circles, people might say, "Oh! Look at that example of altruism, he was sacrificing himself for a child.

What was a wonderful gesture!" Other people would say, "No, he was clearly doing it out of self-interest. It was his child." Others would say, "It's a bit of both."

But that conversation occurs within a context of moral thinking in which all moral issues involve the balancing of individual interests. I didn't think that captured so many examples of human behaviour. I didn't think the father was being altruistic or selfish.

It was not a case of whether he sacrificed himself for the baby or used the baby to feel better about himself. I prefer to say, "No, he ran into the fire because he was the child's father." This is not about individual interest. That is not about the weighing of values or the worth of individuals. It is about a relationship.

I saw wisdom in alternative approaches to justice that focused on relationships, from aboriginal cultures to Hegelian systems of relationships. Overgeneralising Hegel's theory, it claimed that the whole is more primary than the parts.

Hegel was used by Marx in this way. Marx would say, "We are what we are via virtue of our relationship to the means of production. If I own the means of production, and I am extracting the surplus value of labour from my workers, then I am a capitalist.

If I do not own the means of production, and I am a tool of my oppressor and, as a result, I am a proletariat. I am what I am most essentially by my connection to the economic whole. Fascism, which also drew from Hegel, said, "You are what you are by relation to the whole, the nation-state."



You can see that in Spartan soldiers who died in the battlefield and were said to have died in self-interest. How can you say you died in self-interest? [Laughing] You're dead! Well if you are defined by your relationship to the state, then you are a soldier.

By dying as a soldier you fulfil your role and in a heroic fashion. Nazi Stormtroopers did the same. They were fulfilled as part of the whole. I see these as politically motivated perversions of relationally-based systems of identity.

But there is something important about this regarding identity. I am what I am because of my relationships. I am a father, which is relational. I am not fully described by my autonomous existential existence.

While a part of our identity is defined by our autonomy (I am an existentialist after all), part of our identity is defined by relationships. I am living in relationships. What I love about Ethical Culture is that it allows for this duality of human nature.

We are creatures who are essentially autonomous from other people in a deep and profound way. That aspect of our identity can be seen in much Enlightenment thinking. At the same time, we are relational creatures. For me, balancing those two poles of my existence is the art of living.

How do I do justice to both my autonomous nature and my relational nature? I don't do justice by rejecting relationships. I am autonomous, but I also live a life of joy with family and friends, and being a citizen of a country, and a man, a creature, on this planet.

To me, that combination of autonomy and relation is fascinating. And Ethical Culture has that assumption of our duality undergirding it. I think this is due in part because Adler came from a very collectivist culture in eastern European Jewish culture and came to America where he was amazed and impressed at our individualism.

Somehow navigating both of those aspects was necessary to be a part of individual life and of this country.

**I appreciate that very much. It is insightful. Thank you for very much for your time, Hugh.**

# Q&A on Ex-Muslim Experiences – Session 1, Yasmeen

May 18, 2017

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

*This is an educational series on the experiences of ex-Muslims. The Council of Ex-Muslims of Britain (CEMB) is one major organisation in the UK. The CEMB contingent will march in the gay pride parade in London on July 8, 2017. Those who want to be part of the CEMB contingent, please email Daniel at [exmuslimcouncil@gmail.com](mailto:exmuslimcouncil@gmail.com). As well, the CEMB will be having an event entitled “International Conference on Freedom of Conscience and Expression in the 21st Century,” on July 22-24, 2017 in Central London. The following sessions are the stories, the personal narratives, of ex-Muslims in general. Yasmeen is the first profile. Here is her story as an ex-Muslim in America.*

**Scott Jacobsen: To begin, what was your family background in religion? How did this, in turn, influence your development within the religion?**

**Yasmeen:** My parents were Christian by name. So I grew up pretty secular. As a teenager, I was an atheist by default. I didn't have solid arguments for my atheism. I feel like that definitely contributed to my conversion to Islam.

**Jacobsen: From within Islam, what was your first perception of women's status within it? And how did this develop over time as a perspective?**

**Yasmeen:** I don't really like to use the term “internalised misogyny,” but that's kind of what was happening with me as I was a Muslim. I believed women were inferior to men. I accepted my role as a woman in Islam.

That only really started to change when really horrible things happened to me, like abuse within the community, abuse within my own family. It started to get me out of that mentality. It was almost like a fantasy, but that fantasy was shattered when it actually happened to me.

**Jacobsen: Is this a common experience for women that were within your community, at the time?**

**Yasmeen:** Definitely, there are a lot of women who will reassure that it is okay how your husband is acting. He is supposed to be jealous and have what is called a *gheerah*. Some women were forced to wear a *niqab* during a wedding because they were wearing makeup. They will defend wife-beating and other such things.

**Jacobsen: Within the community, are the restrictions on women, in general, more stringent and numerous than on men? If so, are there any equivalents in the restrictions on men as on women, in the Islam you were living under?**

**Yasmeen:** It is basically day and night. People will say that technically under Islam men and women are treated the same as far as things like fornication, and dressing, and doing drugs and

alcohol. They will say it's the same. In practice, men and women are not treated equally whatsoever.

We're talking about the smallest thing like household chores, being able to go outside the house, especially at night time, being able to go out alone, how much skin you're allowed to show, if you'll be forgiven for fornicating or doing drugs.

Anything like that, it is completely different for men and women in Islam. Also, virginity is different for men and women. Men are not really held to the same standard as women. Women are expected to be virgins when they are married.

Unless they are divorced or widowed. I got off pretty easy because I was a convert, but I had my own issues with virginity and issues regarding sexuality.

**Jacobsen: For women reading this in near future or the far future, who are Muslim, and are under duress or abusive circumstances, who can they contact for help? How can they protect themselves from an abusive situation, whether within the family, with the spouse, or in the larger community?**

**For those that aren't Muslims, but are concerned for women under religious dictates, what are ways to reach out and help them, or to support organisations already doing so?**

**Yasmeen:** First off, they have to be financially independent because what holds a lot of these women back is not being financially independent, and being financially dependent on their families for everything. Women shelters are an option, but, unfortunately, I've seen many of these women turned away and dismissed as a cultural issue.

Unfortunately, there aren't many organisations that have the resources to help these women right now. I know a few people are working on it. Faisal Saeed Al Mutar is working on his organisation. Also, there is *Faith to Faithless*. They are working to get more resources to help people who have left their religion. I would tell them to never accept that this behaviour is normal and acceptable, even within Islam.

**Jacobsen: Were there any positives that you took from your time as a Muslim? And subsequently, what were the personal benefits for leaving Islam to you? As well, if I may ask, were there any benefits in family life for you?**

**Yasmeen:** Of course, anything isn't completely evil or completely good. I don't think Islam is completely evil. There are some good things to be learned from it, like family values, being committed to family, respecting your parents, being grateful for food, shelter, water.

Islam taught me a lot of patience. I think even the bad things I endured during my time as a Muslim really helped me to mature.

Leaving Islam, on the other hand, was a horrible experience, it cost me my marriage. We were divorced for 5 months. We finally reconciled. It cost me all of my friends and my community.

But one positive that came from this, my husband did some research himself. he read some Hadiths. He saw some horrible things. he moderated himself. He is a lot more moderate as a Muslim. That has improved our family life. However, he is not aware of the full extent of what I do.

**Jacobsen: Taking a step back out of personal experience, and looking more at a demographic trend and the experiences that come from this, are there more public ex-Muslims that are men or that are women? Because in conversation with the CEO of Atheist Republic, it was noted that there do seem to be, at least in the online sphere, more ex-Muslim men than women.**

**I can make assumptions about various premises that might build an argument as to why, but I can't necessarily state one way or the other. So your experience and insight would assist in rounding out this perspective on the demographic trends in the ex-Muslim community.**

**Yasmeen:** Yes, there are a lot more men. I think this is because it is more acceptable for men to leave the religion. Because they can pretend it never happened, because there aren't as many restrictions on them.

Whereas, for women, it would be very difficult to lead that double life. They are also more likely to be stuck in marriages that they don't want to be stuck in, and also more likely to be stuck with children to take care of.

I think those factors keep them in the religion, even though they don't want to be. I think you are also a lot more scared of the consequences as a woman. You don't know if somebody is going to beat you, disown you, or, in some cases, kill you.

Even as somebody who was a white convert, I use a fake name online because I receive death threats constantly. I think converts are more likely to leave Islam, but less likely to talk about it.

I knew two girls just in my community who alluded to me that they were going to leave Islam, but then they disappeared off the face of the Earth.

**Jacobsen: In America, I talked to a woman named Marie Alena Castle in an interview. She has been around through the 60s, the 70s, the 80s, the 90s, the 00s, and the 10s for the women's rights movement and the human rights movement, and the atheist movement, at least in America.**

**She described the progression of women as earning the right to vote, earning the right or privilege to a career of their choice.**

**Following this, she now sees the current battleground against the "religious Right" – I believe that's the proper term for the United States. She sees the fight against them as**

**abortion, equitable and safe access to abortion, and reproductive health and rights, especially for women.**

**What do you see as the current battleground for women within Islam, women that have left Islam, and women in general in Britain? A big question, but I think it is an important one.**

**Yasmeen:** Both as a Muslim and an ex-Muslim. I feel we are fighting the Left and the Right. If you're a Muslim that deviates even slightly from what is acceptable within the community, you're not only attacked by Muslims, but you're attacked by the Far-Right.

They'll say, "You're a secret Jihadist. You're practising, *Taqiyyah*." Then as an ex-Muslim, you're fighting the Far-Right, who will say, if you are not bigoted against Muslims, "You are just covering for them. You are a Jihadist supporter."

Then, of course, you are fighting against Muslims. Some of whom want you dead, and you're fighting against the Far-Left, who see Islam as a brown person's religion. If you criticize it, then, somehow, you're bigoted.

The Far-Left seems to be siding with Islamists now because they are picking the most stereotypically Muslim people to support. So Liberal Muslims, ex-Muslims, cultural Muslims, all get thrown under the bus by Far-Left.

I do think abortion rights and some aspects of women's rights are under threat by the Far-Right, but I also think our freedom of speech is under attack by the Far-Left. I remember when I was wearing *hijab*. I really didn't want to.

I didn't have much choice to take it off. There were a lot of Far-Left people supporting World Hijab Day. They refused to recognize that a lot of women are forced, even in the US, within the community are forced to wear *hijab*.

**Jacobsen: One of the more devastating effects on women through cultural, and easily arguably religious as well, practice is female genital mutilation, clitoridectomy, and so on. How is this viewed within the community, even within developed nations?**

**Coming out of the Muslim community as an ex-Muslim, how does one's perspective shift on, not only a woman's right to wellbeing with regards to her body, especially reproductive health, as well as access, equitable and safe access to that reproductive health technology?**

**Yasmeen:** In my community, I never met anybody who has female genital mutilation done to them. I think it varies from country to country – the level of acceptance. I definitely did read some *Hadith* about female circumcision, as you would call it.

I do think it is loosely related to Islam. I think there are some cultural beliefs surrounding it too. In Islam, people differentiate between female genital mutilation and female circumcision, which is taking a piece of the clitoral hood off.

Of course, now, ashamed that I ever supported something like that, but I don't personally support circumcision on males either. As far as birth control goes, that also depends on the person in Islam.

Some people do say that birth control is allowed as long as you aren't on it indefinitely, as long as you plan to have children in the future. Some people say it is completely *haram*. Other people say it is up to your husband.

Personally, my husband was against birth control. So I wasn't given access to birth control. Abortion is also technically allowed in Islam, kind of. If it is done before 120 days, it is not considered murder, but it is still *haram*.

It is still considered a sin. I actually have a daughter because I wasn't given access to birth control or an abortion.

**Jacobsen: Changing gears a bit, and thank you for that, to some of the beliefs in the belief system, how many people adhere to supernaturalist beliefs such as angels, and *jinn*s, and the Devil, and the myriad assorted beings that are purported to exist, as well as to the efficacy of things such as prayer, for instance?**

**I say this because Britain is one of the nations that has developed quite past other countries such as the United States, even Canada, in terms of reduction in anti-scientific and supernaturalist beliefs in the general populace to more scientific and naturalist beliefs.**

**Yasmeen:** Pretty much everybody believes in *jinn*, *sehir* – which is black magic, angels of course, and of course *dua* – prayer. I haven't met a single person who doesn't believe in these things.

In fact, they believe in possession by *jinn*. One time, I had a friend tell me about these teenagers who were practising *sehir*, which is black magic. They were executed. I said, "Isn't that a little intense?"

They are just teenagers. Maybe, they are a little rebellious because they are teenagers." She said, "No, because they were practising black magic."

**Jacobsen: With your husband having the final say on contraceptive use, and the daughter you had as a result of not being able to have a definite, a final, say in your own body with regards to reproductive health, what are the emotions that come up knowing this as a truth while being a believer?**

**What are the feelings as you are raising the child as a result of this? What are the feelings raising the child outside of Islam?**

**Yasmeen:** Okay, so, my husband didn't approve of birth control because he thought it was *haram* to prevent a family, but what we did practice was something called *Al-'Azl* or coitus interruptus.

He told me that if I did get pregnant that I would probably be able to get an abortion if it was early on and that it would be okay. But when I got pregnant, that went out the window. I remember begging for an abortion because I didn't want to have a child.

He and his family basically told me, "No." That really affected me as a believer. That was a big, big turning point. It almost drove me crazy. I remember the whole pregnancy I was begging for an abortion.

After she was born, I was so crazy. Maybe, it was postpartum depression too, but I almost abandoned her. Now, I accept my role as a mother and I love her, but some days it is still hard to accept it because I didn't want another child to begin with. I do have another child from marriage.

**Jacobsen: What is the different of marriage in Islam compared to civil marriage or a secular marriage, or other religious marriages? Because your own is not a legal marriage, as you have noted to me, off tape basically.**

**Yasmeen:** Marriage in Islam is similar to marriage in any other religion. The man is basically the head of the household, and the woman is supposed to be subservient to him. As far as the actual process of marriage, you basically write up a contract.

You have what is called *wali* for the woman, which is a guardian who she goes through to set up her marriage and pre-approve of her marriage. It could be a parent or somebody else.

Then the rest is pretty similar, you agree to the terms and say, "I do," and then have a dinner. The problem within the community is a lot of these marriages are not actually recognized under the law.

The reason for doing this is so the men don't have to fulfil their actual legal obligations towards these women. It is also a loop hole to have a second, or third, or a fourth wife. That's what happened with my marriage.

My husband initially told me that he would fill out the legal paperwork. "Let's do it Islamically, and we'll do it later," and it never happened. I can't say how many marriages aren't done legally, but it is the ease with which it is done that concerns me.

**Jacobsen: This leads me to some final thoughts with next steps. You have a unique perspective with regards to the ex-Muslim community, as a minority within that "minority within a minority" – to use Maryam Namazie's phrase. You are a woman within the ex-Muslim community, which is, as noted earlier in the interview, not the dominant demographic of ex-Muslims.**

**The dominant demographic are men as ex-Muslims. As well, you described your own narrative as well as issues within the community from superstition to reproductive health**

**rights and access, abortion access, approval of those by the community, social pressure, the man having the final word, and so on.**

**This makes me think, “What can be done next to move the conversation forward? How can we translate that conversation into action? And who can be an ally? And who have been allies?”**

**Yasmeen:** I think we need to get this out there into the mainstream. I think the only people that are going to be completely honest and more unbiased will be ex-Muslims. I think we do already have a lot of allies in other apostate communities, like the ex-Jehovah’s Witness, ex-Mormon, and others. I think it would be a great task, but I think we need to get the Left on our side.

I think it could be easy with enough awareness because we are a minority within a minority. Why would the Far-Left not listen to us? I think if there were enough of us. I think they would come around to listening to us, but I don’t know how realistic that is.

**Jacobsen: I appreciate you taking your time today. Do you have any feelings or thoughts in conclusion about the conversation we have had today?**

**Yasmeen:** Yes, Scott, thank you so much. I wanted to remind people that whatever us ex-Muslims and Muslim liberals say. We’re not saying this because we hate Muslims. We have Muslim family.

Sometimes, we have Muslim spouses and Muslim friends. We love them. We just think that what we’re doing is not only helping them but also helping people like us.

When I say we’re trying to help Muslims also, what I mean is that most of the time, ex-Muslims are one of the only people trying to bridge the gap between the Far-Right and the Far-Left, and protect not only freedom of speech, but also protect Muslims against bigotry.

**Jacobsen: Thank you for your time today, Yasmeen.**



# Politics News in Brief – May 19th, 2017

May 19, 2017

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

## **Brexit talks could collapse over UK divorce bill, says EU negotiator**

According to *The Guardian*, Michel Barnier, the European Union's chief Brexit negotiator, has fears of a refusal of some member states (of the EU) to soften demands over the "divorce bill" coming from Britain.

This could collapse the talks and subsequently the UK could be "crashing out of the EU without a deal".

Jean-Claude Juncker, the European Commission president, in addition to other senior officials, noted the stakes remain so high with Paris' and Berlin's refusal to pay any more for the departure of the UK from the EU.

## **Brexit and the Identity Crisis for the UK**

*CNN*, reporting on the buildup to the UK elections, focused on the town of Redcar. Although the seaside resort and town is 250 miles from Westminster, the distance between its people and the UK's heart of government could be "a million miles." Redcar is in the industrial northeast of England, so should be safe for the Labour party.

Anna Turley, a local member of parliament (Labour), has been knocking on doors to "keep her seat" in the next month's general election. There is, apparently, a "palpable" disaffection with the politics in Westminster.

As the voters are working class – steel and heavy industry types, the borough of Redcar ("and Cleveland") has been "knocked off its feet by globalisation." In 2015, 3,000 jobs shut down due to falling steel prices. Even though Redcar should be a victory for Labour, globalisation is another important factor for the vote.

## **The Difficulty, If Not Impossibility, of Stopping Foreign Influence on UK Politics**

The Commission's chief says it monitors closely political parties' use of data analytics and social media to target voters. *The Guardian*, reporting on the foreign influence on UK politics, highlights the fact the Electoral Commission has been powerless to prevent any foreign efforts altering the perceptions, and so the statistical votes, of the British electorate, and so British election.

Social media is another influence on the election too. Claire Bassett said, "If something is happening outside of the borders of this country and is not part of any of the regime we are responsible for, it's not something we can cover within our regulation."

This has raised concerns about companies using advanced data analysis. The analysis of social media stuff of people. The analyses can target people with specifically targeted messages to their profiles, based on their data. Bassett there wasn't much individuals or governments could do to prevent paid manipulation through these analyses and other means.

# Philosophy News in Brief – May 19th, 2017

May 19, 2017

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

## **Some Philosophical Principles of Success**

An author from *Inc.*, speaking on his personal philosophy for success, recently said, “I have a modest and maybe even overly simple **personal** philosophy with which I view my life — I compartmentalise my entire existence into three basic buckets: social, business, and family.

This plays out in many different ways, but today I am focused on my walls around business.” Two philosophical principles for entrepreneurial initiatives, from the author, come in two paths. One is the pursuit of gain while the other is the avoidance of loss.

However, the reduction of risk is not really a possibility, according to the author. The best companies do not factor into their calculations the possibility of worst-case scenarios, but they know that the paths of failure are probable outcomes.

## **John Singleton Copley as a ‘National Treasure’ Portraits**

The *Harvard Gazette* reported that “Five years ago, when Harvard’s Ethan Lasser began examining the history of a series of portraits by the American painter John Singleton Copley, something odd caught his eye.”

Lasser described the continual references within the records as to the prior placement of the series of portraits by John Singleton Copley. When looking further, the author found a big and “untapped archive.”

They began to look for the original materials for the possibility of recreation of the “stories of collecting and scholarship that collided inside the Philosophy Chamber.” It is the largest of three rooms in the Harvard Hall, from the late 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, which taught students with “a vast collection of art, scientific instruments, plant and mineral specimens, indigenous American artefacts, and ancient relics.”

## **Reflection on the Reasons for Extremism After Mashal Khan Murder**

The *Daily Times* recently published an article which, through highlighting the gory incident of Mashal Khan’s lynching at Abdul Wali Khan University, Mardan, stressed that there is an obvious question in the minds of most thinking Pakistanis currently: what is the cause of intolerance and extremism among the educated class of Pakistani society?”

It is noted that there are myriad reasons for this, including the “abysmal” state of the education system regarding philosophy in the post-secondary institutional sector.

The “coding” for kids can impact the personalities quite profoundly in addition to the “idiosyncrasy” found in Pakistani culture for kids, to not ask questions. In reflection on Mashal Khan, it was noted that maybe this is an important point of consideration surrounding his murder.

# Q&A on Atheism, Women's Rights, and Human Rights with Marie Alena Castle – Session 2

May 22, 2017

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

*Marie Alena Castle is the communications director for Atheists for Human Rights. Raised Roman Catholic she became an atheist later in life. She has since been an important figure within the atheist movement through her involvement with 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, explored and crystallised in an educational series. The first part of this series can be found here – Session 1.*

**Jacobsen: With your four decades of experience in activism for atheism, human rights, and women's rights, you earlier described the victory for women's right to vote and pursue careers and for reproductive rights. Who has formed the main resistance to the massive pro-life lobby from Catholic and other Christian religious groups?**

**Alena Castle:** Groups such as NARAL and NOW and Planned Parenthood have been the most publicly visible opponents of the Catholic/Protestant fundamentalist assaults on reproductive health care.

However, the most effective has been the political organising within the Democratic party. I was extensively involved in getting the Democratic party platform to support abortion rights and in getting pro-choice candidates endorsed and elected.

Having a major political party oppose the Republican party's misogynistic position was key to holding the line against them.

**Jacobsen: In the current battleground over abortion, reproductive health and rights, modern attacks on Margaret Sanger's character have been launched to indirectly take down abortion activists and clinics, and argue against such rights for women. What can best protect abortion access and Sanger's legacy and work?**

**Alena Castle:** The attacks on Sanger amount to "alternative facts" and seriously distorted history. Women's rights leaders of the past, including Sanger as well as Susan B. Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton are sometimes quoted in opposition to abortion – but their concern was that so many women died from abortions that were either self induced or done by incompetent quacks or because of the inadequate medical knowledge of the time.

Sanger has been accused of favouring eugenics (birth control to prevent the birth of genetically defective babies). These views *have been deliberately misconstrued* regarding their intent when in fact they were intended to save women's lives and help ensure a better life for the babies they gave birth to.

Today the anti-abortionists are *still making up* fake horror stories about foetal development and abortion and its effect on women that are outright lies.

Nothing will stop this dishonest distortion of history and the absurd lies but more should be done to assert, often and vigorously, the actual medical facts about abortion and the moral rightness and integrity of Sanger's and other feminists' views and of the women who have abortions.

**Jacobsen: What would you say has been most effective as a preventive mechanism against the encroachment on the rights of women from the hyper-religious Right, or the religious Right?**

**Alena Castle:** Political activism! That is the only thing that will work. We need to focus on putting a majority of elected officials in office at all levels who support women's rights and the rights of the nonreligious.

You can't make changes by just talking about them – it takes laws and their enforcement. Only politicians make laws – not NARAL or NOW or atheist organisations or people who march in the streets.

**Jacobsen: As an atheist and feminist, what have been the most educational experiences in your personal or professional life as to the objectives of the anti-atheist and anti-feminist movements in North America and, indeed, across the world?**

**Alena Castle:** I have personally experiencing the effect of the religious right's political agenda on my life and on the lives of others. The first funeral I went to was when I was 10 years old. Our lovely 22-year-old neighbour had died of a botched illegal abortion.

(At the time, such deaths were listed as “obstruction of the bowels” to save the family's embarrassment and I only learned several years later what the true cause was). And then there were the funerals of good friends who were gay and died of AIDS while the religious right did everything to hinder medical research for treatment.

And almost worse was seeing the total lack of compassion by advocates for that agenda for the harm it causes. Example:

I had a discussion with a very nice, polite woman about a news report of how an 11-year-old girl, somewhat retarded, had been raped by her father, was pregnant, begged for an abortion, and was denied by a court order.

Soon after she had the baby, she was back in court on a charge of being an unfit mother. I asked this nice woman if she thought that girl should have been allowed to have an abortion.

She said no, that forcing her to continue the pregnancy was the right and moral thing to do. Her religious beliefs had hardened her heart and I told her so.

How do we talk to people with such a warped sense of morality? This woman also believed in personhood from the moment of conception. At that “moment,” her “person” is a microscopic fertilised egg undifferentiated at the cellular level, and no bigger than the period at the end of this sentence.

The anti-abortion people put up billboards with a picture of a year-old real baby and a statement that the baby’s heartbeat is detected at a foetal age of a few weeks. They don’t explain that it is then a two-chambered heart at the lizard level of development.

(The adorable – always white – baby on the billboard has the fully developed four-chambered heart). Abortion never kills a baby; it just keeps one from forming. The religious right thinks preserving that development outweighs any harm it is causing the women.

We have the words of the Pope and the Protestant reformers to thank for this inhumanity. Martin Luther’s associate, Philip Melancthon said, “If a woman weary of bearing children, it matters not. Let her only die from bearing; she is there to do it.”

Pope Pius XI said, “However we may pity the mother whose health and even life is imperilled by the performance of her natural duty, there yet remains no sufficient reason for condoning the direct murder of the innocent.”

There is no baby, biologically speaking until the beginning of the third trimester – the rhetoric about innocence skips that convenient fact. After that, it’s a medical emergency affecting the woman, the fetus or both, that requires removal of the fetus.

If these anti-abortion hard-hearts have a problem with this, they should go ahead and die from bearing if they find themselves in such a situation, but leave the rest of us alone.

**Thank you for your time, Ms. Alena Castle! Your words and experiences are of even greater relevance at this time with women’s lives under attack again.**

# Q&A on the Philosophical Foundations of Psychology with Dr. Sven van de Wetering – Session 1

May 29, 2017

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

*Dr. Sven van de Wetering has just stepped down as head of psychology at the University of the Fraser Valley, and is now an associate professor in the same department. He is on the Advisory Board of In-Sight: Independent Interview-Based Journal. Dr. van de Wetering earned his BSc in Biology at The University of British Columbia, and Bachelors of Arts in Psychology at Concordia University, Master of Arts, and PhD in Psychology from Simon Fraser University. His research interest lies in “conservation psychology, lay conceptions of evil, relationships between personality variables and political attitudes.” Here we explore, as an educational series, the philosophical foundations of psychology.*

**Scott Douglas Jacobsen:** Dr. Sven van de Wetering, thank you for agreeing to do this again. We first did an interview a few years ago, and this time, I would like to dig deeper into our conversation on the philosophical foundations of psychology. So let us start with what is psychology?

**Dr. Sven van de Wetering:** Psychology is the attempt to apply the same high epistemological criteria that have made the natural sciences such a success to a set of questions that preoccupy almost everyone, namely, why our fellow humans think, feel, and act the way they do.

Because psychology asks an enormous range of questions, its various subfields have relatively little in common with each other, aside from the strive for epistemological rigour.

**SJ:** Psychology seems to create epistemological issues, which, in turn, make for ontological issues. Could you please further discuss the place of epistemology in psychology. And what are some of the more hotly debated issues surrounding it?

**SW:** Every undergraduate programme in psychology that I know of teaches two lower-level courses that deal almost entirely with epistemology. One of these is a course in statistics, and the second is a course in research methods. Between them, these courses introduce the fundamentals of methodology in psychology.

These courses are difficult to teach. Perhaps because so many psychology students are terrified of math. A frequent response of students being forced to take their first course in psychological statistics is to get very focused on the details of conducting the statistical analyses, and lose sight of the worldview on which those psychological statistics are based.

Essentially, the idea is that the human world is a very complex place, and that the common western intuition that single causes give rise to single effects is not helpful in trying to figure out what is going on.

Instead, a human being is subject to many influences at any given time, some internal, some external, and some with their roots in the individual's distant past.

Many of these influences are practically invisible, and even if we went to the trouble of attempting to make ourselves aware of every single one of those influences, we still would not know how all those different factors interact.

To cope with the uncertainty induced by this overwhelming complexity, we create the simplifying fiction of random variation.

Instead of seeing causes and effects as being tightly coupled in human affairs, we see influences that increase or decrease the probability of certain human behaviours within that allegedly random matrix of behavioural possibility.

Thus, we partition this blooming, buzzing confusion of human behaviour into two components: a portion that we think we can attribute to a small group of influences we are currently examining, and another portion that we attribute to the much larger group of influences we are not currently studying, and that we thus dismiss as error variance.

Statistics is therefore used to separate the signal from the noise in this framework, and research methods are a set of techniques we use to amplify the signal so that the statistical techniques can be picked out more easily.

One thing that has always bemused me about psychological research is the extent to which we can typically only explain a few percent of the variances for any given phenomenon. This is due to nothing more than the fact that picking up the signal is hard.

This is nothing to be ashamed of, but the focus on the signal is so intense that I think we often lose sight of the fact that the noise is also human behaviour.

I would love to see psychological discourse focus a little more on the variances we cannot explain, not so much as a lesson in humility, but just as a way of cultivating an awareness of what incredibly complicated creatures human beings are.

**SJ: What was the first tacit epistemology in psychological research? In other words, who can be considered the first psychologist? And what was their approach to psychology?**

**SW:** At the risk of sounding very boring and conventional, I am going to say Wilhelm Wundt. He called his approach "physiological" (what we now call experimental). What he meant by this is that he would attempt to present people with highly controlled stimuli in order to evoke a tightly circumscribed set of responses.

This actually does not make him that much different from some people that came before him, such as Fechner. His really big innovation however was to create a group of researchers (i.e. graduate students). Wundt recognized that science is a fundamentally social enterprise, and that

the proverbial mad scientist in the tower in the thunderstorm is an object of suspicion and derision not because he is mad, but because he is socially isolated.

Communicating one's findings with other scientists (Wundt also created the first psychology journal) and training other young scientists in one's techniques is not a peripheral enterprise. The essence of science is that it is self-correcting, but for various psychological reasons, individuals are not very good at correcting themselves.

It is only by subjecting their work to the scrutiny of other scientists that any given scientist can obtain the benefits of this self-correcting aspect of the scientific method. It is for this reason that I consider the hype surrounding Wilhelm Wundt completely justified.

**SJ: What are some of the major sub-fields, and their fundamental philosophical disagreements, of the discipline?**

**SW:** The number of subfields in psychology is very large, but I would have to say that the major tension within psychology is between people who emphasize the epistemological rigour discussed above and the people who focus on real-world relevance.

Few psychologists want to discard either rigour or relevance, but there is sometimes a bit of a trade-off between the two.

Experiments that allow researchers to establish tight linkages between causes and effects often make use of highly controlled laboratory tasks that are quite unlike the sort of situations most people face in their day-to-day lives.

Real-world relevance, on the other hand, may come when we try to conduct therapy on someone with real psychological problems. Because the client is often in the midst of a highly complex life situation, strict experimental control is likely to be difficult or impossible to implement, and opportunities for rigour are greatly diminished.

As I said, most of us want both rigour and relevance, but we often have to trade them off against each other. Some people are willing to give up relatively little rigour in the name of relevance, and stay in their laboratories. Others prize relevance above all else, and will sacrifice a great deal of rigour for the sake of having a fighting chance of being useful to people in need.

I think part of the reason this creates so much tension is exactly because psychologists value both rigour and relevance. The ones who, to many outside observers, seem pretty irrelevant, tend to justify themselves by claiming to be more relevant than most other people think they are.

Similarly, the relevant practitioners often think they are more epistemologically rigorous than they really are. Thus, much of the tension comes not from differences in opinion about what to give up for the sake of what, but rather anger at the other group for disputing their self-perceptions as both rigorous and relevant.

**SJ: Thank you for your time Dr. Sven van de Wetering. It is always a pleasure talking to you.**



# Interview with Professor Phil Zuckerman – Sociology and Secular Studies, Pitzer College

June 1, 2017

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

*Phil Zuckerman is a Professor of Sociology and Secular Studies at Pitzer College. He wrote a number of books including, most recently, The Nonreligious: Understanding Secular People and Societies. Here we discuss secular studies from the personal, and expert, perspective of Professor Zuckerman.*

**Scott Douglas Jacobsen:** I appreciate you giving us your time today. Your specialty is in secularism. Was secularism always a topic of interest for you? Were people in your family a major influence? Or was this simply the natural trajectory of a curious mind reasoning things out?

**Professor Phil Zuckerman:** I am a third generation atheist. All four of my grandparents were non-believers. My father's folks were very poor Jews who grew up in the ghettos of Warsaw, Poland.

As teenagers, they took to socialism as the best route to make the world a better place; they saw religion as hindering human progress and keeping the poor duped and pacified. My mother's parents were upper-middle class Jews from Bohemia who found literature, art, theatre, cinema, music, and hiking much more satisfying to the soul than religion.

So, my Dad was a clear-cut atheist and my mom was more of an agnostic or apatheist (just didn't care or think much about god, either way).

My folks weren't anti-religious, per se. In fact, we were fairly involved with our local Jewish community when I was growing up – but much more in an ethnic/cultural sense: celebrating holidays, eating certain foods, socializing with people from a similar background, etc.

Our involvement with the Jewish community was *never* about God or prayer or anything supernatural. It was about heritage, history, etc. I grew up in a coastal suburb of Los Angeles in the 1970s and 1980s and religion just wasn't a big thing.

Most of my friends and neighbours were irreligious. No kids in my neighbourhood went to church. I never saw any family pray around the dinner table. But then, when I was 15, I had my first serious girlfriend. She was the daughter of an Evangelical preacher.

She believed in Jesus. I was totally flabbergasted by her and her family's beliefs. They seemed utterly insane. Yet, she and her family weren't insane; they were kind and thoughtful people. But they believed in crazy shit.

I became obsessed with understanding religious faith: how can rational people believe the utterly absurd? I'm still trying to figure this out. Sure, I've gained a lot of good insight throughout the course of my studying of religion, but as for really intelligent, well-educated people who are strong believers — I remain truly baffled.

And in that state of confusion, I've turned to research on and writings about atheism, agnosticism, humanism, and secularism because they all help me articulate my own worldview which is critical of religious faith and supportive of reason, empiricism, scepticism, human rights, women's rights, true morality, etc.

**Jacobsen: How did this interest in secular studies grow into a life long specialization?**

**Zuckerman:** First, it dawned on me about ten or fifteen years ago that no one was studying secular people or secular cultures, specifically. The social sciences are all about studying humans: what they do, what they believe, how they behave, how they act, etc.

And while the social sciences have been studying religion since their inceptions, *lived secularity* has gone almost completely un-studied. How secular people live, think, celebrate, love, raise kids, deal with death, vote, sleep, eat, etc., etc. has been virtually ignored.

And yet secular people constitute a significant chunk of humanity. Irreligion, anti-religion, atheism, agnosticism, humanism, indifference, etc. — these orientations and identifications are growing, and they capture the world-views and life-ways of hundreds of millions of people.

We need to study them and understand them. Second, when I was teaching classes on religion, such as *The Sociology of Religion*, I was often deconstructing religion. Taking a critical/sceptical approach.

One day, a student said that she had wanted to learn about religion in the world, and not just about debunking religion. She felt like my religion class was falsely titled. And she was right. So I decided to re-tool that class, and make it truly about religion in society (without too much debunking), and then I created a whole new class called "Scepticism, Secularism, and Irreligion."

In that class, I just looked at religion critically, head-on, and examined various sceptical approaches to religion, from the ancient Greeks and ancient Indians up through Freud and Russell and into the New Atheists. The course was hugely popular. Clearly, students were craving courses that debunked religion.

From there, other new courses were created, such as courses on secularism as a political force in various nations around the world, courses on the Secularism and Morality, just to name a few. "I would say that societies get worse when secularism is being forced by a dictatorship with no respect for personal freedom, freedom of conscience, or basic human rights.

But, on the other extreme, when secularism is organic — that is — it emerges freely, in a democratic society, things tend to get better."

**Jacobsen: From a historical perspective, what are the origins of secularism? Who was its first adherent or proponent?**

**Zuckerman:** That's nearly impossible to say for sure. After all, what does one mean by "secularism"? As I see it, "secularism" can and does mean numerous things. For example, we can talk of *political* secularism, which is basically about the separation of church and state and government abeyance or neutrality concerning matters of religion.

The most notable modern articulations of this would be found in the First Amendment of the US Constitution for instance, or article 20 of the 1947 Constitution of Japan.

But there is also what we could call *philosophical* or *sceptical* secularism, which is about critiquing religion, debunking religious claims, and attempting to disabuse people of their religious beliefs.

Evidence for this form of secularism goes way, way back: there was the Carvaka/Lokoyata, who lived in India during the 7<sup>th</sup> century B.C.E, were a group of materialist thinkers who rejected the supernaturalism of ancient Hindu religion and were vociferous in their mockery of religious authorities.

They were essentially atheists who saw no evidence for the existence of god or karma or any afterlife whatsoever. There was the Jewish philosopher known as Kohelet of ancient Israel (3<sup>rd</sup> century BCE), the presumed author of the Book of Ecclesiastes, who suggested that all life is ultimately meaningless and that there is no life after death.

Emergent agnosticism, anti-religiosity, and an all-around debunking orientation are also very well-represented among the ancient Greeks and Romans of the classical age (Lucretius, Epicurus, Democritus, etc).

These individuals criticized the claims of religion and articulated a very secular and this-worldly ethos. From within the Islamic world, there was Muhammad Al-Warraaq (9<sup>th</sup> century C.E.), who doubted the existence of Allah and was skeptical of religious prophets; there is also the freethinking, anti-religious assertions of Muhammad al-Razi (10<sup>th</sup> century C.E.), and Omar Khayyam (11<sup>th</sup> century C.E.).

Finally, there is what we might call *socio-cultural* secularism, which entails the weakening or diminishing of religion in society, in day-to-day life. We're talking things like more stores being open on Sundays, time spent on the internet replacing Bible study, television shows or Broadway musicals making fun of religion with little backlash, etc.

At root, socio-cultural secularism is both a socio-historical and demographic phenomenon whereby a growing number people start caring less and less about religion. It involves greater numbers of people in a given society living their lives in a decidedly secular manner, utterly oblivious or indifferent to supernatural things like God, sin, salvation, heaven, hell, etc., baldly

disinterested in religious rituals and activities, and less inclined to include or consider religion as a significant or even marginal component of their identity.

Your question is huge – where do these various forms of secularism originate? – and I simply don't have the time (or expertise!) to delve into it at length. I'd suggest starting with Jennifer Michael Hecht's *Doubt: A History*. Or perhaps Calum Brown's *The Death of Christian Britain*.

**Jacobsen: How do societies get worse and better with more secularism rather than less?**

**Zuckerman:** First off, it depends if that secularism is forced or not. By "forced" I mean, in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, we've seen quite a few secular dictatorships take over a country and force/impose their dogmatic version of secularism on a captive population.

These have often been violent, repressive regimes that tried their hardest to suppress religion by jailing and torturing religious leaders, killing religious people, bulldozing churches and mosques, etc. Communist Albania was one such nightmare – the corrupt and insane atheist dictatorship there even made it illegal to name your baby a Biblical name!

So, I would say that societies get worse when secularism is being forced by a dictatorship with no respect for personal freedom, freedom of conscience, or basic human rights. But, on the other extreme, when secularism is organic – that is – it emerges freely, in democratic societies, things tend to get better.

Of course, this is just a correlation. But we know that the most highly secularized societies tend to be among the best in the world, at least according to standard sociological measures. The best countries in which to be a mother, the most peaceful countries, those countries with the lowest murder rates – their populations generally tend to be quite secular.

And this correlation holds true for nearly every measure of societal well-being imaginable, such as levels of corruption in business and government, sexually transmitted disease rates, teen pregnancy rates, quality of hospital care, environmental degradation, access to clean drinking water, etc.

We can even look at various studies which measure subjective happiness; year after year, nations like Denmark, Norway, and Sweden – the least religious countries in the western world — report the highest levels of happiness among their populations, while countries like Benin, Togo, and Burundi – among the most religious nations on earth – are the least happy.

One scholar who has researched this matter extensively is Gregory S. Paul. He created the "Successful Societies Scale", in which he tries to objectively measure a whole array of variables that are indicative of societal goodness and well-being.

When he measures such factors as life satisfaction, incarceration rates, alcohol consumption rates, inequality, employment rates, etc., and correlates them with religiosity/secularity, his findings are unambiguously clear: aside from the important but exceedingly outlying exception of suicide — religious societies have significantly lower suicide rates than more secular societies

— on just about every other single measure of societal-goodness, the least religious nations fare markedly better than the more religious nations.

But again, it is a correlation only. And it very well may go the other way: it may be that as societies improved, they become more secular – not the other way around. Norris and Inglehart’s book *Sacred and Secular* is a great, data-rich source for this line of thinking.

“Aside from the important but exceedingly outlying exception of suicide — religious societies have significantly lower suicide rates than more secular societies — on just about every other single measure of societal-goodness, the least religious nations fare markedly better than the more religious nations.”

**Jacobsen: Is secularism beneficial or harmful for women’s rights and human rights?**

**Zuckerman:** No question here: wherever religion weakens, the status, freedom, and power of women improves. Wherever secularism is strong – even when forced, oddly enough – women’s health, occupational opportunities, electoral access, etc. improve.

Not only are women’s status, power, wealth, and life choices stronger/better in the most secular societies on earth today, and weaker/poorer in the most religious, but secular men and women are – on average – more likely to support women’s rights and equality than their religious peers.

As for human rights, well, as I said above, in situations of forced secularism under Communist dictatorships, human rights suffer terribly. But in situations of organic secularism, where people simply stop being religious of their own free will, human rights tend to thrive.

And as for political secularism – the separation of church and state – things most definitely improve for the minority religions, and for the non-religious as well. In the contemporary world, where most societies have a situation of religious pluralism (more than one religion existing), then political secularism is the *only* viable option because to privilege one particular religion over another, or over non-religion, inevitably leads to inequality and injustice.

**Jacobsen: I assume, based on some observations in my personal and professional life, that the irreligious are thought to be less trustworthy and more immoral than the religious. Does the data back this up?**

**Zuckerman:** Yes, religious people in America view the non-religious as immoral and less trustworthy (lots of data showing this, particularly from the work of Psychology Professor Will Gervais), and no, research shows that they are in fact not less moral or trustworthy.

Catherine Caldwell-Harris, professor of psychology at Boston University, found that there exists no differences between atheists and theists in terms of levels of compassion or empathy. And studies from both the United States and the United Kingdom have reported that atheists are *under*-represented in prisons.

Additional studies have shown that atheists and agnostics, on average, exhibit lower levels of racism and prejudice than their more God-believing peers, as well as lower levels of nationalism and militarism, and greater levels of tolerance for those they disagree with.

Or consider research that specifically illustrates atheist morality in action: a recent international study looked at children and their likelihood of being generous or selfish in six different countries. Some of the kids had been raised Christian, some had been raised Muslim, and some had been raised without religion.

The non-religious kids were the most generous – giving away, on average, a higher number of their stickers to kids they didn't know– than the Muslim or Christian kids, who tended to be more selfish. Sure, it was just one study involving kids and stickers.

But it effectively points to a much larger and important reality: that the vast majority of atheists of the world are decent and humane. “When life is harsh and hard – when people don't have access to health care, education, jobs, and society is riddled with corruption and crime, then people will turn to religious fantasies to help them cope.”

**Jacobsen: If you had to have an elevator pitch in support of secularism, or those in support of a theocratic society or a government tending towards the theocratic, what would your elevator pitch be in support of secularism?**

**Zuckerman:** First, I would sing “Imagine” by John Lennon. Then I would sing “Dear God” by XTC. Then I would say: morality should be based on empathy and compassion, not obedience to an invisible magic being – that's moral outsourcing.

Additionally, it is always better to base your beliefs on evidence rather than faith. Furthermore, scientific research has done far more to cure illness and alleviate suffering in the world than prayer.

Additionally, the most secularized democracies today are doing much better than the most religious, and finally, if you find personal comfort, affirmation, and security in your religious faith, so be it – I don't want to take that away from you.

But please keep it out of our government and our public schools, and understand that no one has the right to impose their religious faith on others.

**Jacobsen: What are perennial threats to secularism? What are the immediate, big issues surrounding secularism and its implementation?**

**Zuckerman:** Well, which secularism are you referring to? The biggest threat to political secularism comes from religious fundamentalists/theocrats who wants to force their religion on the rest of society.

The biggest threat to philosophical or sceptical secularism is when people live insecure, unsafe, precarious lives – in such situations, they understandably turn to religious faith for comfort. That

is, when life is harsh and hard – when people don't have access to health care, education, jobs and society is riddled with corruption and crime, then people will turn to religious fantasies to help them cope.

They simply will not care about reason, rationality, empiricism, etc. And the biggest threat to socio-cultural secularism? There isn't one. It is marching on, undeterred. The internet is a huge player in this.

**Jacobsen: Thank you for your time today, Professor Zuckerman.**

# Q&A on Philosophy with Dr. Stephen Law – Session 2

June 2, 2017

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

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

**Scott Douglas Jacobsen: In Q&A on Philosophy with Dr. Stephen Law – Session 1, we talked about the desperate move in debates called ‘Going Nuclear;’ faith schools in the United Kingdom (UK); and early education in critical thinking. These bring another question to mind: how should religion be taught in the UK?**

**Dr. Stephen Law:** I think it is important for young people to be taught about religion. Religion has hugely shaped, and continues to shape, our world.

What I am opposed to is what I call (in my book *The War For Children's Minds*) the ‘Authoritarian’ teaching of religion – in which young people are supposed to accept, more or less uncritically, what they are told about religion by some supposed authority – whether that authority be a priest, a rabbi, an imam, or their local atheist communist-party official.

Authoritarian religious schools are such a part of our traditional cultural landscape that they benefit from the anaesthetic of familiarity. We think they're harmless, perhaps even socially necessary.

In order to see just how pernicious many really are, consider this analogy. Suppose authoritarian political schools started opening up around the country. A conservative school opens in Swindon, and is followed by a communist school in Slough for instance.

In these schools, portraits of political leaders beam serenely down from classroom walls. Each day begins with the collective singing of a political anthem. Pupils are expected to defer, more or less unquestioningly, to their school's political authority and its revered political texts.

Rarely are children exposed to alternative political view points, except, perhaps, in a caricatured form, so they can be sweepingly dismissed.

What would be the public's reaction to such schools? Outrage. These schools would be accused of stunting children – of forcing their minds into politically pre-approved moulds.



My question is: if such authoritarian political schools are utterly beyond the pale, why are so many of us prepared to tolerate their religious equivalents? The answer, I suspect, is inertia. Authoritarian political schools would be a shocking new development. But there have always been authoritarian religious schools, thus familiarity, and perhaps a sense of inevitability, has blunted the sense of outrage we might otherwise feel. I think it is time we got that sense of outrage back.

**Jacobsen: How can we move things in that direction in the UK educational system?**

**Law:** It seems to me that all schools should meet certain minimum standards when it comes to religious teaching – (i) every child should be encouraged to think for themselves and make up their own minds about what religion to accept, if any. It is very important that they are reminded that they are entirely free to accept or reject atheism, Roman Catholicism, Islam, etc., (ii) every child should be exposed to a range of views about religion, including atheism and humanism, preferably explained by those who actually hold them.

Unfortunately, many schools, including many state-funded schools, fail to meet these standards. Children are told not to befriend those of other faiths. Children are told that they have no choice – that they are followers of Islam, or Judaism, or Roman Catholicism, and will pray, and engage in devotional activities, and recite creeds, like it or not.

Children are often also given little exposure to say, atheist, humanist, or other religious points of view, except perhaps in a rather caricatured form. As a result, we have a situation in which, for example, roughly a third of young British Muslims leave school believing that the appropriate penalty for any Muslim that leaves the faith is death. We have young British folk leaving our education system having never heard such views questioned or challenged, thinking that they have no choice but to accept a particular religious faith.

Jacobsen: Currently, ‘philosophy’ as a term seems to have expanded, and now includes the natural sciences. Natural scientists, whether knowingly or not, are teaching natural philosophy. So while philosophy is still relevant, but this branch (natural philosophy) is currently enjoying most of the success and recognition. What’s your view on the contemporary importance of philosophy?

**Law:** Well, the term ‘philosophy’ now tends to be reserved for a sort of armchair intellectual activity – not the sort of thing that empirical scientists engage in (they perform observations, engage in experiments, etc.; while philosophers can work while sitting in a comfy chair with their eyes closed).

I think a lot of people are suspicious of philosophy, and even consider it a grand waste of time, because they think: ‘Well, if we want knowledge of how things really are – of the reality as it really is – then we need to engage in the observation of reality. We need to apply scientific methods, pull out our microscopes and telescopes, and so on.

We are not going to get far just sitting in a comfy chair and relying on pure reason and philosophical intuition alone. Indeed, aren't our philosophical intuitions about what reality must be like (about the nature of space, or matter, say) notoriously unreliable?'

Now, I actually have a lot of sympathy with that criticism of philosophy. I think philosophy is actually pretty useless when it comes to uncovering the fundamental characters of reality. But that's not to say that philosophy is without value. I still think philosophy is immensely valuable actually. For what philosophy can do is, for example:

(i) reveal that our theories about reality cannot be true because they involve or generate logical contradictions. So, for example, if someone claims to have discovered a four-sided triangle in the rain forests of Brazil, mathematicians won't bother mounting an expensive expedition to find out if that's true.

They can know, from the comfort of their armchairs, that no such triangle exists out there. Not all contradictions are quite as obvious as that – sometimes we need to engage in some pretty deep thinking to excavate them. That is a job for armchair philosophy, not empirical science.

(ii) reveal that, say, our fundamental moral commitments have consequences we had not recognised. For example, we may discover, through armchair reflection, that our moral commitments require that we treat women, or other races, or other species, very differently from the way they've traditionally been treated. By means of armchair philosophical reflection, great moral progress can, and has, been made.

(iii) solve conceptual puzzles. Many traditional philosophical puzzles, such as the mind/body problem, appear to be essentially conceptual in nature. For example, it seems that mind must be material in order for it to have any physical effects; yet, on the other hand, it seems to many that there's some sort of conceptual obstacle to identifying mind and brain, or mental states, or events with neuro-physical states or events.

Whether there really is such a conceptual obstacle will require, not empirical science, but armchair conceptual methods to figure out.

Philosophy may be useless at revealing how reality fundamentally works, and I believe that the traditional metaphysical role associated with philosophy should actually be left to the natural sciences, but philosophy, nevertheless, remains hugely important.

**Jacobsen: Thank you very much for your time again Dr. Stephen Law.**

# Q&A on Ex-Muslims with Waleed Al-Husseini – Session 1

June 5, 2017

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

*Waleed Al-Husseini founded the Council of Ex-Muslims of France. He escaped from the Palestinian Authority to Jordan and then to France, after torture and imprisonment in Palestine. He is an ex-Muslim and an atheist. In this educational series, we talk about the situation of ex-Muslims in France.*

**Scott Douglas Jacobsen:** To begin with, what inspired you to start the foundation for ex-muslims in France in the first place?

**Waleed Al-Husseini:** You know, if I want to speak about the inspiration, it will be from the things I have been through. I mean my story, what we explained in the last interview, because it makes me feel that there are a lot of us, and that we need to be united.

We need to be united in our voice to speak about us and our problems, to make others feel not alone, and also to demonstrate to Europe and the United States that there are people who leave Islam.

All of these things were reasons and inspiration. Then the work of Maryam Namazie, who is the founder of the Council of Ex-Muslims in Britain. We chose the date of *chevalier de la barre*, the young French nobleman who got killed for blasphemy here in France during the Dark Ages, to show that we are all *chevalier de la barre*, but from a Muslim background instead of Christian. These are the things that inspired me.

“Or in Saudi Arabia and Mauritania for example, where people have gone to the streets asking the government to kill the apostates. So those in our situation know that we will get killed. Even here in France I am in the same situation. I’m in danger.”

**Jacobsen:** What are the main social, political, and educational, initiatives of the organization?

**Al-Husseini:** We are a group of atheists and non-believers who have faced threats and restrictions in our personal lives. Many of us have been arrested for blasphemy. The Council of Ex-Muslims of France has the following aims:

We call for universal rights and full equality and oppose tolerance of inhuman beliefs, discrimination and ill-treatment in the name of respecting religion and culture. Freedom to criticise religion. Prohibition of restrictions on unconditional freedom of criticism and expression using so-called religious ‘sanctities’.

Freedom of religion and atheism.

Separation of religion from the state and the educational and legal system.

Prohibition of religious customs, rules, ceremonies or activities that are incompatible with or infringe people's rights and freedoms.

Abolition of all restrictive and repressive cultural and religious customs which hinder and contradict woman's independence, free will and equality. Prohibition of segregation of sexes.

Prohibition of interference by any authority, family members or relatives, or official authorities in the private lives of women and men and their personal, emotional and sexual relationships and sexuality.

Protection of children from manipulation and abuse by religion and religious institutions. Prohibition of any kind of financial, material or moral support by the state or state institutions to religion and religious activities and institutions.

Prohibition of all forms of religious intimidation and threats.

"Some of us can't even give talks at universities, as you saw what happened with Maryam Namazie last year. When they use the term "islamophobia," which never existed as a label before, it is just used to shut us up. This word is used to protect Muslims. It is what I call the modern fatwa."

**Jacobsen: More to the central discussion, for ex-Muslims – whether atheist, agnostic, another religion, secular humanist, and so on – in France, what is the general day-to-day situation for them?**

**Al-Husseini:** They are in danger not only from governments, but more from the people. Many of us get killed simply because of the usage of some liberal words – for example – look at what happened in Pakistan a few weeks ago or what happened to the bloggers in Bangladesh last year.

Or in Saudi Arabia and Mauritania for example, where people have gone to the streets asking the government to kill the apostates. So those in our situation know that we will get killed. Even here in France I am in the same situation. I'm in danger.

**Jacobsen: If any, what percentage of ex-Muslims would you say undergo severe discrimination in France? And if so, what are the forms of the discrimination?**

**Al-Husseini:** Here in France, many avoid saying anything because they will be attacked at their work, or perhaps fired if the owner of the company is Muslim. Many of them will not say anything because they are living in areas with many Muslims, who will attack them.

Some of us can't even give talks at universities, as you must have seen with what happened to Maryam Namazie last year. When they use the term "Islamophobia," which hasn't as a label before by the way, it is just used to shut us up. This word is used to protect Muslims. It is what I call the modern fatwa.

**Jacobsen: What is the one of the biggest misconceptions that French Muslims have about French ex-Muslims?**

**Al-Husseini:** It is the same everywhere, they think that ex-Muslims are Zionists, or that they are working with them to destroy Islam. It's always the same. They never think that it's a free choice.

# Q&A on the Philosophy of Economics with Dr. Alexander Douglas – Session 3

June 6, 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 discuss the philosophy of economics, its evolution, and how the discipline of economics should move forward in a world with increasing inequality so that it is more attuned to democracy. Previous sessions of our Q&A can be found [here](#) and [here](#)*

**Scott Douglas Jacobsen: Is there a lack of consistency in the terminologies used by economists?**

**Dr. Alexander Douglas:** There's a question about whether economists use terms consistently. But there's another pressing issue, which is the gap between the language academic economists use and the language of public discourse.

I wonder if the retreat of economics into higher- and higher-level mathematics has done damage to democracy. Although there was a near-consensus among macro-economists in Britain that first austerity and then Brexit were bad policies, the government received popular support for both.

The problem was that the macro-economists could say what they believed, but they couldn't really explain why they believed it. The official argument rested on some of the most complex mathematics in the world, and there was no convincing 'entry-level' version.

Effectively, macro-economists have to ask the public to trust their expertise, even though we can't see into their black boxes. It was easy for the media to portray the economic experts as elites with hidden agendas and vested interests.

Normally the way to fend off that sort of *ad hominem* argument is to say, "Never mind me or my motives, just look at my argument". But you can't do that when the simplest compelling version of your argument consists of hundreds of differential equations.

I think this is a major problem. There is no bridge between the concepts of academic economics and the concepts we use to think about our day-to-day lives. Politics happens in the domain of the everyday concepts.

**Jacobsen: What do you think of neuroeconomics?**

**Douglas:** Neuroeconomics is very interesting and something I know little about. Philosophically, it raises more 'conceptual bridge' puzzles, this time between the scientific study of brain-events

causing behaviour and the ordinary explanations we give for human actions. Some philosophers call this “folk psychology”. There are a range of opinions on this.

The most extreme, “eliminative materialism”, suggests that our ordinary explanations, e.g. “Jane crossed the road because she prefers to walk in the sun”, are simply wrong and will one day be entirely replaced by explanations at the physiological/neurological level: Jane’s body moved in such-and-such a way because such-and-such events occurred in her brain. Standard choice theory in economics is, in my view, a regimented version of “folk psychology”.

So one interesting question is whether the end game for neuro – economics is to entirely replace standard economics or whether it can somehow be fitted into the existing paradigm.

“Neuro – economics is very interesting...Philosophically, it raises more ‘conceptual bridge’ puzzles, this time between the scientific study of brain-events causing behaviour and the ordinary explanations we give for human actions.”

**Jacobsen: What is the healthy perspective – the accurate view – on human economic decisions? What drives us?**

**Douglas:** I’m not convinced that the individual economic agent is the right starting point. You can start instead at the sub-personal level, as the eliminative materialists propose. You can also start with institutions, which have their own ways of behaving that sometimes seem independent of the agents composing them.

J.K. Galbraith’s entertaining book, *The New Industrial State*, is full of plausible-sounding claims about how committees, boards, and so on have their own strange ways of making decisions, which differ from the ways that individual people make decisions.

His book on the 1929 stock market crash contains equally plausible descriptions of crowd behaviour, which can be very unlike the behaviour of individuals on their own.

Academic economists are beginning to study institutions in more formal and rigorous ways. The ‘New Institutionalists’ build models to explain why (rational) individuals might submit to the authority of an institution in order to avoid the transaction costs that accompany free exchange in the market.

Economists like Herbert Gintis use models from evolutionary biology and game theory to model social norms and other emergent properties of social systems (properties that can’t be explained in terms of facts about the individual agents).

I’m sometimes tempted towards a much more radical view. There is philosophical literature that emerged from the work of the later Wittgenstein, concerning the nature of rule-following behaviour.

One central claim is that rules can’t exist for an individual on her own; they can only exist for a whole community. Another is that the relation between a rule and the behaviour it governs can’t

be captured by any *causal* relation – it is not the case, for instance, that knowledge of a rule *causes* behaviour in accordance with that rule.

Rather, the relation is more akin to a *logical* connection: the rule and the behaviour stand in a similar relation to that of the premise and conclusion in an argument. I believe that preferences are effectively rules: a preference for A over B is a rule: *choose A over B*.

This theory of preferences-as-rules, combined with the Wittgensteinian ideas about rules, suggests to me that both methodological individualism and the search for *causal* explanations of choice-guided behaviour might be mistakes. If so, much of modern economics would rest upon a mistake.

**Jacobsen: Can you imagine a future with ubiquitous artificial intelligence where mathematical models and algorithms could accurately predict all human behaviour?**

**Douglas:** To the extent that the physical world is determinate then there should in principle be a system of equations that could accurately predict all human behaviour. Of course, the physical world might not be determinate.

And even if it is, the finding of the relevant equations might be beyond not only our cognitive capacities but those of any cognitive system capable of existing.

Moreover, there is no reason to expect that any workable model will look anything like the choice theory used by economists. The perfect explanation of human behaviour might make no reference to choices at all; again, it might just track the motion of particles around the human brain and body, or it might track patterns at the institutional level.

We don't know what sorts of causes the perfect model would quantify over. Thus you don't have to believe that there's a perfect mathematical model of individual choice, even if you think there's guaranteed to be a perfect causal model that explains and predicts all observable human behaviour.



# Interview – Professor Tim Whitmarsh, Professor of Greek Culture on Atheism in History

June 13, 2017

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

*Professor Tim Whitmarsh is the A.G. Leventis Professor of Greek Culture at the University of Cambridge, Professor of Ancient Literatures at the University of Oxford, and an honorary fellow at the University of Exeter. He is a leading classicist. He has been the A.G. Leventis Professor since October 2014. His research focuses on the Greek life under the Roman Empire, as well as atheists in the ancient world. Here Scott Jacobsen sits down to discuss atheism and its history.*

**Scott Douglas Jacobsen: I want to distinguish between two streams of thinking. First, the common historical conceptions of atheism. Second, the deep history of atheism outside of “common” narrative. When is atheism assumed to have started?**

**Professor Tim Whitmarsh:** These are the crucial questions to begin with. I think if you ask most people, they would say atheism is a product of the modern West. It has its roots in the European Enlightenment, in the rise of science and the Industrial Revolution, and in the formation of modern secular democracies like the United States.

There is much truth to this picture of course: atheism *as we understand it today* is a modern phenomenon. But it’s that qualification ‘as we understand it today’ that is critical. Why should we understand atheism only from a modern perspective?

The words *atheos* (‘atheist’) and *atheotēs* (‘atheism’) are over 2000 years old. The job of someone like myself, a classicist, is to try to change the angle of vision, and to jolt people out of their assumptions that their own categories of analysis are the only ones possible.

“There’s a peculiar vanity – at once self-serving and self-hating – to this idea that the modern West is fundamentally different in kind to everything that is not it. I am fully with the French philosopher Bruno Latour on this: ‘we have never been modern.’”

**Jacobsen: What are some of the earliest historical records of atheism in the ancient world? And how does this change the conversation from the common perspective?**

**Whitmarsh:** The word *atheos* is first used in the sense of ‘one who doesn’t believe in the gods’ in a text of Plato from the early fourth century BCE. It was in a speech supposedly given by Socrates at his unsuccessful defence against charges of introducing new gods and corrupting the young.

The context suggests it was routinely used in Classical Athens to describe a fashionable philosophical movement. We know for sure that there were people in this era who argued that religion is a human construct designed by legislators to control societies; or that the idea of gods was rooted in a primitive misunderstanding of the natural elements; or that the existence of widespread injustice in our world proves that there can be no divinities.

Whether these people called themselves *atheoi* (literally ‘the godless’ ones) or whether it was a slur on them by others, we don’t know – perhaps a mixture of the two, just as labels like ‘queer’ are now used in both ways.

Anyhow, over time, these ideas inspired many among the Greek people to come up with many different forms of arguments against the gods, some earnest, some playful. I argue in the book that the idea of *atheism* – of a coherent set of non-theistic beliefs that define a cogent worldview – first appeared in the second century BCE, when philosophers were taking stock of their predecessors’ views and trying to organise them more systematically.

There was a strong librarian’s mentality during this era (the Library of Alexandria is only the most famous example of a widespread phenomenon): and thinkers tended to generate new ideas in part by putting together pre-existing ideas into new packages.

You asked how this changes the conversation: well, it shows for a start that you don’t need the modern West to have an idea of atheism. And more importantly, for me at least, it challenges the presumption that human beings are by default religious, and have been throughout history until the modern West.

There’s a peculiar vanity – at once self-serving and self-hating – to this idea that the modern West is fundamentally different in kind to everything that is not it. I am fully with the French philosopher Bruno Latour on this: ‘we have never been modern.’

**Jacobsen: By how long does atheism predate Abrahamic faiths such as Christianity and Islam?**

**Whitmarsh:** There are two ways to answer this question. First, I can give you a literal answer, in terms of the story I tell in this book. The story of ancient Greek atheism begins in the fifth century BCE, although its roots lie earlier, in the sixth century, when new structures of scientific and philosophical thought were challenging the established mythologically-based views of the world.

So, broadly speaking, Greek atheism emerges around the time of monotheistic Judaism (although some would date that earlier), half a millennium before Paul and his colleagues were establishing the first churches, and just over a millennium before Gabriel revealed his prophecy to Mohammed. But let me stress my second point, which is crucial.

The story I tell in the book is just one possible history of ancient atheism, an important one for sure, given that the word ‘atheist’ is Greek in origin, and Enlightenment thinkers like Hume and Voltaire were steeped in the Classics.

But it is only one possible history. If you take seriously the idea with which we started, that shifting the angle of vision opens up new ways of looking at the world, then you have to acknowledge that there are other versions of the history of atheism, which remain to be mapped out systematically.

An Indian school of philosophical materialism known as Carvaka flourished, and indeed, early Hindu and Buddhist thought was largely free of deity. The same has been said of Confucianism. And indeed, the more you start looking, the more new possibilities open up.

The crucial point is, I think, that we should not assume that humans are by default ‘religious’ (whatever we mean by that – but that is a different question). There are different personality types in every culture.

It’s particularly important to stress this, since many will want to spin this story as a Eurocentric one, about how those clever old proto-European Greeks got there before the Enlightenment. That is a complete misreading: there was nothing ‘European’ in antiquity about the Greeks, who in fact had their most enriching cultural dialogues with Egypt and the lands we now call Lebanon, Turkey, Iraq and Iran.

“That is a complete misreading: there was nothing ‘European’ in antiquity about the Greeks, who in fact had their most enriching cultural dialogues with Egypt and the lands we now call Lebanon, Turkey, Iraq and Iran.”

**Jacobsen: How was atheism, in essence, wiped out of history after Christianity became the official religion of the Roman Empire?**

**Whitmarsh:** It’s a more complex story than that. In fact, some of the evidence I use for pre-Christian atheism comes from Christian sources. At one level, the earliest Christians embraced the atheists warmly, because they assumed that their arguments applied only to pagan deities. ‘Look!’ they said ‘Even the Greeks themselves didn’t believe in their gods!’

It never occurred to these Christians that there might be more troubling implications in these atheistic ideas for their own faith (or at least if it did, the thought was swiftly repressed). Another aspect to bear in mind is that Christianity was not a monolith. It was fundamentally reshaped as it was adopted by the Greco-Roman elites, and took on a lot of philosophical ideas.

All of the big arguments in the fourth and fifth centuries about the nature of Christ – how could he be both divine and human, and in what proportion, and so on – came out of a dialogue with what was a fundamentally materialist strain in Greek thought.

So in a sense (a very, very extended sense) a form of atheism survived Christianity. Christology was a kind of schizophrenic debate between absolute faith and a philosophical realism that could never be fully adapted to the idea of a god made human.

But I am not arguing that the Church fathers were crypto-atheists! You are right, fundamentally, that the Christianisation of the Roman Empire (and the concurrent Romanisation of Christianity) changed everything.

You see it in the late-antique law codes, which show an unprecedented desire to impose Christian belief on everyone. And not just Christian belief, but the right kind of belief. The imperial law-makers reserved their harshest strictures for Christian heretics.

Atheistic views can still be glimpsed in the penumbra, as I have said, all societies have their sceptics, but it became much harder to express them in public. In fact, the word *atheos* was cooped for a different meaning in this period: to mean one who didn't believe in the Christian god, irrespective of whether they believed in other gods.

**Jacobsen: What was life like for Greek people living under the Romans during the time of the Roman Empire?**

**Whitmarsh:** Mixed. By and large, the Empire raised living standards massively, and ensured peace in the heartlands. How much the economic benefits of Empire actually changed life for peasants and slaves is open to question, but many would say that these people were now in drier, warmer houses, using imported goods of higher quality and so forth.

For the elite, Romanisation gave new opportunities for travel and cultural enrichment. The Romans weren't always perceived by the Greeks as an occupying power, in the same way that the British were in India or the Russians in Afghanistan.

Identities were not exclusive in antiquity, nor were they racialised. It was perfectly possible to be Roman and Greek simultaneously: there was no contradiction at all, since they referred to two different aspects (they were respectively legal and cultural identities).

Over time, Roman citizenship was extended, until in the early third century it was offered to all free male inhabitants of the Empire. And remember, most people operated in local contexts, in city-states, which still functioned in the same way as before, with Greek people taking decisions and publishing their decrees on Greek inscriptions.

But of course it wasn't rosy, far from it. The Romans were unforgiving when it came to insurrection and insubordination, and their response was often arbitrary and brutal. There are stories of Roman soldiers beating up male peasants; and no doubt, it was worse for the women.

And the Roman policy-makers could be particularly harsh towards ethnic groups they viewed as trouble-makers, like Jews, particularly after the sacking of Jerusalem in 70 CE, which the Flavians spun as a triumph over a monstrous foe.

It was Jews who resisted Rome the most fiercely, both on paper and militarily. And remember – since you were asking about Greeks – that many Jews were also Greeks, and (again) that did not have to be a contradiction. Some, like the apostle Paul, were Roman, Greek, and Jewish, all at once.

Aside from the Jews, others tended to be more acquiescent, although you can find plenty of resistance to aspects of Roman rule, to the idea of one-man rule, to the cult of the emperor, and so forth. Christianity absorbed a lot of that Jewish sense of being fundamentally opposed to the

Roman state, but there was also a powerful, contradictory, belief that their faith was entirely compatible ('Render unto Caesar what is Caesar's, and unto God what is God's' – all of that).

Again, remember that the vast majority of Christians, for the first two hundred years, were also Greek. So it is a tangled, complex picture, which would take a long time to paint properly; what I have given you is just a snapshot.

“It was Jews who resisted Rome the most fiercely, both on paper and militarily. And remember that many Jews were also Greek, and that did not have to be a contradiction.”

**Jacobsen: You have classified some work as atheistic, or straight atheism, including those found in Xenophanes of Colophon, or Carneades. Was the term “atheism,” and its associated ideas and relationships, seen as good or bad, positive or negative, in the ancient world?**

**Whitmarsh:** Actually, I wouldn't classify either of those two as a straight atheist. Xenophanes claimed that the Homeric gods are nonsense, so he was powerfully opposed to traditional ideas of divinity. But he did say there was a single god, who was a cosmic principle.

Why he belongs in the story is because he redefined divinity: he said that a 'god' is not an anthropomorphic deity, nor a being that humans can interact with, but a single and coherent explanation for all of the diverse features of observable nature.

It was that intellectual shift that created the space for a kind of naturalism, i.e. a belief that there is nothing in our world but material nature (what the Greek call *physis*), which has regular principles that can be explained rationally – which is, I think, a fundamentally atheistic principle.

Few ancient thinkers actually went so far as to argue that nature is all there is, but some did. And it would be good to be able to quiz people like Xenophanes directly on the question of what kind of god he was positing, and whether 'nature' would do just as well as a substitute.

We just don't know, and modern philosophical terms like 'naturalist' or (even worse) 'deist,' are in any case misleading. But certainly one of Xenophanes' intellectual successors, Anaxagoras, was prosecuted in Athens for 'not believing in the gods' and for having materialist views of the celestial bodies.

So ... sorry for another complex answer, but it's important to be precise in these matters! Carneades, meanwhile, was a Sceptic philosopher: he believed that you cannot make dogmatic assertions about anything in the world.

So him and his successor Clitomachus, head of the Platonic Academy, went about inventing and compiling arguments both for and against the existence of gods. What is particularly interesting is that the arguments against the existence of gods were then separated off and circulated independently, and used by groups who defined themselves by their non-belief.

**Jacobsen: What was one of the more powerful arguments compiled by Carneades?**

**Whitmarsh:** Clitomachus was the compiler, if we're thinking about written texts; Carneades didn't write anything himself. But yes, we can think of them as a kind of double-act. My favourite argument is one that proves that gods cannot be associated with morality.

Human morals imply a choice between at least two alternatives, and usually to be 'moral' implies that you take decisions that are right but which cost you. So if you are faced by a terrifying enemy in battle, it is easier to run but harder and better to stay and fight.

That is an example of the moral quality of bravery. Similarly, defending the poor against the depredations of the rich and powerful – an instance of 'justice' – involves personal effort and risk. Yet gods, as perfect beings, are never faced by such decisions.

Gods would never feel fear in battle, since there is no chance of them losing. They would never even contemplate making an unjust decision on the part of the rich, since it costs them nothing to weigh decisively on the right side.

So we should accept that morality exists only in the human sphere, and reject any claim that associates it with divinity. Not only does this attack an important component of conventional theistic argumentation ('how can you have morality if you do away with religion?'), but it is also an insightful comment on the nature of morality: being moral is not just about avoiding wrongdoing, it's also about putting yourself on the line.

"I would speculate that atheism in the stronger form emerges, historically speaking, out of a kind of relativism, when cities protected by local deities began to interact and compete."

**Jacobsen: What about 'pre-history'? Should we reasonably extrapolate into the past the existence of atheists in times with little or no recording found to date?**

**Whitmarsh:** Good question! We are in the realms of complete speculation here, but it is fun, and even sometimes useful to speculate. Let's zoom out a little, and try to reconstruct the history of religion as a whole.

None of what I am about to say is 'true' in the sense of being provable, and I am far from being an expert in prehistoric religions. So please run with this, and take it in the spirit in which it is intended.

The evidence for something that we might call religious worship begins to appear around the time of the end of the last ice age, around 11,500 years ago. That is when we begin to see signs that survival into some kind of afterlife is on the cards, and that humans may be able to broker some kind of deal with higher powers.

But what that 'religion' – if that's the right word – was like in practice is very hard to know, as is what was going on in people's heads, because all we have are material remains. So of course, it is impossible to say whether it was universally accepted as obviously true, or whether it was sometimes resisted.

I personally believe, as I have said, that humans are diverse, and that some form of scepticism is probably found in all cultures: that animates our questing inventiveness. There is certainly plenty of anthropological evidence from modern pre-industrial cultures for people who dispute the efficaciousness of deities and their human ambassadors. But for prehistory, who knows?

Something closer to what we understand today as religion – an organised, reflective, ritual system, with clerical hierarchies, based around places deemed holy and certain times of the year, honouring gods who exist in comfort independently of humanity – seems to come with settled habitation, and particularly with urbanisation.

In particular, you now begin to get the strong sense that the community who inhabit a particular place is protected by a special deity that has a special care for that people and that city. That process began, very roughly, 6,000 or so years ago: Mesopotamia (modern Iraq) has the best evidence in the region covered by West Asia, Europe and north Africa.

I would see Greek antiquity as a late manifestation of that process, by and large. Greek gods are not so very different from their older cousins in the near east: the Olympians are primarily gods who care for human cities. But with urbanisation comes imperialism too, real or desired: this is when one city or locale becomes or wants to become dominant over others, and so you get a sense of hierarchy or even transcendence in the divine sphere too.

One deity is better than the others, or superior in kind. That military-political hierarchy may or may not map onto familial hierarchies: sometimes you get a top imperial god who is also a patriarchal father-god or a matriarchal reproductive deity, but sometimes not. Somewhere in this competitive world emerge both the idea of a ‘top god’ (or even ‘the one true god’), the awareness that gods come and go, and that divine power is not necessarily cosmic.

I would speculate that atheism in the stronger form – the conviction that deities are human social constructs (as opposed to the weaker form of scepticism in the effectiveness of ritual) – emerges, historically speaking, out of a kind of relativism, when cities protected by local deities began to interact and compete.

But as I stressed at the start, this is a very schematic map: the reality was much messier and more complex! Once again ... Schematic maps are useful for navigation, but the world always looks very different at ground level. And let me stress again that the pattern will look very different elsewhere in the world.

**Jacobsen: Thank you for your time today, Professor Whitmarsh.**

# Interview – Rev. Dr. Paul Knupp, Jr on Humanist Activism

June 20, 2017

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

*Rev. Dr. Paul Knupp, Jr. is the Co-Founder & President of the Humanist Society of Iowa. He is a Chaplain for the American Humanist Association and trained in theology and psychological dynamics. Here we discuss some of his work and background and thinking. The interview was conducted by Scott Jacobsen of Conatus News.*

**Scott Douglas Jacobsen:** Is there a family involvement that led you to becoming a member of humanist groups in general, and more involved in humanistic judaism? When did this become a philosophical life stance, for you?

**Rev. Knupp:** No prior family involvement. It became a more ethical and practical stance for me six years ago, when I became a Chaplain for the American Humanist Association.

**Jacobsen:** You acquired professional training at Drake University, Princeton Seminary, Roberts Wesleyan College, and the University of Iowa. What was the purpose and content of this training?

**Rev. Knupp:** My training was in ministry, educational psychology, education, and psychology of religion. But this training later greatly helped with humanist work. Theological and psychological dynamics are inherent in all Humanism work.

**Jacobsen:** What is the general treatment and perspective of humanists in America? For example, some countries' populations don't care because they're integrated in their acceptance of them. Others express open vitriol and prejudice. Others simply don't know what those terms mean, so don't know who those fellow citizens in their respective general populations.

**Rev. Knupp:** All of the reactions you cite here, we have experienced. However, since Gallup polls religious "nones" now at 25% of the population, our acceptance grows daily.

**Jacobsen:** You are the co-founder and president of the Humanist Society of Iowa. What tasks and responsibilities come with this station? What inspired its founding? Who was the other founder?

**Rev. Knupp:** A Humanist chapter must have five AHA members sign to form a local body. I garnered this support and we submitted it to headquarters in DC. We formed a set of bylaws and submitted to the state. We originally formed a chapter at the Iowa State Penitentiary.

I thought it too ironic to not have our own local chapter, so I helped institute one. I wanted to call it the Lyle Simpson Humanist Chapter, after the 12th AHA president and one of our members, but he would not hear of it.



**Jacobsen: What are the demographics of the society? Who is the most likely demographic to be a humanist?**

**Rev. Knupp:** Our ages run from twenties to eighties. We are equally mixed between sexes. We have numerous LGBTQ members. We have some members of colour. We have many atheists and freethinkers.

**Jacobsen: How does the Humanist Society of Iowa, if at all, advocate and promote humanism in the public sphere?**

**Rev. Knupp:** We participate in public events, e.g., The Women's March, The Gay Parade, the March for Science, Darwin Day, the National Day of Reason; we advocate legislatively for our ideals and concerns.

**Jacobsen: As a chapter of the American Humanist Association, an affiliate of the Iowa Atheists and Freethinkers, of the First Unitarian Church of Des Moines, and a member of the Central Iowa Coalition of Reason, what benefits come with the memberships?**

**Rev. Knupp:** We increase our numbers for direct social action, as well as our knowledge and information base.

**Jacobsen: How do these assist in the coordination of local, states and national efforts for societal and cultural acceptance of humanism, knowledge of humanism, and inculcation of humanist values?**

**Rev. Knupp:** We share national days of protest and direct action, as well as accurate information of national concerns.

**Jacobsen: Can you tell us a bit more about your work with prisoners and detainees? How do you feel called to service in this way?**

**Rev. Knupp:** I have written for The Humanist on humanists "behind bars." The Humanist Society of Iowa is in regular correspondence with the Humanist Community of the Iowa State Penitentiary.

I am a monthly external chaplain and sponsor there as well as an attendee with the Humanists at Fort Dodge Correctional Facility. Some of the most marginalised in our society are those behind bars. They wrote to Mr. Lyle Simpson, and asked to start an AHA chapter.

Mr. Simpson sent me to assist them. We formed a chapter at the state penitentiary almost six years ago. One of the members transferred to Ft. Dodge and asked for a chapter there. Mr. Tom Harvey, AHA Celebrant, has assisted me in this work.

In terms of priority, those marginalised deserve foremost my time and efforts.

**Jacobsen: What are some of the more touching stories for you? How can humanists become involved with the prison population?**

**Rev. Knupp:** The men, offenders, report that Humanism has aided their lives immensely. Every person in the age range of 30+ at the state penitentiary exemplifies a life better lived due to Humanism. The same is true for the Ft. Dodge offenders who are in their twenties. In all cases, the men report a happier and more fruitful existence due to Humanism.

**Jacobsen: What are the valuable lessons in life that gathered from this experience and public service?**

**Rev. Knupp:** Never count anyone out, no matter what horrendous deed that has been committed. We all have an embedded potential waiting for self-actualisation. We are born good, for good.

**Jacobsen: What have been some of the main campaigns, initiatives of the Humanist Society of Iowa?**

**Rev. Knupp:** Our new president, Gwen Harvey, initiated a training of lobbying for legislative action. She keeps our eyes on important legislative events and rallies our input.

**Jacobsen: Who are some of the most unexpected allies for the advancement of humanists in the US?**

**Rev. Knupp:** My own church, in which I was originally ordained, the United Church of Christ, is a surprise supporter.

**Jacobsen: In general, what are the perennial threats to the practice of humanism in the US?**

**Rev. Knupp:** Religious dogmatism is a perennial threat. In the US case, right wing fundamental versions of christianity, and evangelical christianity are perhaps most important to be wary of. Other prominent members of the AHA have spoken more about this.

**Jacobsen: How can people get involved with the Humanist Society of Iowa, even donate to it?**

**Rev. Knupp:** Go to our Meetup page.

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

**Rev. Knupp:** Thank you and it will take us all to bring the kingdom of heaven to earth.

**Jacobsen: Thank you for your time, Paul.**

# An Interview on Humanism and Superstition in Lagos

July 2, 2017

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

*James-Adeyinka Shorungbe is the Director of the Humanist Assembly of Lagos, Nigeria. It is a secular congregation in Nigeria. Here he talks with Scott Douglas Jacobsen about the Humanist Assembly of Lagos, the impediments to both critical thinking and humanism in Nigeria, pervasive superstition, the general perception of those attending the Humanist Assembly of Lagos, and more.*

*\*This audio interview has been edited for clarity, concision, and readability.\**

**Scott Douglas Jacobsen: So, you are the director of the Humanist Assembly of Lagos. What are some tasks and responsibilities that come along with that position?**

**James-Adeyinka Shorungbe:** Essentially, organising the affairs of the organisation, charting annual programs to promote critical thinking in Lagos (Nigeria), maintaining relationships with other organisations such as IHEU, IHEYO, NHM. HAL is also a founding member body of the humanist movement in Nigeria so I was actively involved in that regard.

**Jacobsen: What are some of the impediments to the education and advocacy for both critical thinking and humanism within Nigeria?**

**Shorungbe:** First, Nigeria is a society highly entrenched in superstition. So that is a major, impediment, to promoting critical thinking. In order to address that, education and awareness has to be done.

While the government is trying to improve the literacy level from its current level of just under 60%, a number topics that promote critical thinking are not being taught in schools.

Evolution is not being taught in schools. Anthropology is not taught in schools. History is not taught, and so on. So there's education but low application of critical thinking to challenge the norm. Creationism is the only story taught in schools.

So this creates an entire mindset of citizens who are highly superstitious. You also have the movie industry churning out a lot of superstition which the citizens all buy into and believe literacy as factual.

As a major impediment, superstition is a big, big problem. To address this, not enough of our message is getting out there. To be honest, I don't think we're doing enough to get our message out there in terms of awareness and enlightenment. We have barely scratched the surface in terms of addressing superstition in Nigeria.

**Jacobsen: With a large portion of the population having a superstitious mindset, what is their general perception of the Humanist Assembly in Lagos?**

**Shorungbe:** The few people who we have interacted with, they generally do not understand humanism or humanists. Their perception is anything that doesn't recognise any divine being is straight evil, paganism, evildoers, etc. People we've had interactions with, often ask shocking questions like, "So you mean you don't believe in God?"

When you try to get across the message that human problems and human situations can be solved by humans and are best solved by human efforts, we always get push backs, "No, no, no, you need to have divine intervention." It is something strange to them, to the society—very strange.

**Jacobsen: If you were to take a survey of public attitudes and beliefs, how many humanists can one expect to find in Nigeria, or even Lagos specifically?**

**Shorungbe:** Because Nigeria is a very conservative society and a lot of people do not openly identify as humanists, atheists, and freethinkers, agnostics, etc. it is a bit difficult to count. Many official forms and data gathering applications usually only have the two main faiths as beliefs.

However, when you go to online forums, when you go on social media, there are quite a lot of Nigerians who express themselves as nonbelievers.

There was research conducted by the Pew organisation. It stated that as many as 2–3% of Nigerians are humanists, freethinkers, and nonreligious. In a population of 180 million, 2–3% would come to 3 to 5 million Nigerians, but many are not outspoken. But in terms of the outspoken ones, we have very few humanists who are openly affiliated with humanism and agnosticism online and offline.

**Jacobsen: Do you think that having an umbrella organisation will play an important part in solving issues like teaching correct scientific theories in the biological sciences and evolutionary theory in schools?**

**Shorungbe:** Yes, definitely, it is. With an umbrella body, you have a louder voice. You have more clout. That is one of the reasons why in Nigeria a number of associations are all coming under the umbrella of the national body, 'Nigerian Humanist Movement.' Aside from the online community of The Nigerian Atheists and a couple of chat groups, we are still fragmented in Nigeria.

The Humanist Assembly of Lagos is one of 2 organisations that is formally registered and trying to break barriers and putting the voice out there for other humanists to appreciate that they are not alone.

That you can be different. That you can be good without any divine belief. The importance of having an umbrella body is very critical. Now, with an umbrella body, we can have representation to push through the Nigerian National Assembly, through government bodies, etc.

We can better organise ourselves to ensure the adoption of more scientific methods in schools—for example, becoming advocates for the teaching of evolutionary theory in school curricula.

**Jacobsen: What are some future initiatives of the Humanist Assembly of Lagos? How can people get in contact to help or donate to the organisation?**

**Shorongbe:** For the future, we will be looking to organise events that can showcase and promote humanism as well as critical thinking. Events such as film screenings, lectures, debates etc.

We are also toying with the idea of a radio show to enlighten the general public and kick-start discussions within the public sphere. A radio where speakers would come on and talk about everyday human issues and how these can be addressed without thinking they are caused by divine or superstitious means.

Just to enlighten the public of the various challenges one has in life and how they can be addressed by practical action, which do not require divine intervention.

Essentially promoting humanism, freethinking, atheism, agnosticism on a national level. To get in touch with us, you can contact us via email: [humanistassemblylagos@yahoo.com](mailto:humanistassemblylagos@yahoo.com). We also have a page on Facebook, Humanist Assembly of Lagos, and Twitter under @humanistalagos.

**Jacobsen: Thank you for your time, Adeyinka.**

# Interview with Houzan Mahmoud – Co-Founder, The Culture Project

July 4, 2017

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

*Houzan Mahmoud is the Co-Founder of The Kurdish Culture Project or The Culture Project and the valued partner of Conatus News in the Conference on Defending Progressivism. She is a women's rights activist, campaigner and defender, and a feminist. In this wide-ranging and exclusive interview, Mahmoud discusses the Kurds, Iraq, women's rights, and more.*

**Scott Douglas Jacobsen:** You are a women's rights activist, feminist, and an anti-war activist. You were born in Iraqi Kurdistan. What were the moments of political awakening for you?

**Houzan Mahmoud:** One of the things I'll never forget is the break-out of war between Iraq and Iran. I was only six-years-old at the time. Iraq's bloody dictator Saddam Hussein coming to political power in 1979 changed our lives in Kurdistan and Iraq forever.

Being Kurdish poses all sorts of problems as it is, and living under the fascist regime of Saddam made things incredibly hard for my family. Prior to Saddam coming to power, my brothers took up arms during late 70's against Iraq's regime, I was too little to remember the particulars.

However, what I do know is that from 1973 to 1991 I grew up and lived under one of the most horrendous regimes in modern history.

I am forty-four years old now, but I still live with the horrors I faced during my childhood and adolescence years living in Iraq. From the day I was born, all the way to this moment, all I have witnessed is war, a never-ending war in Iraq.

That's why even my life in London is very much shaped and affected by the events that have and are still unfolding in Iraq and Kurdistan. I have many shared memories with my own people from the region, memories of struggle, loss of loved ones, horrors of genocide, and the pain of having to leave our homes again and again.

I live like a nomad; even if I live in a home I always think to myself "I am not sure how long I will be living here – where next?"

**Jacobsen:** How did you come to align with the principles inherent in feminism and anti-war activism?

**Mahmoud:** I grew up in a war zone, a climate of long lasting and bloody wars, a constant exodus and displacement. I am strongly opposed to war because it only brings devastation and abject poverty.

It destroys homes, it destroys entire lives. However, I wouldn't say that I am a pacifist largely due to the environment in which I was born. As Kurds, we are always subjected to the horror of war, occupation, and repetitive cultural, linguistic and physical genocides.

For example, I support the armed struggle of Rojava against the Islamic State of Syria and Iraq (ISIS). In such cases, you can have one option: you either take up arms or be ruled by the monstrous forces of ISIS.

As for my feminist principles, there were various reasons that are personal, social and political. Of course, when you grew up in a socially-conservative society, a place in which every move you make somehow amounts to either shame or honour, if you adopt progressive views there is considerable backlash, you become a 'rebel'.

The mentality that women are 'inferior' and men are superior is somehow imbued within almost every aspects of daily life – politics, art and literature. The language we speak carries a great deal of words that reinforce women's subordination. I must admit that from a very early age, I was aware of my own position in my society, I felt trapped, powerless and lonely.

I felt stranded on a small planet that was destroyed by war. Making the smallest demand for women's rights felt like a crime. Everything was about war, killing, survival and political-struggle against the enemy. There was little room for feminist ideas.

Even when I joined a leftist political party, hoping that it provide the equality I sought after, I felt it was a man's club. I left it and started reading feminist books intensively, as well as the history of feminism and the different schools of thoughts.

I found within feminism a home, a place in which an ideology truly spoke for women. So, yes, going through a painful life journey full of loss and being a woman was and still is not easy. That's why feminism is vital to me, to my thinking, activism and worldview.

**Jacobsen: What are the more immediate concerns for women's rights relevant to the Iraqi Kurdish community?**

**Mahmoud:** There are many issues to fight against, such as so-called 'honour killings', female genital mutilation (FGM), forced and arranged marriages, and other forms of violence – like many other societies in the world.

Kurdish women are fighting against all of these issues, and they're fighting outside invaders too – such as ISIS. So the problems are not limited, but are changing and are varied in addition to the political instability that, as we know, forays into the lives of women and their rights.

**Jacobsen: You co-founded Culture Project, which is a platform for “Kurdish writers, feminists, artists, and activists.” What inspired it – its theme and title?**

**Mahmoud:** I am one of the founders of Culture Project and have supported it, as well as having worked with various organisations and campaigns that highlight and assuage violence against women.

One thing that was missing was a holistic approach to the important need of raising awareness about gender and feminism and challenging cultural productions that are patriarchal and male dominated.

So I discussed the idea with a couple of friends and supporters about creating such a platform, a platform that supported those people who have non-conformist views, as well as challenging regressive/conservative norms and values which are “traditional”.

This platform is open for all regardless of sex and gender. We would love to bring forward new faces, young writers and others in order to create a debate and produce new knowledge that challenges the old schools of thought.

As for the name, I thought that if we give it a name that gave our organisation the appearance it is female-only, it will just limit our scope of work. We decided to call it *Culture Project* in order to be inclusive of all people: activists, writers, philosophers, feminists, novelists, poets, etc.

**Jacobsen: What have been some of its more popular articles – title and contents?**

**Mahmoud:** We have various writers on both our Kurdish and English websites – websites proving to be very popular. Of course, on the Kurdish website we have far more writers, poets, feminist writers, philosophical essays, art and cultural reviews, etc., as well as short stories.

On our English website we have a very well-informed new generation of young Kurds who are active politically and are critical of the status-quo in Kurdistan. They challenge existing gender relations. You can find some very interesting poems, short stories, artistic-writing, and essays.

One of the important pillars of our project is that we have gender and feminist awareness at its core. We promote and motivate our writers to be gender sensitive and champion feminist positions.

When we were in Kurdistan in May, we hosted a debate on Feminism and Art, which was very well attended and created a very interesting debate.

**Jacobsen: As a secular feminist have there been threats to your life, or others involved with the project?**

**Mahmoud:** There have been several threats directed at me when we launched our Anti Sharia Campaign in Kurdistan and Iraq back in 2005. Even now when I write and criticise Islamism and advocate for feminist ideals I get hate mail, threats and expletive diatribes on Social media.

Also, one of our writers who openly writes against Islamism received letters containing death threats. The fact is that those of us who are non-compromising and are open in our criticism of



Islam and Islamism our lives are automatically in danger. We are not safe in either the Middle East nor in the UK.

**Jacobsen: What are the unique concerns of women and girls in war, in contrast to boys and men?**

**Mahmoud:** One of the major features of all wars is the use of rape as a weapon. Most of the times women in war situations end up becoming victims to rape, trafficking, sexual slavery and dealing with the consequences of the devastation that war brings to their societies.

For example, women who become widows in socially conservative societies who have very little welfare are living in dire conditions. Conversely, men and boys, who are fighting, face death, injuries and other war traumas.

However, in some cases men who are caught as prisoners of war are sexually assaulted as an act of humiliation in order to breakdown their 'manhood'. The case of the Yezidi genocide committed by ISIS symbolises this horror. Women were taken as spoils of war; they could be raped, sold and turned into slaves. Men who did not convert were killed.

**Jacobsen: Looking into the past a bit, you were one of the speakers for the March, 2003 London, United Kingdom anti-war rally. What was the content of, and the reaction to, the speech?**

**Mahmoud:** I used to take part in anti-war demonstrations against US-lead wars in Afghanistan. Later on, when the US and its allies decided to attack Iraq in 2003, I became more involved and active in the anti-war efforts in UK and elsewhere.

I asserted my opposition to the war on Iraq, despite the fact of being Kurdish and someone who has suffered immensely under Saddam's regime. I still didn't think that any foreign intervention was going to improve our lives.

I also emphasised that this war will only bring more terrorism because it will strengthen political Islam, i.e. Islamism. Some people on the political Left liked my opposition to the war but disliked my opposition to political Islam, as they view them as an "anti-imperialist" resistance.

To me, however, this is absurd – how can a terrorist force that kills, beheads, and oppresses women have anything to do with resisting imperialism?

There is no doubt that we all wanted an end to Saddam's totalitarian regime, but I was opposed to foreign invasion. In this region we don't have a good experience with foreign interventions and colonialism throughout history.

Imperialist powers invade, destroy and support or install puppet regimes to serve their interest only. Look at Iraq and Afghanistan – since the invasion we are faced with much more terrorism, instability, poverty, displacement and mass migration of people. There is a humanitarian disaster and an endless tragedy of war and bloodshed.

**Jacobsen: You have also featured on major news outlets such as The Guardian, The Independent, BBC, CNN, NBC, and Sky News. You have campaigned strongly against Sharia law in addition to the oppression of women in Iraq and Kurdistan. Does this campaigning against Sharia law extend into the international domain?**

**Mahmoud:** Yes, because political Islamist groups are now everywhere seeking to impose Islamist ideals on people and restricting freedom of speech and expression. Even in UK we have problem with religious schooling, Mosques that advocate for Jihad, and hate speech.

We have Sharia councils that violate women's rights. I am part of the One Law for All coalition that seeks to expose these violations and influence government policy makers. The struggle for women's rights, secularism and universal values is an international struggle.

I always felt I was part of this worldwide struggle even if we are confined to local issues, but we fight with a universal vision for rights, gender equality, secularism and an egalitarian alternative to patriarchal capitalist system.

**Jacobsen: What religious/irreligious and ethnic worldview makes the most sense with respect to the proper interpretation of the world to you?**

**Mahmoud:** I am not interested in any religions that seek to convince me of *another* world. I live here in the now, that is what it matters to me. I take a stand against injustice, class division and the gender apartheid that is currently taking place.

We need to replace the horrendous climate that has been created by capitalism and corporate profit-making by creating a heaven on this earth, one in which we are all treated equally, fairly and with justice for all. I have no time for tales of heaven and hell in another world. There is no evidence of such realms.

However, I have experienced very similar places here in *this* earth. After having lived in war zones and having had fought for survival, being in London is to me like heaven. I felt human again. I can enjoy the freedoms I am entitled to as a woman. I owe it to the struggle of generations of powerful feminist movements in this country.

**Jacobsen: Does this comprehensive activism – women's rights, Kurdish culture, feminism, anti-war, and, I assume, others – come from the religious/irreligious worldview at all?**

**Mahmoud:** To me, they come from an irreligious worldview. This is because religions limit our imaginations and they limited our freedom of thought. Religion restricts human creativity, it restricts our freedom of ideas. It subjects people to an outmoded dictates – be they from the bible, the Quran, or any other holy book.

The notion of sin, guilt, shame and honour create a gender divide and it imposes a hetero-normative narrative that is shamefully discriminating. As a woman, I felt I was half human when I was religious. I felt everything I do was loaded with guilt, and that I am somehow inferior to men.

When I started to question and dislike all the restrictions I realised that religion is not for me and that it is a man made and merely in the service of men. The more I read into world-religion, the more I realised it is extremely patriarchal and oppressive towards women.

**Jacobsen: How can people become involved with the Culture Project, or in the advocacy and promotion of Kurdish culture?**

**Mahmoud:** Well, we really need help and support from talented people, people who have editing skills, who can review and analyse art work, who can write reports, proposals, and we need people who have design skills. Any support through volunteering would be deeply cherished.

**Jacobsen: Thank you for your time, Houzan.**

**Mahmoud:** You are most welcome, it is my pleasure.

# Interview with Annie Laurie Gaylor on Religion's Battle on Women's Rights

July 9, 2017

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

*Annie Laurie Gaylor is the Co-President of the Freedom From Religion Foundation (FFRF) with Dan Barker. She has been part of the fight against the encroachment of religion on secular culture, and human and women's rights for decades. Here she talks with Scott Douglas Jacobsen about the FFRF and some personal history.*

*\*This audio interview has been edited for clarity and readability and approved by the interviewee.\**

**Scott Douglas Jacobsen:** To begin, was there a family background in non-belief? Or if there was a background in religion, in family, how did you come to not believe in a formal faith?

**Gaylor:** I am a 3<sup>rd</sup> generation freethinker on my mother's side of the family. My brothers and I grew up without any religious indoctrination. We consider ourselves very lucky. My father was brought up in a religion but didn't become too devoted.

So my parents were of accord, and felt very strongly that it is almost child abuse to indoctrinate small children into scary concepts like original sin and everlasting torment, guilt, shame – before they can even understand abstractions.

In the same office building where my mother worked, the dentist said, "Oh, you have such well-behaved children. How do you account for that?" She suggested that you should not indoctrinate children. It shocked him quite a bit.

**Jacobsen:** But, growing up at a time when religion was taken for granted in the US, did you not have questions of your own?

**Gaylor:** Yes. When we would bring up religion to our parents, it was clear they did not believe, but they did not impose it on us. It would come up in the conversation naturally. We got the idea that religion was not for us, that it's a bit ridiculous. But we knew that it was serious topic that we would one day be expected to make up our own minds about.

**Jacobsen:** Were you aware of the lack of status of women, in general, within religions at a young age?

**Gaylor:** Actually, I was, because my best friend was Catholic. My friend once complained that the only reason we had to go to school was because of this woman, and I realised much later she was referring to Eve. I knew vaguely who Adam and Eve were, and only realised belatedly that my friend was blaming school on Eve as if it were a sentence.

Women, or Eve, in her worldview were responsible for everything bad in the world. In that respect, that was a little wake-up call. I grew up free from all of the God stuff. I was, of course, surrounded by religion. As I grew a little older, I realised very quickly, in school, that we were the odd ones out for not having a religion.

Interestingly, there were two main reactions. One of them was envy. That was the most prevalent: “Oh! You don’t have to get up on Sunday to go to Sunday School at church.” It was a clear envy. The second reaction, “But how can you be an agnostic? Because you’re a good girl.” I was well-behaved. I didn’t get into trouble.

So early on, I was encountering this ridiculous stereotype, which dogs non-believers still today: That you can’t be good without God, or that our morality must come from religion. So if you’re a moral person, it doesn’t equate that you could be a non-believer.

I was the only agnostic girl in the class. There was one Jewish girl and one non-believer in a class of about 30 kids. So I was aware that I was in a great minority, but I never felt the least bit apologetic about it. I felt that this was a very natural way to be.

**Jacobsen: This conviction continued with you throughout?**

**Gaylor:** When I later studied women freethinkers in history, I was very struck by Ernestine L. Rose. The daughter of a Jewish rabbi in Poland, she was born behind a wall. She was a rebellious little girl by the age of 5 who didn’t take with religion and ended up coming over to the United States.

She became the first woman to lobby for women’s property rights in New York State. In 1848, New York became the first state to enact property rights for married women. It had been introduced by a freethinking judge. Ernestine had come in by 1836 and went door-to-door trying to get women to support this legislation.

It took 12 years. She was a famous feminist and an atheist. She was invited to speak, and very celebrated in infidel societies.

One her main speeches talked about how every child is born an atheist, and would remain so unless they are otherwise inculcated. I think she’s right. It doesn’t mean everybody’s born rational and necessarily able to critique religion based on reason, but, of course, dogma has to be inculcated in you, all of the religious concepts and stories.

You are not born with those. So I feel like I was just given a head start.

**Jacobsen: Of course, one of the most well-known female freethinkers in our history was Hypatia. There were severe consequences for her.**

**Gaylor:** Yes. Of course, even later I think women freethinkers had to be very brave because we only see atheist and freethought in the 1500s, 1600s, and after the Enlightenment in the Western culture. They were still killing women as witches in the 1500s, 1600s, and into the 1700s.

So these women were all aware of this terrible history of women being put to death as witches. In the face of this hostile climate, I think the fact that women caught up very quickly as leading exponents of freethought is very meritorious.

For eg., Mary Wollstonecraft from the 1790s, Ernestine L. Rose in the 1830s etc. In the 1820s, Frances Wright became the first woman to speak to mixed audiences of men and women going after the clergy.

So women have been very leading advocates for free-thought. All these women were simply subject to all kinds of situations by the clergy. Ernestine gave one speech where 700 theology students mobbed the speech and turned off the gaslight. She was cute. She said, "There is one thing true in Bible. Let there be light." Or something like that.

**Jacobsen: That must have been quite a time to live through.**

**Gaylor:** Elizabeth Cady Stanton, who was very active in the 1840s and was an agnostic, said, "The Bible was hurled at us from every side," when they were talking about women's rights. The feminist movement was largely initiated by women freethinkers, which makes sense because women were told that they had to be in silence and servitude.

So it took heretics and infidels to be willing to brave the wrath of the clergy and to violate the strictures of the New Testament.

But I think the feminist movement owes an enormous debt to women freethinkers. I don't think that's as publicly known as it should be. That's one of the reasons I put together this anthology: *Women Without Superstition*, the first anthology of women freethinkers. It was clearly a theme.

It wasn't what I necessarily started off with as a preconceived notion. But it came up over and over again.

The earliest women freethinkers and writers were also the earliest feminists.

My influence, besides my mother, was Bertrand Russell. Russell was the one that I had read. Even in the 1960s and 70s, when there was very little in the libraries about freethought, you could almost always find *Why I am Not a Christian* by Bertrand Russell.

His popular writings from the 40s and 50s, almost single-handedly kept freethought alive in this country.

When everything else was being taken off the shelf, for e.g., Ingersoll wasn't there, but Russell's writings remain very influential. So I would say that my personal hero, when I was growing up as a junior high school student, was Bertrand Russell. I didn't really read Asimov that much. But I was pleased to meet him because he was always an outspoken freethinker. His wife continues that

tradition. I think he was more influential to someone like my husband Dan Barker. Dan, who was raised fundamentalist, would still read science fiction.

**Jacobsen: Then you co-founded the Freedom From Religion Foundation (FFRF) with your mother.**

**Gaylor:** Yes, we co-founded it in 1976. My mother and I started FFRF because we became aware of what it meant. She was the principal founder and was asked to go national with it in 1978. . I was in college when we founded FFRF.

It was partly when Jerry Falwell was in ascendancy. We felt nobody was speaking out against his lies. His historic lies. What opened our eyes was my mother's work for abortion rights. She wrote the first editorial in favour of legalising abortion in 1967, in Wisconsin. She was a statewide, well-known abortion proponent and I would accompany her to her interviews and speeches.

The capitol in Madison would be filled with nuns and priests and bussed-in school children. Every statement they made against contraception and abortion would start with "God", for eg, "God says abortion is murder."

It was very obvious to us who the organised opposition to women's reproductive rights was. My mother felt that the work done by women's groups were great, but unless they were going to get at the root of the problem, which was religious sway over our civil law, that we would never make progress.

So that was one of the main reasons we founded FFRF. It was our feminist experiences. Unfortunately, we are still fighting the same battle today.

**Jacobsen: That's right. Now, the current battleground on the issue of abortion and reproductive health rights is with the "Religious Right". How do you think your mother would feel in the light of actions such as the "Global Gag" rule, which was enacted by the current Trump administration?**

**Gaylor:** I think she would be completely vindicated! I mean, she would feel that we've sounded the alarm. She would feel how important it is to carry on. She felt that the enemy of women's rights was religion.

That unless we would actively confront that threat our rights were always going to be in jeopardy. She would feel even more strongly about how important it is that separation of church and state be honoured. Of course, she was dismayed that since *Roe vs. Wade*, we've been on the defensive almost from the beginning.

Here's what she (Anne Nicol Gaylor) wrote:

*In working for women's rights I fought in a battle that would never end, because the root cause of the denial of those rights was religion and its control over government. Unless*

*religion is kept in its place, all personal rights will be in jeopardy. This is the battle that needs to be fought. To be free from religion is an advantage for individuals; it is a necessity for government.*

Something that she wrote in 1987, still very completely relevant and true.

**Jacobsen: How do you feel about that?**

**Gaylor:** It just proves how important this battle is. We've pointed out how important it is to keep religion out of government if we're going to protect women's rights. We knew we weren't taking this victory for granted.

We've lost a lot of ground. That we can never have freedom while we've got religion in government. Wherever you are, and whatever the religion is. I feel that FFRF is really, at base, working for the Enlightenment, or working to keep it going. It is a very important job. We've lost so much ground since the 50s.

That's the decade that I was born in. Ironically, I spent most of my life trying to undo much of the bad precedent that was passed by Congress in the 1950s.

**Jacobsen: In the formation and evolution of the United States, what do you think has been most influential in rooting religion in this country?**

**Gaylor:** This idea that we're a Christian nation has really changed the perception in our country. In fact, we have a godless and secular constitution, but there have been many actions of Congress that have mis-educated the public, such as inserting "Under God" in the *Pledge of Allegiance* in 1954.

Putting "In God We Trust" on the currency, then adopting it as a second national motto, when we had a perfectly good one, "E. Pluribus Unum," which celebrates diversity – "Out of many, one."

That was chosen by our Founders: Benjamin Franklin, John Adams. Thomas Jefferson chose that motto.

**Jacobsen: But would you say there are other ways in which American history allows for religion to play an important role?**

**Gaylor:** The National Day of Prayer, which directs the president to direct citizens to pray every year. It has created so much mischief. We sued over that. We had a victory, then it got turned around.

We sued over the housing allowance law passed in the 1950s, which is the IRS advantage for clergy. The Internal Revenue Service gives churches the right to pay clergy with a housing allowance that they can deduct from their taxable income.



They only good thing I can think out of the 50s is the Johnson Amendment. That's what Trump keeps talking about overturning. It is codifying that tax exempt groups can't engage in politicking.

He had his executive order last week during the National Day of Prayer. We sued over it. Essentially, he said the IRS is not to enforce the anti-electioneering provisions against churches. Of course, FFRF is a tax exempt group.

So churches are being treated preferentially. So that gave us injury to sue. We sued over this before.

**Jacobsen: When was the last time, in your opinion, that separation of church and state has been as much under threat as it is now?**

**Gaylor:** The 50s were the Red Scare. After wars, it was a bad time for individual liberties. We haven't really recovered from those inroads in the 50s, even though the population – the demographics – have changed a great deal.

We're talking about a quarter of the population that is non-religious. But the politicians and the courts haven't caught up with the population. We' had this 'coup' with the religious Right with the last election.

But they are not going to acknowledge the changing demographics. They are quite the opposite.

**Jacobsen: What countries would you say we can look to as a model? What influences people's departure from religion?**

**Gaylor:** Iceland is ahead of the game in every way. Although, things can change quickly. The economic side, they really took a beating in 2008. They are very isolated. But they have been good at fighting off the evangelists who want to come and visit them.

They used to be a very, very religious and austere place in the 50s, 60s, and in the 70s — the poverty level was part of that, but I think it's an amazing country.

I guess, you can never completely count on things. The pendulum can swing quickly, but that's also true in our favour. I think the election in 2018 could be quite pivotal in this country in stopping some of the assaults that are ongoing right now.

**Jacobsen: Any feelings or thoughts in conclusion about our conversation today?**

**Gaylor:** I would say that we've got our work cut out for us. I truly believe the motto that FFRF has: Freedom depends on freethinkers.

**Jacobsen: Thank you for your time today, Annie.**

**Gaylor:** I enjoyed the conversation. Thank you.

# Interview with Ex-Muslims of Sri Lanka

July 10, 2017

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

*Ex-Muslims of Sri Lanka (EMSL) is an organisation devoted to the representation of a minority within a minority – ex-Muslims. This is an educational interview with direct, frank answers on serious questions for a widely unacknowledged persecuted community: the ex-religious, and in this instance the ex-Muslim. I feel personal impetus to research, interview, and present these minority within a minority interviews. So here we are.*

**Scott Douglas Jacobsen: Within the ex-Muslim community, there are so many stories discussing the discrimination, prejudice, hate crimes, physical violence and attacks, and so on, against the ex-Muslim community, usually from the Muslim community at large. What is the state of irreligious freedom in Sri Lanka?**

**Ex-Muslims of Sri Lanka:** Sri Lanka is a non-Muslim country, and being irreligious (even though there are only a very few individuals) is not considered as a serious crime by the majority i.e. the Buddhists and the Hindus.

Yet Muslims are concerned, of course, as it is considered the ultimate betrayal of and attack against the community and the religion. As far as our members are concerned, knowing these realities that happen everywhere, most of them have chosen to remain closeted.

Very few of them have decided to openly discuss their non-belief with the family and friends. They have to face physical violence, discrimination and isolation, and these have taken a considerable psychological toll on them.

To our surprise, while working towards forming the Ex Muslims of Sri Lanka, we found out that there is not even a single irreligious, atheist organisation for the Ex-Buddhists or Ex-Hindus existed in Sri Lanka, even though the two religions do not prosecute those who desert the faith, unlike Islam. So, we are the first of this kind to be formed as an organisation / group at the national level.

**Jacobsen: Maryam Namazie is an articulate, passionate, and insightful voice of ex-Muslims in Britain. Has she been a beacon of hope and inspiration for the Ex-Muslims in Sri Lanka? Also, has she helped the Ex-Muslims of Sri Lanka in any way?**

**Ex-Muslims of Sri Lanka:** Yes indeed, she has been a considerable motivational strength as far as Sri Lankan ex-Muslims are concerned. When the founder of the EMSL decided to form the group, he contacted many ex-Muslims around the world and she was one of the very few who responded and provided guidance.

We are very grateful for being accredited as one of the affiliated bodies of Council of Ex-Muslims of Britain (CEMB). We were also invited to participate in the International Conference on Freedom of Conscience and Expression in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century.

But unfortunately we were compelled not to submit our visa applications in order to protect our identities from being exposed, considering the British visa applications are handled by a VFS office (third-party entity), not by the British High Commission.

**Jacobsen: There is a foundational need for equality and universal rights, including the right to criticise religion, the right to atheism, the right to secularism, the right to freedom for women, to protection of children, and from intimidation tactics by religion. What success stories have there been in relation to each of these fronts for ex-Muslims in Sri Lanka?**

**Ex-Muslims of Sri Lanka:** Since none of our members have declared themselves publicly as ex-Muslims (except the few exposed themselves to their intimate family and friends), we are not in a position to provide a definitive answer to this question.

But we can recall an incident when a female Muslim writer named Shameela Seyyida was forced to flee the country in the face of violence after expressing her liberal views whilst being interviewed for BBC radio with regard to protecting the rights of the women who are involved in prostitution.

Here in Sri Lanka, Muslims marriages and divorces are governed by a special law that is in accordance with Sharia law, known as the Muslim Personal Marriage Act. The law allows Muslims to marry little girls, girls even lower than the age of 12.

There are voices against the law and demanding to amend the law on par with present day civil societies, but the clergies-controlled local Islamic Authority, All Ceylon Jamiyathul Ulam, refuses to accept the necessary changes to the law – including defining a minimum marriage age for Muslims.

Many of the educated Muslim women are unhappy with the law, but they are afraid to raise their voices in the fear of being labelled as either women with “loose characters” or “evil and wicked women” or even slut-shamed by local clerics.

**Jacobsen: What have been notable murders of ex-Muslims in Sri Lanka for their renouncement of the faith? Does this happen as often with another religion’s faithful becoming faithless? Or does this happen mostly with Islam?**

**Ex-Muslims of Sri Lanka:** Even though we have received a substantial amount of death threats online, So far we have been fortunate enough not to have encountered any lynchings, beheadings or torture so far.

It is so disheartening to recall that one ex-Muslim from the state of Tamil Nadu, India, named Farook – a 32-year-old father of two – who was brutally murdered a few months back by pious, bearded Muslims for becoming an apostate. We have not heard anyone being punished or murdered in this century for leaving a religion other than the religion of Islam.

As far as we know, Islam is the only religion that commands to kill those who leave the religion. But it is widely witnessed that Muslim apologists (apologists often identified as moderate Muslims) try to twist the matter by bringing up some earlier Qur'anic verses to show the world that Islam has no compulsion.

They do their best to bury the fact that Islam has barbaric law against those who leave the religion.

We have to understand something important from the history of Mohamed to understand the whole picture clearly. The apologists ask us not to take Qur'anic verses out of context, but it is they who cherry pick the peaceful verses to mislead people.

At the time, Mohamed claimed he was the prophet of God, he was 40. He spent the first 13 years in his hometown Mecca, gradually inviting people to follow him, but the vast majority rejected him.

After 13 years of failure in his home town, he moved to another city named Medina, situated 450 km away from Mecca. In Medina he became a success as he gained more followers and unlimited power.

He lived his next 10 years in Medina till his death at the age of 63.

His prophetic career can be divided into two parts. The first one is the 13 years he spent in Mecca with no power plus his first two years in Medina. The second part is his last 8 years in Medina as a powerful leader, ruler and warlord. The first part is 15 years, while the second part is 8 years – a total of 23 years.

During the first part of his prophetic career, he had lived a non-violent and generally peaceful life, and his preaching was primarily about tolerance, non-violence, and peace. He had lived only with two wives during this period. He married his second wife only after the demise of his first wife. He did not even have two wives at the same time during the first phase of his religious career.

The second part of his prophetic career spanned around 8 years until his death. Having gained all the necessary power in Medina, he started to exhibit his true colours during this period. He even had 10 wives at a time, until his death, including a few teenage girls and an underage child.

He waged wars against non-Muslim and Jewish tribes. He carried out mass murders, genocides, lootings, sex-slavery, slavery-trading, and other violent and disgusting crimes.

Now let's come back to the subject of killing apostates. During the first part of his prophetic career, he did not command any such punishments, but the second and the last part of the career he clearly gave orders to assassinate those who leave Islam.

According to Islamic principles, when a new rule is introduced which contradicts an earlier one, the earlier one would be invalidated even if it remains in the Qur'an or Hadith. A good example of this principle is the Qur'anic verse about prohibiting alcohol consumption.

The earlier Qur'anic verses ordered Muslims not to drink alcohol while praying, but later on the order was overruled by the complete prohibition of consuming alcohol. Both these orders are found in the Qur'an to date and they are recited by Muslims all over the globe, but it is the second rule that is accepted by Muslims.

So we understand that if there is an order or guidance that is contrary to the earlier one in Islam, the latest one would be the valid one. Muslim apologists have successfully misguided the world by using the preaching from Mohamed's first part of the prophetic career to build up a fake image of Islam that finds expression in that old chestnut "Islam is the religion of peace".

In reality, of course, the religion is not a "religion of peace".

**Jacobsen: How can people be protected from being misguided by using only the preaching of the first phase of Mohamed's Islamic life?**

**Ex-Muslims of Sri Lanka:** People should be either educated or made aware of the two parts of Mohamed's religious career, at least in brief. We are not certain that every Muslim understands this so seldom-discussed fact. We believe that if they really know this, the real peace-loving Muslims would have to make a strong decision about continuing to follow and view Islam as a "religion of peace".

**Jacobsen: What can improve the state of free speech for ex-Muslims in Sri Lanka? What can build the ties for those ex-Muslims in other countries?**

**Ex-Muslims of Sri Lanka:** We feel within the Sri Lankan context, as well as the world in general, we need to promote questioning, challenging, opposing ideas and tolerate and respect opposing ideas. Moreover, we need to cultivate open-mindedness and critical thinking from a young age to accept self-criticism.

According to a survey by the Daily Telegraph, as far as Sri Lanka is concerned, it is one of the top 5 countries in the world with a ratio of 99% of people who think that religion is very important. With this background, improving free speech in our society is an uphill task.

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

**Ex-Muslims of Sri Lanka:** To be frank, we do not promote atheism as an alternative to Islam. Ex-Muslims of Sri Lanka is a platform for those who have left Islam under various circumstances and not following any other faiths.

They can be atheists, agnostics or irreligious.

But with regards to Islam, we clearly think Qur'an is not a divinely revealed book. Instead, we think it's a man-made one. Likewise, we also think Mohamed is not a perfect role model for humanity. Our best argument against Islam is Mohamed and his life. If you understand the timeline of events about his life, you will see him as the person he really was.

**Jacobsen: For those that renounce the faith outright, have family and friends disowned them? What were the most hurtful comments that you've heard? How do they cope?**

**Ex-Muslims of Sri Lanka:** As we said earlier, many of our members remain closeted. Despite that their obvious irreligiousness itself has caused them emotional distress. The rest who are courageous enough to admit their faithlessness to their close family and friends are forced to endure depression, isolation, and at certain instances even physical abuse.

The common accusation is that we are conspiring against Islam and Muslims for monetary objectives with support of Zionists and the west. Furthermore, we have been labelled devilish and other not-so-favourable names.

**Jacobsen: Are these typical responses to leaving Islam?**

**Ex-Muslims of Sri Lanka: Yes indeed, and you find this only among Muslims.**

**Jacobsen: Why is the reaction so seemingly disproportionate – against even a son, a brother, or a friend?**

**Ex-Muslims of Sri Lanka:** Nearly all children born in Muslim families are indoctrinated with religious beliefs from a very tender age. Starting with evening religious schools (Madrasa), regular general preachings, Friday's Jummah preachings, sponsored programs on state own media – including hours of preaching on national radio etc., all brainwash Muslims, especially children.

They are taught to think, act and live in a particular way – approved by Islamic teachings. The local Islamic Authority, All Ceylon Jamiyathul Ulama, and foreign-funded (Specially Arabic countries and Turkey) Islamic movements, make this scenario even worse.

**Jacobsen: What is the best way to combat far-Right ideologies such as ethnic nationalism and Islamism?**

**Ex-Muslims of Sri Lanka:** Nowadays, here in Sri Lanka, we are experiencing politically motivated Buddhist extremism, but luckily most of the Buddhists did not rally behind such extremism. Providing a secular-based education would be the best way to encourage critical thinking and inquisitiveness. Moreover, teaching children to respect each other's views and to promote secular humanitarian values would start a better tomorrow.

**Jacobsen: What do the most technologically advanced and democratic, and developed, societies take for granted with respect to free-speech?**

**Ex-Muslims of Sri Lanka:** In the majority of Western countries, free speech is more or less guaranteed by a constitution and they have learnt their lessons during the Enlightenment era.

There was no such thing, even remotely, experienced by people in countries such as Sri Lanka. Though free speech is nominally mentioned in the Sri Lankan constitution in writing, religion, at the same time, has also been given prominent place. Therefore, religious beliefs overpower free speech.

**Jacobsen: Waleed Al-Husseini of the Council of Ex-Muslims of France wrote on the conspiratorial perspective of some Muslims. That is, individuals leaving Islam can be seen as an agent of a Western or Jewish State. What seems like the source of this conspiracy view?**

**Ex-Muslims of Sri Lanka:** Scott, once again, we have to go for an answer that is similar to the one of Waleed Al-Husseini. The Qur'an and the Hadiths are the main reason for this conspiracy standpoint.

There are a lot of Qur'anic verses and Hadiths said by Mohamed during the latter part of his prophetic career that spread hatred towards Jews and Christians.

Muslims are made to believe that every failure they experience and every failure within the religion can be explained by pointing by Jews, Israel or Mossad. Most Muslims can't even think that a Muslim can leave the religion by his or her own will.

We are often accused of working for Israel, but we are the only ones who understand the struggles in operating the EMSL. For the past three months, we are struggling a lot to find a place to have a meet-up for our members, but we are still unable to locate a place that is convenient and safe for us.

Also, a general look at our official website will make anyone aware that it needs a lot of development and updates, but we are not even in a position to do the necessary developments. Muslims are made to think that people of Israel do nothing but sit and spend their whole time thinking of ways to conspire against Islam.

Let's be honest, we had the same mindset during our days as Muslims.

**Jacobsen: How was the organisation formed? Why was it formed? What are its current educational initiatives and social activist works?**

**Ex-Muslims of Sri Lanka:** It started as one man's idea. Originally, it was meant to be a meet-up with his old friend who had also become an ex-Muslim a few years ago. Once they realised that both of them were in the same boat, they strongly felt the need to meet each other.

But the plan took a different shape when the founder felt a responsibility to bring all other individuals who had left Islam under one umbrella. That was when EMSL was formed, in December 2016.

Following months of online and live discussions, social media campaigns were carried out to create the dream of forming Sri Lanka's first irreligious organisation at a national level. The funniest situation was when some hardcore Islamists who were well-known by some of our members tried their level best to join us as spies by pretending to be ex-Muslims. We had to give them cold shoulders and ignore them completely.

We have many plans for online activities and we will do them when the time and resources permit us. Currently, we share other's materials on our official Facebook page.

**Jacobsen: There are a series of planned resolutions from the Ex-Muslims of Sri Lanka (or, maybe, they have come out, but in any case). What is the state of them? What will be their content and purpose?**

**What is the most important one? How will these improve the livelihoods of ex-Muslims in Sri Lanka, especially with the political activism pointed at the Government of Sri Lanka?**

**Ex-Muslims of Sri Lanka:** With regard to the proposal, they are still at the draft stage. Our objective in bringing such a proposal is to ensure equal rights of irreligious people, atheists, secular humanists, freethinkers, and LGBTIQ communities, and also to enlighten the public with regards to the very existence of such people and communities in Sri Lanka.

*“The present system of segregating the schools on the basis of race and religion should be abolished. The mind of the children should not be poised with racist and religious fanaticism.”*

We think the above one is the most important resolution. If the minds of growing children are not poisoned with racist and religious ideologies or when the idea of either following or not following a religion is made as freedom of choice, children will view the world around them differently. That would improve everyone's lives, including ex-Muslims – at least in the long run.

**Jacobsen: What are the upcoming and ongoing initiatives for the Ex-Muslims of Sri Lanka? You can be reached through the website, Facebook, and email.**

**Ex-Muslims of Sri Lanka:** We have made steps to prepare video testimonies of some of our members. We have also prepared a message to Sri Lankan Muslims. We hope that message would have reached the media by the time this interview is published.

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

**Ex-Muslims of Sri Lanka:** We are grateful to Conatus News for giving us this great opportunity. Scott, we appreciate your time and efforts in making this interview a success. We hope that this interview would make awareness about Ex-Muslims among local Muslims.



Finally, we would like to take this opportunity to invite Sri Lankan ex-Muslims who have not yet joined us. We know there are a few players in Facebook & Twitter with their own identities as well as concealed identities. We are hopeful that they also join us.

Thank you very much.

**Jacobsen: Thank you for your time.**

# Q&A on the Philosophy of Economics with Dr. Alexander Douglas – Session 4

July 17, 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 discuss the philosophy of economics, its evolution, and how the discipline of economics should move forward in a world with increasing inequality so that it is more attuned to democracy. Previous sessions of our Q&A can be found [here](#), [here](#), and [here](#).*

**Scott Douglas Jacobsen: Dr. Douglas, as previously discussed, a gap in knowledge, theory, and predictable consequences have developed in economics. When did this occur?**

**Dr. Alexander Douglas:** Economics didn't always seek status as a precise empirical science. Adam Smith famously declared disinterest in what he called "political arithmetic".

He might have been thinking of William Petty's *Political Arithmetick* (1690), which attempted to advise the king on the specific economic effects of various policies. Smith, at least as I read him, was more interested in the moral psychology of economic activity, such as the sorts of motivations that drive people into economic interaction and the psychological effects of being engaged in it. I think he was closer to a novelist than a scientist.

He sought to dramatize capitalism and present the sorts of character that inhabit it. There is a world of difference between this, and the ambition to use economic theory to forecast the specific effects of various policies or institutional changes.

The mania for the latter sort of calculated forecasting took off with the innovations in national accounting statistics that began with the development of the National Bureau of Economic Research in the United States, and in other similar departments around the globe, in the middle of the twentieth century.

Now economic aggregates are treated as the report card for the standing government. The government takes credit when the numbers look good. The opposition blames the government when the numbers look bad. Both agree to propound the illusion that the government somehow controls these numbers.

"Now economic aggregates are treated as the report card for the standing government. The government takes credit when the numbers look good. The opposition blames the government when the numbers look bad."

**Jacobsen: What might be the upper limit in predicting human choices?**

**Douglas:** I don't know. Neuroscience might one day discover some algorithm that predicts precise behavioural outputs from easily-sorted classes of inputs. We'd then have a precise method for predicting behavioural responses of human agents to environmental changes.

But, again, even if this were possible, who knows whether it would be of any predictive use. Huge differences in behavioural outcomes might be made by differences too small for the instruments to measure.

At any rate, I don't see why we should be trying to predict human behaviour – or what I'd rather call human action. The eighteenth-century materialist Baron D'Holbach dreamed of a day when the government could “hold the magnet” to move its citizens around like iron filings, after having developed a complete science of psychological “magnetism”.

He was, in other words, an early advocate of governance by manipulation of incentives – perhaps an ancestor of today's proponents of “nudge” theory. I find this idea disturbing.

I believe that the unpredictability of human action is a precious thing that should be preserved, and instead of trying to render human action predictable and thus controllable, I'd rather we strove to develop an ethics and a politics that fully embraces uncertainty. Maybe if we stopped trying to control each other so much, we'd find that the world is becoming less dangerous rather than more.

What really worries me is that in developing a theory that treats people as cipher-like “pleasure machines” – to use Geoffrey Hodgson's term – and in designing our institutions on the basis of that theory, we will end up reducing people to what the theory treats them as being.

Economists often say that their theory is value-neutral, that they aren't telling us how people *should* be, but merely telling us how people *are*. They treat opposition to their project as a superstitious reaction against scientific enquiry.

But they don't consider that the prevailing theory of human nature can end up transforming human nature. For example, if you regard humans as little more than consumers, you might cover the landscape with advertising, seeking to tap into this lucrative monomania.

Then when the advertising becomes so abundant that people have nothing else to look at, they really do become the monomaniacal consumers they were assumed to be. This is, I think, what Ruskin was getting at in the first part of *Unto This Last*.

A key job for philosophers is to fight this tendency that degrades the human spirit in practice by underestimating it in theory.

**Jacobsen: Could the rules for economic behaviour – exchange of products and services – become looser with weakened social ties, and thus loosen the Wittgensteinian view on “rules”?**

**Douglas:** In the ‘Wittgensteinian’ view that I proposed (which may not really have much to do with Wittgenstein), rules are instantiated at the level of communities, not individuals.

Certainly, we could explain the exchange of products and services by identifying the various social rules that drive these exchanges, beginning our analysis at the level of the community rather than the individual.

But in doing so we would be giving up a crucial principle of mainstream economics, namely *methodological individualism*: the principle that the unit of explanation for economic behaviour are *individuals*. Individuals, in mainstream economic theory, are supposed to have preference-orderings, which are rules governing their behaviour (“swap one apple for two or more oranges, but not less”).

The ‘Wittgensteinian’ argument I hinted at has the conclusion that preferences can’t pertain to individuals on their own. A rule requires a crowd in order to be concretely instantiated. A rule that isn’t properly binding has no concrete reality; it exists as a mere abstraction. But a rule that I impose on myself isn’t properly binding.

I always have absolute power to exempt myself from the rule. The same holds for a small group, who can always conspire to excuse themselves. But a *crowd* develops an inner tendency towards conformism, exercising peer-pressure and the “tyranny of public opinion” to keep its members in the fold. If (concretely existing) rules are peculiar to crowds, then so are preferences.

Individuals explore and experiment; it is the crowd that gives rise to the rigid preferences from which economists begin their analyses.

“Critics of capitalism often focus on the exploitation of the worker, but, as Joan Robinson said, it is often worse under capitalism to *not* have your labour exploited – at least not in the labour market.”

**Jacobsen: How do economic choices (tendencies) change over the course of an individual’s life?**

**Douglas:** Well, it is only in the middle of our lives that we can expect much from the Invisible Hand – and that’s only for those who are able and legally permitted to sell their labour. During childhood and old age, we can only count on what others are obliged to give us.

I believe that our societies pitifully under-provides for the non-working population. Young children are packed into classrooms in ugly buildings, often taught by inadequately-trained assistants.

The elderly languish in miserable and understaffed care facilities, or are left alone at home. Provision for the disabled is always strongly urged as it is inadequately funded. For centuries the domestic labour of women, unrecognised as a commodity by the market, was at best remunerated with a bare subsistence living; and to some extent this remains true.

Meanwhile, income-earners get to enjoy the highest material standard of living in history: things that used to be luxury commodities – holidays abroad, designer clothing, exotic cuisine –are now mass-produced for widespread enjoyment by the waged.

John Kenneth Galbraith once depicted an American family meditating on “the curious unevenness of its blessings” – an engorgement of private consumer goods alongside threadbare public services.

Today this unevenness translates into a massive inequality between income-earners, who can access the consumer goods with which the market is gavaged, and non-income-earners, who are stuck with the vanishing trickle of public services.

There is no reason to expect anything different according to standard economic theory. Why would a market society produce anything for those who have no commodities to offer in exchange, or are not permitted to exchange what they have to offer, or offer a sort of value that is not recognised as a legitimate commodity by the market?

Critics of capitalism often focus on the exploitation of the worker, but, as Joan Robinson said, it is often worse under capitalism to *not* have your labour exploited – at least not in the labour market.

**Jacobsen: Thank you once again, Dr. Douglas.**

# **Q&A on the Philosophical Foundations of Psychology with Dr. Sven van de Wetering – Session 2**

**July 18, 2017**

**Scott Douglas Jacobsen**

*Dr. Sven van de Wetering has just stepped down as head of psychology at the University of the Fraser Valley, and is now an associate professor in the same department. He is on the Advisory Board of In-Sight: Independent Interview-Based Journal. Dr. van de Wetering earned his BSc in Biology at The University of British Columbia, and Bachelors of Arts in Psychology at Concordia University, Master of Arts, and PhD in Psychology from Simon Fraser University. His research interest lies in “conservation psychology, lay conceptions of evil, relationships between personality variables and political attitudes.” Here we explore, as an educational series, the philosophical foundations of psychology. You can find the first session of our Q&A [here](#).*

**Scott Douglas Jacobsen: What philosophy best represents the opinion of most psychologists regarding the means by which human beings think, feel, and act?**

**Dr. Sven van de Wetering:** I think we are still very far from a consensus on this issue. My personal take would be to still use the metaphor of the human as a computer. The gross outlines of the computer’s programming have been laid down by the process of evolution by natural selection, and the fine tuning done by various forms of learning. Feelings are part of the overall system, not some sort of exogenous factor.

These ideas are all at least several decades old, and to my mind, they work well together, but each component of the triad of information processing, evolution, and learning is rejected by some psychologists.

Some psychologists find that thinking of cognition as information processing is unhelpful, others believe in information processing, but consider the human information processor so general in its functioning that evolutionary psychology has no heuristic value, and some are happy with the concept of the mind as an evolved computer, but think that learning processes only do some very minor tweaking around the edges, and are not really worth worrying about.

I guess what I am trying to say is that psychology is a fundamentally pluralistic enterprise. No single theory answers your question because the human mind is a very complex device that can be fruitfully described at many different levels and from many different points of view.

Pluralism is an uncomfortable and cognitively demanding stance that is not for everyone, even among people with PhDs in psychology. Furthermore, even pluralists get things wrong (a lot), so one sometimes wonders what the payoff is.

Other than psychology being fun, of course.

“Certain statistical procedures need to be taught because academic psychologists expect one to know them, and one therefore needs to know them because it is expected, regardless of the intellectual merits of doing so.”

**Jacobsen: What is the worldview, and statistical outlook, that you try to inculcate in students and in mentored pupils such as myself?**

**van de Wetering:** As with several other aspects of psychology, I find that it has to be taught in two ways. One is at the level of the community standards of academic psychology. Certain statistical procedures need to be taught because academic psychologists expect one to know them, and one therefore needs to know them because it is expected, regardless of the intellectual merits of doing so.

The other is to do whatever it takes to find out what the data actually means. This often entails doing more descriptive work than what you see in many journal articles. In some really egregious examples, I have seen published articles where authors claimed their hypothesis was supported because some test said  $p < .05$ , but when I actually looked at the group means, the difference between them was in the opposite direction from the one predicted.

This is an extreme example, but something I see much more commonly is people writing things such as “Variable y induces people to produce behaviour x.” But when I look at the actual data, I find that both groups actually tended to avoid engaging in behaviour x, but members of the experimental group were slightly less likely to avoid behaviour x than members of the control group, and therefore people actually engaging in behaviour x made up a fairly small proportion of the overall sample.

Still more frequently and less egregiously, people will write about a difference in means as if everyone in every group was behaving in the exact way that the group mean indicates they are behaving. There is often little or no acknowledgment of variability in responses, even though the reported standard deviations indicate that this variability is substantial.

If I can summarize this paragraph, let me say that p values are given too much attention at the expense of descriptive statistics, and descriptive statistics are often being treated as if they describe everything, rather than being highly aggregated summaries that throw a lot of information away.

It is of course right to summarize and to ignore individual cases in our research reports (because to do otherwise would invite cognitive overload), but we should try to avoid conventions in writing that make it seem like the individual cases don't even exist or that the summary statistics contain all the information of interest.

We of course go into research with hypotheses in mind, but if we don't spend many hours playing with the raw data, we don't get to find out what the data are actually telling us. It's always exciting when  $p < .05$ , but that's always only a small part of the story.

Playing around with the raw data, graphing them, noticing anomalies, etc. helps keep us alert to the complex messiness of human behaviour, and helps steer us away from unjustified formulations such as “variable x causes this change in variable y” when really all we know is that in one study, on average, variable x was associated with that change in variable y, and there is seldom evidence that variable x had that effect on variable y for every single person in the study, or even for a majority of people.

**Jacobsen: Between rigour and relevance, where has there been the most fruitful growth of real data about people?**

**van de Wetering:** I am very hesitant to pronounce on this, because I am more attuned to developments on the side that emphasises rigour. That being said, I think developments have not been entirely positive on my end of the playing field, given the replication crisis and all. It may be that things are even worse among those who emphasise social relevance, but my personal opinion is that no branch of psychology is in a great place right now.

**Jacobsen: Thank you for your time, Sven – always a pleasure.**



# **Q&A on the Philosophical Foundations of Psychology with Dr. Sven van de Wetering – Session 3**

**July 29, 2017**

**Scott Douglas Jacobsen**

*Dr. Sven van de Wetering has just stepped down as head of psychology at the University of the Fraser Valley, and is now an associate professor in the same department. He is on the Advisory Board of In-Sight: Independent Interview-Based Journal. Dr. van de Wetering earned his BSc in Biology at The University of British Columbia, and Bachelors of Arts in Psychology at Concordia University, Master of Arts, and PhD in Psychology from Simon Fraser University. His research interest lies in “conservation psychology, lay conceptions of evil, relationships between personality variables and political attitudes.” Here we explore, as an educational series, the philosophical foundations of psychology. Session 1 & Session 2.*

**Scott Douglas Jacobsen:** What is the epistemology underlying statistics in psychology? Where does psychology begin to find its statistical limits?

**Dr. Sven van de Wetering:** I think the more or less explicit epistemological assumption underlying the use of statistics in psychology comes right out of Skinner and his notion that the human organism can be thought of as a locus of variables.

**In other words, human cognitive, emotional, and behavioural propensities can be meaningfully studied as dimensions that can be expressed numerically, as can environmental events likely to influence those propensities.**

**Furthermore, the task of psychology is conceived of as being to figure out ways of measuring those underlying variables and of inferring how they influence one another. We depart from Skinner, though, in rejecting his absurd claim that one can explain all variability, that the concept of error variance is meaningless.**

**Because error variance is a fundamental feature of the complexity of human organisms, and the even more complex environment in which they operate, inferential statistics then become an important tool to separate incorrect hypotheses from correct ones.**

**Also important in all this is the assumption that human beings are very good at finding patterns in any sort of data, including pure noise, and that safeguards are needed to prevent us from inferring patterns where none exist.**

**Human beings are seen as very fallible creatures, and inferential statistics are seen as safeguards against that fallibility.**

**“We depart from Skinner, though, in rejecting his absurd claim that one can explain all variability, that the concept of error variance is meaningless.”**

**Jacobsen: What are some of the most embarrassing examples of statistical over-extension in psychology studies ?**

**van de Wetering:** I'm not sure, I routinely get embarrassed by over- or misapplication of statistics, but I do sometimes think people don't know what inferential statistics means. Two patterns frequently bother me, though I can't think of particular examples off the top of my head.

One is people who conduct a study with a small sample size, fail to find a statistically reliable difference between treatment groups, and then blithely proclaim that the null hypothesis is true, as if the study's lack of statistical power is some sort of virtue.

The second pattern is almost the opposite of the first: people who conduct studies with enormous sample sizes, find a statistically reliable difference between groups, and then trumpet the finding as an important one.

They don't bother to report effect sizes, probably because to do so would be to acknowledge that the effect they have found, though statistically reliable, is too small to have a lot of real-world significance.

"I'm not sure, I routinely get embarrassed by over – or misapplication of statistics, but I do sometimes think people don't know what inferential statistics means."

**Jacobsen: We did some preliminary work in an interesting area, environmental psychology. You have an expertise in political psychology. How can statistical knowledge about political psychology influence knowledge around issues of environmental psychology, e.g. climate change denial – as opposed to scepticism?**

**van de Wetering:** Many people who are very concerned about anthropogenic climate change are baffled by the large numbers of people who deny that human actions are having an appreciable effect on the Earth's climate.

The scientific evidence appears to be so overwhelming to those who accept it (not that most of them have read much of it) that the only explanation that they can fathom for climate change denialism is that it is rooted in sheer ignorance of the scientific facts.

Statistically, though, scientific ignorance does not appear to be a major factor in climate change denialism, given that the correlation between belief in anthropogenic climate change and general scientific literacy is close to zero.

Instead, we find an extremely strong correlation between belief in anthropogenic climate change and measures of ideology. In the US, people who strongly identify with the Republican Party or who self-identify as very right-wing are very likely to deny that human actions are responsible for changes in climate, regardless of how much they know about science in general or climate science in particular.

**Jacobsen:** The statistical approaches often come in conjunction with “folk psychology.” So, some Folk psychological explanations for a phenomenon exist, then they either become supported or not through scientific studies. Why is this the basis of lots of research? How is it weak? How is it robust?

**Van de Wetering:** “Statistically, scientific ignorance does not appear to be a major factor in climate change denialism. (...) Instead, we find an extremely strong correlation between belief in anthropogenic climate change and measures of ideology.”

We use folk psychology as a heuristic because we don’t really have standardised procedures for hypothesis generation. If we don’t have a formal theory that acts as a source of research hypotheses, then informal theories (i.e. folk psychology) are the next best thing.

The primary strength and primary weakness of folk psychological theories are the same, namely that they are fairly easy for us to understand with our limited cognitive apparatuses. This is a strength because theory is always under-determined by data, so if multiple theories are possible, we might as well go with the ones that are easy to understand.

This is a weakness because there is no *a priori* reason to believe that true theories of human psychological functioning are easily comprehensible. An example of this is connectionist modelling of human cognition.

Connectionism has some pretty substantial explanatory successes to its credit, but has not caught on as well as might be expected just because it is so absurdly non-intuitive that nobody really has a good gut sense of what connectionist models are actually asserting.

**Jacobsen:** Thank you for your time, Sven – pleasure as always.

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